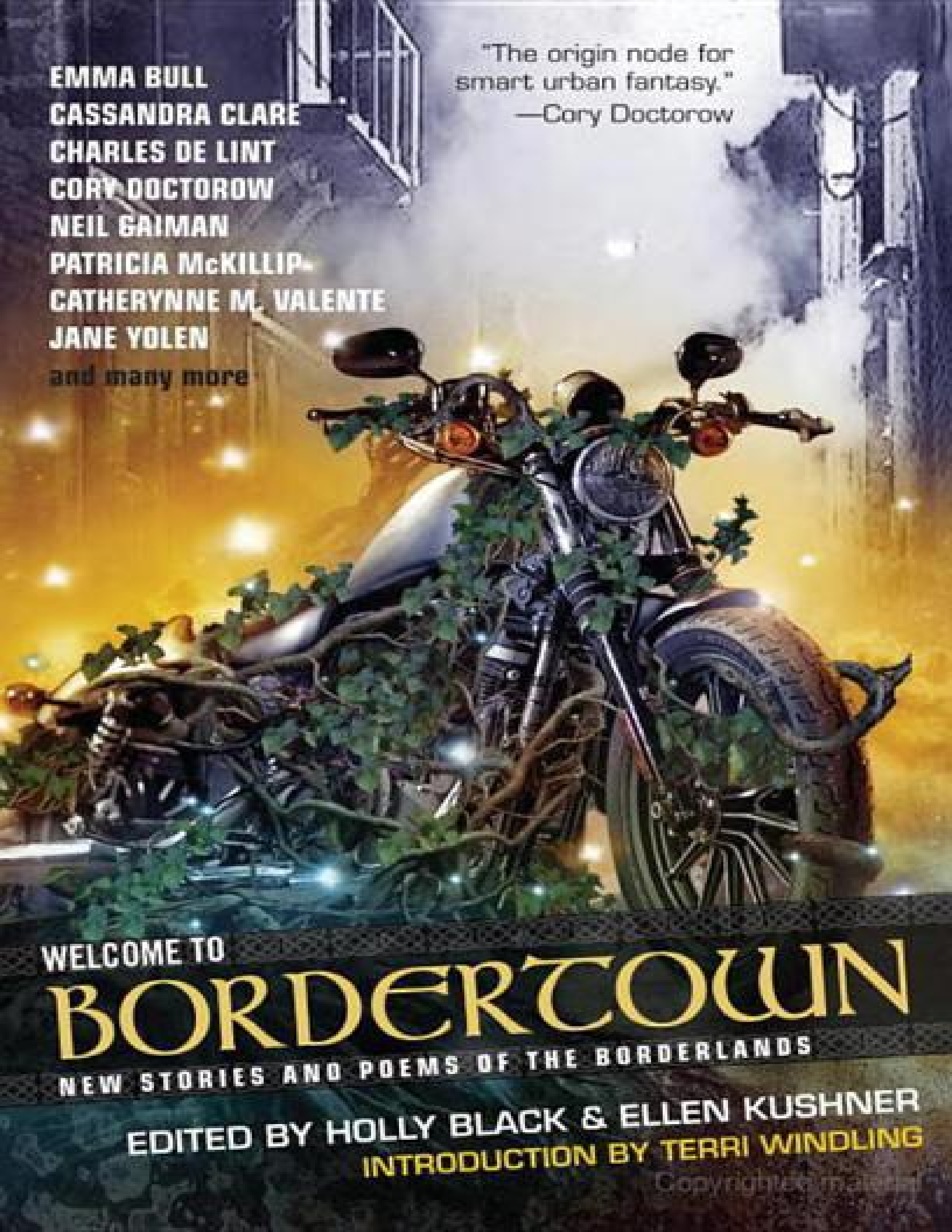

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WELCOME TO BORDERTOWN

Edited by
Holly Black and Ellen Kushner

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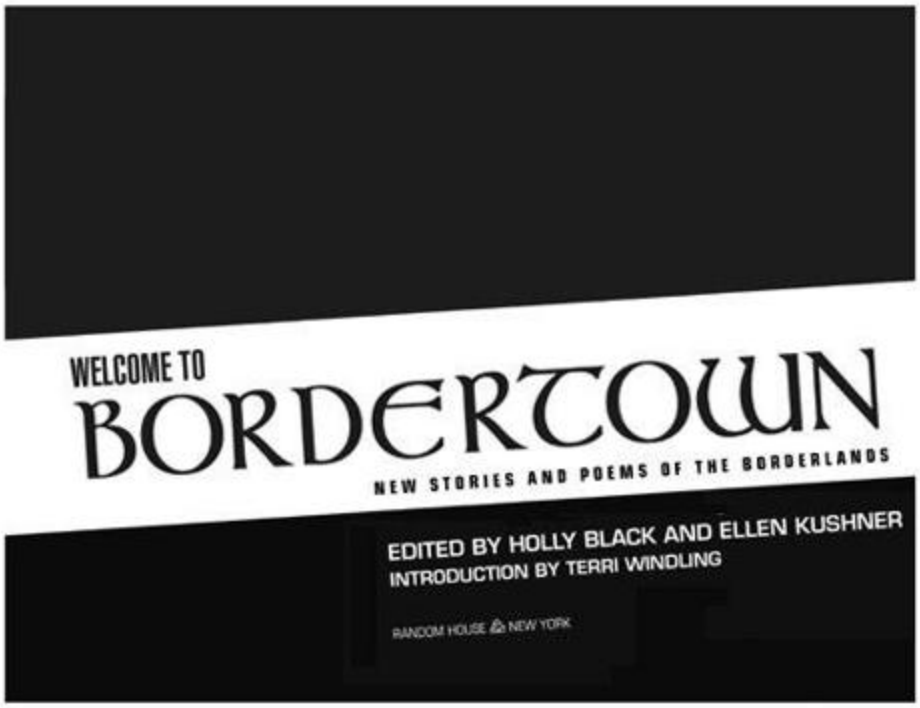

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Welcome to Bordertown : new stories and poems of the Borderlands / edited by Holly Black and Ellen Kushner ; introduction by Terri Windling. — 1st ed.
p. cm.
Summary: Stories and poems set in the urban land of Bordertown, a city on the edge of the faerie and human world, populated by human and elfin runaways.
Contents: Welcome to Bordertown / by Ellen Kushner and Terri Windling — Shannon’s law / by Cory Doctorow — Cruel sister / by Patricia A. McKillip — A voice like a hole / by Catherynne M. Valente — Stairs in her hair / by Amal El-Mohtar — Incunabulum / by Emma Bull — Run back across the border / by Steven Brust — A prince of thirteen days / by Alaya Dawn Johnson — The sages of elsewhere / by Will Shetterly — Soulja grrrl / by Jane Yolen — Crossings / by Janni Lee Simner — Fair trade / by Sara Ryan — Night song for a Halfie / by Jane Yolen — Our stars, our selves / by Tim Pratt — Elf blood / by Annette Curtis Klause — Ours is the prettiest / by Nalo Hopkinson — The wall / by Delia Sherman — We do not come in

peace / by Christopher Barzak — A Borderland jump-rope rhyme / by Jane Yolen — The Rowan gentleman / by Holly Black and Cassandra Clare — The song of the song / by Neil Gaiman — A tangle of green men / by Charles de Lint.
eISBN: 978-0-375-89745-0
1. Supernatural—Literary collections. [1. Supernatural—Literary collections.] I. Black, Holly. II. Kushner, Ellen.
PZ5.W43 2011 808.8′037—dc22 2010035558

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FOR TERRI WINDLING,
who showed us all the way to the Border

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INTRODUCTION
BY HOLLY BLACK

Anyone writing urban fantasy today owes a debt to Terri Windling.

When Terri created the original Borderland series of shared-world stories, there was nothing else like it. The first two volumes, *Borderland* and *Bordertown,* came out in 1986, and created a city where the capricious and dangerous elves of folklore (even if they called themselves something else) walked around in leather jackets, drank alongside human artists and poets at bars, and, most of all, existed in a world that wasn't long ago and far away. Bordertown was always close by, just around a corner, the place you could run away to if you dared.

I was a college student when I read the books for the first time, and they cracked wide open my sense of what you could do in fantasy. Reading about Bordertown was the first time I saw people like me in speculative fiction. Messed-up kids, making messed-up choices. I couldn't be a magician's apprentice or a pig keeper who might or might not be a king's son or a princess with a prophecy hanging over my head. But I could, maybe, somehow, be part of a community of artists who loved magic.

It was more than the idea of folklore mixed with contemporary life that compelled me. I was also drawn in by the idea that all these writers *knew one another.* They were *friends.* Even their characters were friends! They wrote stories together and left clever references to each other in their work. And that created in me a longing for something I didn't even know I could have. I could someday be a writer and have writer friends and we could tell stories together.

From the first time I read the books, I knew that was what I wanted—to be a part of a community of artists.

It was the dream of that life that propelled me into and through college, through endless writing and rewriting of my first novel, through introducing

myself to other writers. It was Bordertown that inspired me to see the mythic and strange in the detritus and mundane trappings of the modern day.

When Ellen Kushner asked me to coedit this anthology with her, I was thrilled. And when Terri Windling gave us her blessing along with lots of good advice (plus the promise to write an introduction), we were off and running. We set about gathering together as many friends of Bordertown as we could. We knew that other readers of those original books had grown up to be writers themselves. We hoped, too, that some of the writers of the original stories would be willing to revisit Bordertown. Asking around, we found a diverse collection of Bordertown fans (including our editor at Random House, Mallory Loehr), each of them more eager than the last to return to the city caught between the Realm and the World, the city where all things were still possible.

I even got to do the thing I dreamed of when I first read Bordertown—I got to write a story with a friend.

Every urban fantasy writer has Terri Windling to thank: for being an innovator, for striking out into new territory. Whether or not today's urban fantasy writers have ever personally read a single Bordertown book (and many have read far more than one), their work is descended from them. Bordertown created the genre. It built the town that everyone else is playing in. This is the book series that changed the landscape of fantasy, and I am proud and humbled to be a part of this new volume.

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INTRODUCTION
BY TERRI WINDLING

Back in the "leather and lace" eighties, I was the fantasy editor for a publishing company in New York City. It was a great time to be young and footloose on the streets of Manhattan—punk rock and folk music were everywhere; Blondie, the Eurythmics, Cyndi Lauper, and Prince were all strutting their stuff on the newly created MTV; and the eighties' sense of style meant I could wear my scruffy black leather into the office without turning too many heads. The fantasy field was growing by leaps and bounds, and I was right in middle of it, working with authors I'd worshiped as a teen, and finding new ones to encourage and publish.

Back then, "fantasy," to most people, meant J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and its imitators and successors, sprawling novels set in magical worlds rich with dragons and wizards, where heroes quested through pastoral landscapes reminiscent of medieval Europe. But some of the younger authors and editors were feeling their way toward a different kind of fantasy, something more contemporary and more homegrown, bringing myth and magic into the world we knew: the city streets of North America.

In the 1980s, four books in particular pioneered a new kind of magical fiction, which reviewers started calling urban fantasy: *Moonheart* by Charles de Lint (1984, the precursor to his long-running Newford series), *Wizard of the Pigeons* by Megan Lindholm (1986), *War for the Oaks* by Emma Bull (1987), and *Weetzie Bat* by Francesca Lia Block (1989). These innovative novels laid the foundation that urban fantasy writers have been building on ever since, including authors like Neil Gaiman, Laurell K. Hamilton, and Mercedes Lackey in the 1990s, and Jim Butcher and Patricia Briggs today.

As an editor in the eighties, I had the pleasure of working with many of the early urban fantasists. We were young, idealistic, and opinionated back then, united by a passion for myth and folklore, a taste for contemporary music and pop culture, and a desire to push the boundaries of the fantasy field just as far as we possibly could. Meeting at writers' conferences and conventions, in bars and cafés and each other's living rooms, we talked endlessly about the rich mythic heritage of North America (with its melting pot of folklore from so many different immigrant and native nations), and about how these myths could be used to tell tales relevant to readers today—especially younger readers.

This was the pre–Harry Potter era, when young adult fantasy was still thin on the ground, and we felt there was a crying need for mythic rites-of-passage tales for modern teens. We weren't so far past the teenage years ourselves, and we remembered all too vividly just how damn difficult those years could be. As an editor, as a writer, and particularly as a reader, I wanted to see fantasy books for younger readers that were full of magic and adventure, yes, but that also addressed some of the sheer *anguish* of that hard passage from adolescence to adulthood—and spoke about the real-world magics that can save us when the world goes dark: like friendship and community, like making art and telling our stories.

In 1985, the good folks at a publishing company called New American Library asked if I was interested in creating a shared-world series for teen readers. I'd just established a young adult fantasy line (called MagicQuest) for Ace/Tempo Books, and word had gotten around that fantasy for teens was a subject I was passionate about. A shared-world series, for those unfamiliar with the concept, is a little like a television series: the editor/creator comes up with the setting, premise, and initial characters, and then invites selected authors to write stories set in this "shared" milieu. Robert Lynn Asprin pretty much invented shared-world anthologies with his long-running Thieves' World series (begun in 1978), set in an imaginary town called Sanctuary in the distant past. New American Library wanted "a Thieves' World for teens"—and I jumped at the chance to create it.

I discussed a number of different ideas with my then–editorial partner, Mark Arnold, finally settling on the notion of a city on the border between Faerie and the human world. I was influenced not only by my background as a student of folklore (in which Faerie lore had been my specialty), but

also by my recent rereading of *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, a fantasy classic by Lord Dunsany (which also later inspired *Stardust*, the wonderful border-of-Elfland saga by Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess). Unlike Robert Lynn Asprin's Sanctuary or the border village in Lord Dunsany's tale, however, I envisioned a modern, big-city setting, with something of the spirit, the style, the buzz, the flash of eighties music and street culture.

As the idea took shape, a single neighborhood emerged as the central setting for the Bordertown stories: an old, abandoned part of the city that had been reclaimed by young people and had become a legendary mecca for runaway kids, both elfin and human. Outcasts, homeless kids, and other teens making their own way in the world would be the focus of our tales. The orphaned or homeless hero, after all, is an archetypal character in mythic rites-of-passage tales. And, I admit, the subject was a deeply personal one for me, for I'd once been a runaway teen myself. Bordertown would be the perfect background for the kind of tales I most wanted, and most needed, to read and to tell.

To bring the streets (and the music!) of Bordertown to life, I asked the help of young writers who were already creating fantasy that broke the Tolkien mold: Charles de Lint and Midori Snyder (two writer/musicians whose teen years had been as unusual as mine, and thus full of good story material), Emma Bull and her husband, Will Shetterly (then very much a part of the Minneapolis music scene), Ellen Kushner (another writer/musician, whose groundbreaking novel *Swordspoint* was still out making the rounds of publishers), and Steven Boyett (whose debut novel, a postapocalyptic fantasy, had just been published). I also wrote some early Borderland stories myself, under the shared pseudonym Bellamy Bach. (Back then, I was still a little shy about being a writer as well as an editor.)

Other writers joined the project as the series continued, each one of them writing tales set in their personal versions of Bordertown, influenced by the cities they lived in, were raised in, or loved the best. Although *my* Bordertown will always be rooted in the gritty, punky, vibrant, violent, flamboyant New York City of the eighties, bits and pieces of L.A., Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Seattle, Tucson, Ottawa, London, Dublin, Sydney, and half a dozen other cities have also been woven into the tapestry of Bordertown by various writers and artists over the years. It is all of those

cities. It is none of those cities. Bordertown, as any of its citizens will tell you, is whatever you want, and dream, and fear, and most desire it to be.

When I wrote the opening words of the very first Bordertown story almost twenty-five years ago (“She wakes in an alley and can’t remember how she got there. There is blood under her fingernails …”), I never imagined that our quirky urban fantasy series would carry on into multiple volumes, or that it would still have so many loyal readers, both young and old, all these years later. I was intrigued (and deeply honored) when Ellen Kushner and Holly Black approached me with the idea of creating a new volume of tales for a new generation of readers. I loved their concept of mixing stories by original Borderland writers with those of younger authors who had grown up with the series, and I quickly gave the project my blessing. It’s been an entirely magical experience to work with Ellen and Holly on this book; and with our Random House editor, Mallory Loehr, and her staff; and with all the wonderful writers, friends both old and new, who are gathered in these pages.

Many thanks to all the writers, editors, and artists who have journeyed to the Border over the years and returned to report on what they’ve found. Many thanks to all the readers who have carried the flame and kept the series alive. I only laid the cobbles for the streets of Bordertown; it took all of us, an entire community, to bring the city to life. And that’s as it should be. Community, friendship, art: stirred together, they make a powerful magic. Used wisely, it can save your life. I know that it saved mine.

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BORDERTOWN BASICS

Due to a sudden influx of newcomers to Our Fair City, we have prepared this leaflet to help to acquaint newbies—aka "noobs"—with life in Bordertown. Who are we? Well, we're *not* the Bordertown Chamber of Commerce, and this is *not* a tourist guide. We are the Bordertown branch of the Diggers[1], and our mission is to help the runaway kids from both sides of the Border who turn up on the streets here. If that's you, read on. You're going to need the information below.

LIFE ON THE BORDER

Misinformation about Bordertown is rife in both the World and the Realm, so here's a quick history lesson from *The Tough Guide to Bordertown* (with commentary by us):

The city takes its name from the Border itself, a magical wall that divides the human World from the enchanted lands beyond: a place that humans call Elfland, populated by a tall, silver-haired, long-lived race of people that humans call elves. They, on the other hand, refer to themselves as Truebloods, and to their homeland simply as the Realm. (Humans, take note: You can refer to the Realm as "Faerie" without causing offense, but do not make the mistake of referring to its citizens as "fairies"—unless you want to be punched.)

Elfhaeme Gate is the only point of passage across the Border, controlled by officers of the Realm. Passage is for those of elfin blood only; no human is ever *allowed to cross the Border. Humans have no idea what really lies on the other side, and the elves themselves aren't telling. In fact, they* can't *tell: there are powerful magics that prevent them from talking about the Realm except in ways designed to obscure the truth.* (So don't ask them, unless you

want to embarrass yourself and them, no matter how much you long to know.)

Bordertown is located in the Borderlands (aka the Nevernever) between Elfland and the World, where it grew out of the ruins of a human city abandoned when Elfland first appeared. Populated by both elves and humans, Bordertown is a famously uncomfortable place to live. Elfin magic is wildly unpredictable here, as are human science and technology, and the city runs on a volatile combination of the two. (If you want to power your electric amp or your iPhone, you're going to need to find a spellbox. And even then, you might get strange results.)

With an economy based on elfin–human trade, much of the city is now reasonably stable—except for the Soho district (south of Ho Street, enclosed within the Old City Wall), which has become a well-known mecca for runaway kids, both human and elfin. This derelict neighborhood remained abandoned for many years until young people began to claim it for their own, squatting in the ruined, graffiti-covered buildings and bringing them back to life. (Yes, kiddies, it's true. Soho belongs to us.)

Okay, so you've found your way to Bordertown. That was probably hard, so hooray for you. But please, dear noobs, don't be naive: life here isn't easy, and you must keep your wits about you. Gangs control many parts of the Old City; the Border drug trade is run from here; and there are even worse things to contend with when Border magic blows in the wrong direction. If you're human, don't drink the red Mad River water—it's addictive and will turn your brain to mush. If you're Trueblood, it's catnip you must avoid. (We're not kidding.) Be smart, be careful, be safe.

ARRIVING IN BORDERTOWN

The Diggers operate three safe houses (for short-term stays) on Water, Plum, and Carmine Streets. No cash required, but you'll be expected to follow the Digger House Rules, strictly enforced: no weapons, no drugs, no gangs, and everyone helps to clean and cook.

Once you've decided whether or not it was a huge mistake to come here after all, look for a longer-term squat or rental on the message board at the Poop (in front of Café Cubana). The bulletin board in the back hall of The Dancing Ferret (the famous music club on Carnival Street) is another good source of housing information, as well as up-to-the-minute info on Soho nightlife and the Border Arts scene. While you're at The Ferret, be sure to tell the owner, Farrel Din, that you're new in town. The first beer is, by tradition, on the house.

THE WEEKLY ADVISORY

As you know if you got here recently, the Way between the World and Bordertown was impossible to find for a while and only recently reopened. From the World's point of view, the Borderlands vanished entirely for thirteen years—but here on the Border, those thirteen years have been only thirteen *days.* A support group has been formed for people whose lives have been affected by the thirteen-year Gap (details available at Elsewhere Books).

All the usual gang treaties are in force this week. Ho, Carnival, and Carmine Streets are Neutral Territory, strictly enforced. All gang areas are restricted to their traditional boundaries (get a map at the Poop if you don't know what these are), except for the alleys running from Chrystoble Street to the Carnival Place mews, currently under dispute by the Rune Lords and the Pack. Avoid them.

Lankin activity has been reported on the east end of Birch Street, pickpockets at Tumbledown Park, and the Rowan Gentleman was (supposedly) spotted in Riverside and Whisthound Square. There have been four monster sightings this week (three unconfirmed, one confirmed but harmless), and the gargoyle at the top of the Mock Avenue Bell Tower has mysteriously vanished.

Ho Street will be closed to traffic on Saturday for the annual Jou'vert parade; Green Lady Lane will be closed on Sunday for the Dogtown Benefit Blues Bash (cash donations or dog chow required for entry); and Onion Street has been closed for the last three weeks for no apparent

reason. The Mock Avenue street association would like to apologize to everyone for fixing the church tower clock last week, which caused widespread confusion. It has now been restored to its usual wrong time.

Border Magic fluctuations have been brisk in the last ten days, with a predicted drop by Sunday. The cloudy weather continues, with sunny patches in the week ahead and Border storms to follow. Watch out for Mad River flooding, lightning strikes in the Nevernever, and windblown spells.

Welcome to Bordertown, boys and girls and Gentle Folk. We hope you enjoy your stay.

1. The original Diggers were a radical Protestant group in seventeenth-century England who practiced a communal, agrarian lifestyle and did not believe in private property. The name was revived by communal groups in the United States and Canada in the 1960s, and then in Bordertown some decades later. The Bordertown Digger community is a multifaith, multiracial group dedicated to helping runaway kids, homeless folks, recovering addicts, and others in need of friendship, food, and a place to sleep.

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WELCOME TO BORDERTOWN

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Milltown, in the present day …

The postcard came three days ago. On one side is a picture of some building and the words “Welcome to Bordertown”; on the other side is a message from my sister, writing to tell us that she’s safe and doing fine. The date on the card is thirteen years old—but the postmark says it was mailed in Boston last week. Mom practically fainted when she found it in our mailbox, and now she won’t talk about it at all.

The rest of the family is talking, though. Uncle Bud thinks the card is a practical joke from some sicko who’d heard about Trish’s disappearance, maybe read it in the papers thirteen years back. Uncle Harry’s theory is that Trish *did* write it, before Whatever Happened to Her happened, and then the card got lost in the mail for thirteen years. Uncle Al thinks that Trish must have been in Boston all this time, probably hooked on drugs, or worse, and too ashamed to let the family know. (It was at this point that Mom left the room and refused to discuss it any further.) As for me, I’ve got a theory of my own, although I know better than to say it out loud. As soon as I saw the postcard, I knew: Trish had really made it to Bordertown.

It was, after all, where she’d said she was going in the note she’d left behind for Mom and Dad—although she might as well have said she was going to Mars or Oz for all that anyone believed it. *I* believed it. I was only six years old, but she’d taken me into her confidence. “There’s a place called the Borderlands,” she’d told me, “where magic is actually real, Jimmy, and elves live alongside mortal men, and everything is *beautiful*. They don’t have cars and televisions, or factories and shopping malls. And no one thinks it’s weird to love old books there and to want more out of life than *this*.”

I was sitting on the bed in her little attic room, watching glumly as she filled her knapsack with clothes and books and chocolate bars. She finished her packing, buckled up the straps, and came over to sit on the bed beside me.

“I still love you, Jimbo,” she tried to reassure me. “And Mom and Dad and the uncles and everybody.”

“What about Rosco?” I asked her miserably. “He’s only a puppy. He won’t understand.”

Trish put an arm around my shoulders. “I need you to look after Rosco now, Jimmy. And Mom and Dad. Will you do that? Promise?”

I nodded slowly … and it seems to me now that my childhood ended with that solemn vow. I keep my promises. Unlike Trish.

“Don’t worry, cuddlebunny,” she said. “I’ll write. And I’ll be home for Christmas.”

She didn’t write. She didn’t come home. For thirteen years, my sister has been just a smiling photograph sitting on the mantel—while my parents stopped smiling at much of anything at all. The family went on. That’s all. We went on—ignoring the empty, aching space where my smart, funny, beautiful sister used to be. The dog grew older. The folks grew older. I kept my word and looked after everybody: the quiet son, the reliable son, the child who would never up and leave. The son who’s never done anything unpredictable his entire life. Until now.

I’m going to Bordertown.

I’m going to find Trish, and then I’m going to bring her home.

* * *

Bordertown, thirteen years earlier by the World’s time, thirteen days by Border time …

Trish stuck the postcard between the pages of *The Book of Three*, the only paperback she’d brought from home, in her knapsack along with two changes of underwear, some warm socks, her pen with the purple ink, plus *The Golden Book of Fairy Tales* and *A Treasury of Verse*. She kept them with her at all times, because nothing was really safe at the squat. Stuff disappeared. She’d been there only two weeks, but already she knew that much about life in Bordertown.

Trish bit back tears. If this had been her first week of college, the way she’d planned, then she’d have a roommate—probably some snotty preppy kid, sure, but they’d be in a dorm with lots of other girls who studied hard and wanted to talk about poetry and history as they walked across campus carrying their books past redbrick buildings covered in ivy.

And instead here she was, begging a girl (whose real name couldn’t possibly be Thelma Louise Mankiller!) to hurry up and let her use the only sink with running water in the squat they all shared in an abandoned

building. She knew she'd been lucky to find it. She'd thought it was a sign: It was called Carterhaugh, which was the name of the place in the old ballad where young Janet encountered the enchanted knight Tam Lin and rescued him from the Queen of Elfland to be her own true love. No guys were allowed in this Carterhaugh, though, and that was fine with her. A boyfriend was not part of her dreams. College was.

Well, that dream was over with.

* * *

Bordertown, same day …

Anush Gupta put his face in his hands and sighed. The Mock Avenue Bell was striking thirteen, which meant it was only 11:47 in the morning, and already it was turning into one of Those Days. He considered returning to Café Cubana for a second pot of chai with a tall side order of sympathy from Screaming Lord Neville, but …

"Come, my hero," he told himself sternly, "this is not how great scholars are made. Margaret Mead did not decide she'd rather get a cup of tea than go question scantily clad Samoans about their relatives. Franz Boas did not hang out with friends instead of putting on his parka and sledding fifty miles in the snow to uncover Inuit travel patterns. You can damn well go chug a few beers with some pointy-eared Truebloods at the Birch Street Bar and Grill."

A couple of hungover elf kids let him buy them bitter ale. But when he asked them if they'd mind answering a few little questions, one of them tried to deck him, and the other one passed out (or pretended to).

It had all seemed so simple last year in school in Berkeley. He'd convinced his department to let him come to Bordertown to do his research, because he, Anush Gupta, was going to be the guy who broke open the gates of Elfland—so to speak. At least, he was going to be the first anthropologist-in-training to bring home real facts about the elves. He wasn't stupid enough to think he'd pass the Gate into the Realm, but why should he have to, when the Border was crawling with elves, some of whom were supposed to be very fond of mortals, indeed? All he had to do was live there for a year among them, ask the right questions and—*poof!*—he'd have all the material he wanted for his great scholarly work: *Storming Elfland:*

The Courtship Rituals of Endogamous and Exogamous Elves and the Construction of Trueblood Identity.

The fact that no one had ever done it before didn't faze him. Anush was used to doing what no one else ever had. And all the other scholars in his field were kind of old. Bordertown was for the young.

His girlfriend at the time, Debbie Feingold, had a cousin who regularly traveled to the Borderlands with shipments of Tic Tacs, which the elves were crazy about that year. All he had to do was sign up as a Kandy Kourier, and the next day some kind of Elvish trading card was in his hands, and he just had to hitch two rides in opposite directions, then walk in a giant circle until his compass went crazy, and then there he was: suddenly staring at an old city wall thickly covered in graffiti that moved, changing shape as he watched it. A gate in the wall led Anush into a tunnel that spat him out onto the streets of Soho, where a kid in a Diggers' House T-shirt handed him a flyer: "Welcome to Bordertown!"

He'd found a room on Puck Street, right over one of those new Peruvian laundry-and-knitting places, just down the street from Godmom's—convenient to Blood turf, without actually being on it. He ate a lot of pizza there and made his official wish right after every meal. He was still waiting for results.

He and Debbie had broken up by mail—her "Dear Anush" letter turned up in a Tootsie Pop wrapper six weeks later—but it was just as well, since she wasn't the kind of girl he could tell his parents about. If he wasn't dating an Indian girl, preferably a med student or computer programmer, they didn't want to know about it. They were already upset enough that he was studying something as impractical as anthro. He'd promised them that he would become a college professor with excellent health benefits and free tuition for all the eventual grandchildren at the college of their choice. But first he had to find some elves who were willing to talk to him about their sex lives.

* * *

… So, anyway, Mom, I don't know when you'll get this, but I just wanted you to know I'm here safe and having a great time with lots of

really nice people.

Love, Trish

She'd written it in her tiniest handwriting, but it still barely all fit on the postcard. She'd chosen carefully from the cards that the pale, skinny artist girl had spread out on the sidewalk: a drawing of big, beautiful Oberon House, topped by its little statue of Puck, with "Welcome to Bordertown!" scribbled like graffiti diagonally across it. It reminded her of a postcard her mom had gotten from her cousin Rita, with "Welcome to San Francisco!" on the front. Rita had gone there on her honeymoon three years ago, and the card was still up on the fridge, so Trish figured Mom would like this one, too.

P.S. Kiss Jimmy—he's my little cuddlebunny 4-ever!

Trish didn't know how she was going to mail it. It's not like there were post offices or stamps or anything. Someone told her you had to go to Trader's Heaven or Riverside and find someone who was headed for the World. Someone else said don't bother, no one had even been able to find an open Way for a week.

It didn't really matter. The whole thing was a lie, anyway.

* * *

Anush gave up on the Bar and Grill. All he'd gotten was elf barf on the cuff of his left jeans leg and a faint feeling of nausea from drinking beer so early in the day. He followed his fancy down to Ho Street and into the Hard Luck Café.

"Hey, Anush." Cam, the tall half-elfin waitress, waved from across the room as he sat down. "Want a lassi?"

He was touched that she remembered, and even more touched that she'd gotten her friend Taash, the guitar-playing cook, to figure out how to make a reasonable version of lassi for him. Halfies were nice folks. Maybe he should have done his research project on them, instead of Truebloods. Anush sat himself down at the counter, its cool marble (from the bank it once had been) soothing under his hands.

“Tell me you’ve got fresh mango,” he groaned dramatically, “and it will redeem all sorrows that I have ever felt.”

Cam tugged on her blond ponytail. “Um … canned guanabana juice okay with you?”

Anush sighed. “Sure.”

* * *

So Trish needed to find a job. Even here in Bordertown, it seemed, girls had to waitress or work behind store counters if they wanted to eat. Trish wandered up Plum Street, her knapsack on her back. She passed boarded-up buildings covered with graffiti. Some of it sparkled with fairy-dust in the noonday sun. Trish snorted. They had fairy-dust here, and all they could use it for was stupid tags on ugly ruins? She’d told her baby brother that Bordertown would be beautiful, but the crumbling buildings weren’t so different from the boarded-up storefronts in the factory town where she’d grown up. She turned onto Ho Street and walked till she came to a stone building with towering pillars. It looked really fancy, out of place here in Soho, but a crooked sign over the door read “Hard Luck Café.” Maybe they needed a waitress. She went in.

And that’s when she saw him.

The man in the Harvard T-shirt.

He had dark hair, dark skin, and really nice eyes. Without even thinking, she marched right up to him.

“Hi,” she said. She could barely get the words out. “Is that—um, I mean—Do you go to Harvard?”

He stared at her. “How did you— Oh. The shirt.” He looked a little embarrassed. “Yeah, I did. Why?”

* * *

Anush put the lassi down and wiped the yogurt mustache off his lip. The girl with the backpack and the tousled mass of brown curls looked dazzled, enchanted, but not in a good way. He hoped she hadn’t been drinking Mad River water, because those kids never made sense and never shut up.

“That’s where I wanted to go,” she said in that same, breathless voice. “Harvard. In Cambridge, Massachusetts. On the banks of the Charles.”

“Yeah,” Anush said. This was possibly one of the weirdest conversations he’d had yet in Bordertown. “Yeah, that’s right.” How old was she? High school? “Maybe you should apply.”

She was still staring at his chest. He was beginning to get why girls objected to this so strongly. “I did.”

Ouch.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he said lamely. “It’s a really competitive school. Not everyone gets in.”

She sat down at the counter next to him. “That’s why I came here. Anything’s better than staying in Milltown, right? I mean, I love my family, but they don’t understand. They just want me to find a nice guy with a good union job, settle down, make babies and Sunday dinners and—and—”

“And you wanted a nice Harvard boy?” He grinned his most charming grin.

The girl shut up. He watched her face freeze over like he’d just killed her dog or something. *Nice going, Anush*, he thought. *No wonder you can’t get elves to talk to you, either.*

“Hey,” he said gently. “I didn’t mean it like that. Of course you wanted a good education. My parents think that’s the most important thing on the planet.”

She kept on twisting her fingers together on the counter.

Boy, he’d really stepped in it this time. “So what other schools did you apply to?” he asked, feeling a little desperate.

“Just Harvard. Everyone knows it’s the best. It’s where I’ve always dreamed of going.”

“But what about your safety school?”

“Safety school? What’s that?”

“You know, the school you know you’ll get into if you don’t get your top pick.”

“You mean the state university? Where I come from, that’s just a party-and-football school. I wanted to go to Harvard and actually learn about things.”

“But there are plenty of good schools besides Harvard,” Anush said patiently. “Didn’t your guidance counselor suggest any others?”

Trish shrugged. “The Milltown school district is broke. We haven’t had a guidance counselor in years.”

“Okay, but—”

“My parents say I can do the two-year course at the community college down the road. But what’s the point? If I’m not good enough for Harvard …”

Anush opened his mouth and shut it again.

“Do you want some coffee?” he asked.

“Tea,” she said stiffly, like she didn’t trust him but was willing to oblige. “I drink herbal tea.”

He nodded over at Cam, held up his cup for another lassi, and started again: “So why Bordertown instead of college?”

“I thought … I thought it would be like in the books,” she muttered to the countertop. “You know—magic. And … and beauty. Like in the olden days, or in a fantasy novel. There’s supposed to be poetry here, and stories, and beautiful elfin music.” She stirred honey into her tea. “But it’s all just gangs and drugs and messed-up kids. Like at home. Just with no parents, and no cops.”

“You haven’t been here long enough to find the beauty, that’s all. There’s a great harper playing this week at The Wheat Sheaf—”

She looked up, her face pale, her eyes bright. “A harper? Like Taliesin, or Thomas the Rhymer?”

She sure knew her Celtic mythology. He risked, “Or Fflewddur Fflam.”

Her eyes glowed like stars. “You’ve read those, too? The Prydain books? By Lloyd Alexander?”

“Of course. I love Taran the Assistant Pig-Keeper, and poor old Gurgi, and Fflewddur with his magic harp. But trust me, Ossian Feldenkranz is no Fflam. He’s a good musician, the real thing. You’ll like his stuff.”

“Which one’s your favorite?”

“I haven’t heard them all yet—”

“No, I mean the Prydain books.” Her face was shining now, her eyes focused, like the smart kid in class she must recently have been. “I used to think *The Black Cauldron*, but I just reread them this year, and now maybe *Taran Wanderer*.… Is it true they’re based on Welsh mythology?”

“Oh, yes,” Anush said, “the Mabinogion. I took a whole class on Celtic Myth in Fantastical Literature, and we read that along with Yeats and Synge

and Lord Dunsany and Evangeline Walton and R. A. MacAvoy—”

The girl leaned forward. “You can *study* those? In *college*?”

“Oh, yeah. My parents weren’t thrilled—they wanted me to do engineering—but I placated them with a double-major in—”

“Tilien!” thrummed a woman’s voice by his ear. “Is that tilien you’re drinking, mortal?” Anush swiveled on his stool to look into eyes the color of violets on the first day of spring. “Here, let me try it.”

The impossibly slender, pale fingers lifted his metal cup, carried it to rose-petal lips that parted like the gates of Paradise to take a sip of his lassi. As she drank, her lashes fanned her cheeks like the peacock feather fans of a prince’s wife.

“Not tilien.” The lassi-scented breath was almost in his own mouth, so close were her lips to his. “What call you this drink, mortal?”

Cam plunked a juice can down in front of the elf goddess. “It’s yogurt lassi made with guanabana. Also known as soursop.”

“Gua-naaaaa-bana.” In her mouth, the word was a poem.

He leaned forward to savor it.

“Very nearly as good. I will taste it again soon.” She smiled at him. “What is your name, mortal man?”

“Anush Gupta.”

“No!” the scruffy girl next to him cried. Maybe her tea had gotten cold.

“Then come, Anush Gupta,” said the Trueblood elf. “Come with me. For we have much to discuss.”

* * *

“Never mind, honey,” said the ponytailed waitress. “He was too old for you, anyway.”

Trish flushed. “It’s not that. I wanted him to tell me about Harvard! And myth classes. And safety schools. And that Welsh thing. Where Prydain comes from.”

“Try Elsewhere Books. Someone there will know.”

“He shouldn’t have told her his real name,” Trish fretted.

“Probably not.”

“Doesn’t it give them power over you?”

“Kiddo, she didn’t need his name for that.” The waitress held out her hand across the counter. “I’m Cam, by the way.”

When Trish saw the tips of her ears, she tried to suppress a gasp.

“It’s cool,” said Cam. “I’m a halfie.”

“I’m, um, Tara.” Trish hadn’t really gotten used to the false name yet. She’d thought about being Eilonwy, but no way did she qualify as the feisty redheaded princess from *The Book of Three.* And besides, she wasn’t really sure how you pronounced it.

* * *

This is it, Anush thought as he left the Hard Luck Café with the elf—the Trueblood—woman. He was dizzy with desire for her, and as strong as a hundred bulls with the certainty that the courtship rituals of exogamous elves would soon be within his grasp. Sure, a trained anthropologist wasn’t supposed to get data this way, but he felt sure his professor would understand.

He followed her down Ho Street and into a tangle of alleys he didn’t recognize. At a narrow side door, she paused and passed her hand over the latch. It turned from iron to gold. She opened the door and led him up shadowy, uneven stairs and into a room that reminded him of a forest, and of a ship, and of something he’d been promised once and never gotten.

When they lay together at last, peaceful and quiet on a bed of bracken that rustled like silk, she said, “You are beautiful, Anush Gupta. Like the night sky in an autumn wood. Ask me something, and it shall be yours.”

Anush sighed deeply. He thought of asking for a notebook, but that might be blowing his big chance. Instead he said, “I do have a few questions, actually.”

She was fine with the first three. She didn’t mind discussing Trueblood hierarchy or scarcity or isolationist self-segregation. Even the relative ages of mate selection just made her laugh. But when he got to “And how many sexual partners would you say you have in a year?” the woman reared up over his head, her hair falling like frozen water around them both.

“The counting of favors is a cruel thing, Anush Gupta. As well count the breaths it takes to speak your name, or the hopes that bring a hart to the well.”

“I’m sorry,” he said hastily. “We can skip this one if you want.”

“Like skipping stones over a lake? But words are not stones, mortal man. Once spoken, they cannot be sunk below waves.”

“Really”—he tried to catch her eyes, as he had when they were making love—“I said I was sorry.”

She turned away from him huffily. “I should have heeded my mother. She said mortals all were thus. I thought you were different.”

“But I am!” He was actually on his knees. “I *am* different. I’m not like all the rest—”

He was almost weeping with frustration. Because it was true. He was. Always. Everywhere. Different. He was the Indian kid who loved Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. He was the American kid who loved his mom’s spicy *bhelpuri.* He was the dutiful son who studied the wrong subject. He was the serious scholar who studied imaginary beings. He was different as could be. Trying to defend himself to an elf was just about the last straw in a lifetime, a haystack, of them.

“Different, are you?” she said coldly. “Then different you shall be.” She raised her hands, began to speak, and stopped. “But wait, my night traveler. I have not wearied of you yet. You and your questions. Clearly we both have much to learn. And your skin is like a river that runs deep and swift after a storm in the mountain. So I give you this choice: whether you shall be different by day or different by night. Choose one, that I may enjoy you the other.”

“Day or—?” he choked, but she said, “So be it. Roam freely in the day, rude as you will, in a form that rudeness allows—but at night, you are mine: all your pleasures, and your questions, and your beauty, all for me.”

“Wait,” protested Anush, “I know this story! It’s kind of the Beastly Bride, and kind of Thomas the Rhymer—with a little Stith Thompson folklore motif number tw— Ouch! Wait a minute, what are you d—”

And that was the last thing he was able to say for a while.

* * *

Trish went to The Wheat Sheaf that night. The place was crowded with all kinds of people—elf, human, even halfies. The other girls at Carterhaugh had told her to steer clear of elves, that they were clannish and mean and

ran with dangerous gangs, but everyone here seemed to get along all right. She sat quietly in a corner with a glass of ginger beer and waited for the music to start. *Osheen* somebody, the Harvard guy had said. A harper. A minstrel. Like in the books.

He didn't look like the books. He was just a guy with scruffy hippie hair and jeans. But when he lifted the harp and played, the room went still.

I will give my love an apple
Without e'er a core
I will give my love a house
Without e'er a door
I will build my love a palace
Wherein she may be
And she may unlock it
Without e'er a key

Trish let herself live in the music. She was a lady now, sitting in her high hall, her greyhound at her feet while the minstrel played for her and her court.

How can there be an apple
Without e'er a core
How can there be a house
Without—

There was a soft rustling as everyone turned to stare at the striking couple who had just come in: a glorious lady with hair like moonlight and a dress as gold as the sun, and at her side, a dark prince—

Anush. The Harvard guy. Dressed now in a skintight shirt that showed off his well-made chest. He had his arm around the lady and was nuzzling her neck in that stupid, boys-in-the-halls-between-classes way, paying no attention to anyone or anything around them.

Trish looked away. Bad enough that they'd just made her miss the last verse of the Riddle Song, which ended with a flourish and applause. Now she'd never know the answers.

Ossian Feldenkranz stood up, setting the harp aside, and shook out his arms. “And now,” he announced, “I’d like to invite up to the stage a buddy of mine, a *landsman* from the old country—and a great musician: *Yidl Mitn Fidl*!”

From the back of the room, a short, scrawny guy with wiry arms and a little goatee came leaping up onto the small stage, brandishing a violin in one hand and a bow in the other. “Hey-*upp*!” he shouted, or something like that, and the music exploded into a dance tune. It sounded a little like that Polka Variety music her uncle Al liked, and a little like she’d always imagined gypsies would be: wild and happy and sad, all at once. Her feet beat time on the floor. She wished she knew some steps so she could dance.

Some of the people did. Chairs were pushed back. Kids were forming a circle, joining hands, dancing and stamping to the music. Their heads were thrown back, they looked so happy—she realized she was happy, too, just watching. It was like being at the seashore with the sun shining down and the waves beating time.

The music slowed and changed. People drifted back to their seats. The violin played soft now, and slow. Gentle.

“By the hearth, a fire is burning,” Ossian murmured over the fiddle’s tune. “An old *rebbe*, a learned man, is teaching the children to read: ‘Learn, children,’ he says; ‘don’t be afraid. Every beginning is hard.’ ”

He started singing in a strange language. Yidl closed his eyes, fiddled and swayed. She looked across to where the Harvard guy sat with the elf lady. He was staring at the musicians, longing on his dark face.

What distant land had his people come from, and how had he gotten to go to Harvard? He knew all about books and fantasy and college. Trish wanted to know what he knew.

Learn, children; don’t be afraid. Every beginning is hard, Ossian sang in the language she didn’t know yet.

She went over to the table where the dark prince sat with his elfin lady. “Hi,” Trish said.

He looked at her blankly, like he’d never seen her before.

“I met you yesterday,” she said bravely. “At the café?”

He looked confused. Enchanted? The elf lady was ignoring her completely. Snotty bitch.

“You’re Anush, right?”

“Yes.” His face cleared a little. “I’m Anush.”

“I’m Tara,” Trish said. He frowned. “Like Taran? In the Prydain books? Only a girl?” Anush smiled at her with beautiful white teeth. “So I was wondering,” Trish went on. “I mean, I just wanted to ask you—”

“Anush Gupta,” said the beautiful lady, placing her long white hand on his, “can you arrange cold beer for me at this table?”

Anush started to rise, then paused, his head turned toward the door, where some kind of commotion was erupting. The music fell silent.

The Wheat Sheaf was supposed to be neutral territory, but everyone tensed, looking around the room to see who was elf, who was human, in case they needed to take sides.

A girl burst into the center of the room.

“Oh my *god*!” she shrieked. “Oh my fucking god! It’s The *Wheat Sheaf*. It really, really is, just like the Wiki said!”

She had arrow-straight hair and a short straight dress. The guy with her was wearing thick black glasses and huge baggy pants. They looked like something out of a cartoon, which in Bordertown was saying a lot. Everyone stared.

“Dude! We made it!” shouted the guy. “We’re in fucking Bordertown! Get out your iPhone, quick, see if you can still tweet—”

“It’s back!” the girl yelled. “Bordertown’s really back! We made it!”

* * *

The day that my sister’s postcard comes, I make the decision to go and find her; the day after that my bag is packed and I’m ready to head for the Border.

I know what people say: that Bordertown doesn’t exist, that it’s just a myth, a hoax, a mass delusion. Or else, if it does exist, then the road from *here* to *there* has long been closed. Or else, if the Way is open, then it’s a road not meant for a guy like me, with dirt under my fingernails and a duffel bag full of tools, not fairy-tale books.

But the Border is real, and I know I’m going to find it. Why? Because I know *how* to find it. You would, too, if you’d been thinking about it every damn day for thirteen years. My parents never talked about Bordertown—the entire subject of Trish was pretty much off-limits—but that didn’t stop

me from searching for every tiny scrap of information I could find: a newspaper mention of the elfin trade here, a radio reference to Border music there; the Bordertown websites that flicker on and off the Internet, semivisible, like ghosts; the Borderland Wikipedia page, which keeps writing and rewriting itself—sensible one moment, gibberish the next, the information constantly changing.

I'm not smart like Trish. I never finished high school, and although I've read all of the books she left behind, I read them mostly to keep her spirit close—I've never been a dreamer like my sister. I fix things. Cars, appliances, electronics. I can make just about any damn thing run. I'm the kind of guy who needs to take things apart just to figure out how they work, and I tend to think most things in life can be fixed if you have time enough, and patience.

I wanted to know how the Borderlands worked, this place that had swallowed my sister up … so, bit by bit, I gathered information. Bit by bit, I figured out a thing or two. That's how I know about the semisecret website where *The Tough Guide to Bordertown* can be downloaded. That's how I know to prepare my truck by knotting red ribbons on the door handles and scattering the floor with leaves of oak and ash. That's how I know to burn cedar and sage, fill my pockets with salt, stick a feather behind my ear. Now that the moon is up, I must start the journey before the owl cries twice. (You think I'm making this up? I'm not. It's a kind of science, just not the kind we're used to.) Once I get out on the interstate, I'll head north (or south, it doesn't matter) and crank up the radio and just keep driving. Eventually the truck will fail, and after that I'll hitch a ride or walk that last stretch through the Nevernever.…

An owl cries once. I open the truck and Rosco, our creaky old mutt, jumps in. I have to move fast before the owl calls again, and that fool of a dog will not be moved. I guess he's coming along with me.

So hold on tight, boy.

We're on our way.

* * *

It was all over Bordertown—a town flooded suddenly with "noobs," as they called themselves. New kids with new toys, new stories, new music, new

books, new hopes.

“I thought *we* were supposed to be the new kids,” Anisette Wolfsdottir grumbled as she washed out her socks in the sink at Carterhaugh. Trish waited for her turn at the tap. The tap water was running pale green today, and everything they washed smelled faintly of cantaloupe.

“I’ve only been here a month,” Anisette went on, scrubbing vigorously. “I’m not exactly old. And know what? I’ll be fifteen next Tuesday.”

“No, you won’t,” said Thelma Louise. “You’ll be twenty-eight.”

Anisette sat down hard.

“We figured it out.”

Anisette started crying in long gulping sobs, still clutching her wet socks as green water trickled down her legs.

“Shut up, Thelma,” Trish said. “That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard.”

“Do the math,” Thelma Louise said. “Thirteen days ago here—about the time you moved in to Carterhaugh, Tara—it was thirteen years ago in the World. So fifteen plus thirteen equals …”

“I’m still a *ki-i-i-d*,” Anisette wailed.

Trish handed her a dirty T-shirt; there was no Kleenex here, and toilet paper was precious. But Anisette just wailed on. “Don’t listen to her,” Trish said. “It isn’t like that at all.” Anisette was beginning to take great whooping gasps. It was getting scary. “Listen to me!” Trish squeezed her hand, sock and all. She had to do something. “Anisette, listen. We’re right on the border of the land of Faerie, the land of Eternal Youth.…” Anisette’s hand gripped hers like a vise. Trish tried to remember what she’d read. “Some call it Tir-nan-Og, the Country of the Young, for age and death have not found it.… So while the World ages, we’ve stayed here, young and beautiful. See? Isn’t that good?”

Anisette leaned her head against her, dripping snot onto Trish’s blouse, but at least she was quieter now. Trish stroked her hair. Anisette *was* just a kid, like her own little Jimbo.

“But if we go back,” Anisette sniffled, “will we get old all of a sudden?”

“I hope so,” said Thelma Louise. “I want to be able to buy booze and cigarettes without anyone giving me shit. I want those smart-ass pimply little guys at the filling station to call me *ma’am*.”

Trish held Anisette harder. Because if she really had lost thirteen years in her thirteen days in Bordertown, then Jimbo was all grown up by now.

Maybe he was in college. He was such a smart little boy. Maybe *he'd* gone to Harvard. He'd probably forgotten her. He probably thought she was dead.

* * *

We're here, in Bordertown, Rosco and me. The hike through the Nevernever was hard, but we made it before our water ran out, reaching the city outskirts at last on a cracked and weedy road beside the river.

I found my way from Riverside to Soho by following the *Tough Guide*'s blurry map, got lost looking for Carnival Street (it wasn't anywhere near where the *Guide* said it would be), then stopped at a club called The Dancing Ferret and ordered my first Border beer. The waitress there had grass-green hair, alabaster skin, and ears with points. "Toto," I whispered in Rosco's ear, "we're not in Kansas anymore."

I'm staying at the Diggers' House on Plum, which is kind of a hostel and kind of a safe house. It's not the Ritz. My bed's on the floor of a dusty little storage space off the kitchen. That's partly because the House is crowded and partly because my "scary" black dog makes people nervous. Elfin people, I mean, and I don't get it, since he's old and arthritic and wouldn't hurt a fly; but Berlin, the girl who runs the House, made me promise I'd keep Rosco out of sight whenever the elf kids are around. So we sleep in the closet, which is better than sleeping out on the street, so I'm not complaining.

We don't spend much time at the House, anyway; it's just a free place to crash at night. By day we're out walking the streets as I figure out how this crazy town works, and then figure out how I'm going to find Trish. It's a much bigger place than I thought it would be; the words "needle" and "haystack" keep coming to mind. I've put up signs at The Ferret, the Poop, the Free Clinic, and lots of other locations:

> *Trish, I'm here and trying to find you.*
> *Please contact me through the Diggers.*
> *Love, Jimmy*

Totally useless. An hour later my signs are covered up by brand-new signs: for bands, for squats, for other missing people who do and do not

resemble my sister. An hour after that, the new signs are covered. Does anyone ever read these things?

I ask about Trish everywhere I go and show everyone the picture that I carry in my wallet: Trish and me on the day we brought little Rosco home from the pound. Now, here's the weird thing (I mean really weird, a magic-leaking-over-the-Border kind of weird): The puppy in that picture is thirteen years old now. The boy in that picture is almost nineteen. But Trish? She's still the girl in the photo. What I mean is, she's *still seventeen.* I found this out on my first day in the city: that the thirteen years that have passed for us back home have only been thirteen *days* on the Border. The whole damn city did a Rip van Winkle when the Way to the Border closed down.

That means, for Trish, it's been only a few short weeks since she ran away from home. And I guess that's good, since it means that she didn't intend to leave us for all this time. But it's freaking me out a bit all the same. I'd been thinking of her as all grown up—but she hasn't aged; she hasn't changed. She's still the Trish that I remember: that same dreamy girl who filled her room with books and art and unicorns; that hardworking girl who was supposed to be the first Milltown kid to go to Harvard; that heartbroken girl who cried in her bed at night, where nobody but me could hear her—while Mom and Dad kept saying that really, community college would be just as good, and she could live at home and keep working at Denny's, and Harvard wasn't for people like us.

She's still *that* Trish, just like I remember.

But I'm not the same Jimmy, and we're not the same family. Thirteen years is a long, long time.

* * *

Should I stay or should I go?

Goddammit, if Trish heard that song one more time, she was going to curl up on the cracked pavement with her backpack over her head and howl like a dog. Since the news of the Lost Years had hit like an atom bomb, it seemed like every street singer in Bordertown suddenly wanted to be Joe Strummer, singing or shouting their raucous: "*If I go there will be trouble, And if I stay it will be double*."

She couldn’t stand it. She had to go; she knew that. She had to get home to her family and see if they were all right. And let them know that she was okay, too. Had they even gotten her postcard? She’d sent it over a week ago. But was that before or after the terrible split? She couldn’t count right. It made her giddy: “As bad as ants crawling around in your head,” as Princess Eilonwy would say in the Prydain books. What would Eilonwy do? She was impetuous and followed her heart. So she’d go back to Milltown, wouldn’t she? But what if … what if they weren’t all right? What if something had happened, something awful? What if they hated her for staying away so long? What if she got there, and they’d moved and left no address?

And what if she went back home to Milltown, just to see them, and then she never managed to leave again?

But of course she had to go back now … didn’t she? *Should I stay or should I go?*

* * *

There was a simple solution to Anush’s problem.

The trouble was, it would utterly destroy his life.

But wasn’t his life pretty well destroyed already?

“Stop sulking,” his lover said. “Or is it brooding? The distinction evades me.”

The elfin woman paced across the floor of her loft, her white robes swirling around her, dappling with dusty sunlight as she passed between the high, paned windows. All the room’s pipes were exposed, showing the raw industrial space it had once been—but the pipes changed color, humming musically with each shifting hue.

“What am I to do with you?” the woman asked the air. “It is hours till sunset, yet. Come.” She patted a velvet hassock. “Come sit at my feet, and ask me more of your questions.”

“What’s the point?” Anush said. He’d given up not speaking. Either way, it was just too painful.

“What was the point before? You were eager enough with your rude questions then.”

“You don’t understand!” Anush exploded. “There’s no point to any of this now! My research grant ran out twelve—no, almost thirteen years ago! No wonder the university never answered my letters asking for an extension. I’ve got no funding! No scholarship! I’ve probably been kicked out of my department for truancy, vagrancy, playing hooky—”

“But …,” said the woman, “you attain all the information you were seeking.”

“Beginning to,” he muttered.

She swept across the floor again. “Look! I’ve an invitation.” She opened her fingers, and a piece of paper fluttered to the floor, turning to silver powder just as it touched the wood. “Death apples,” she swore. “It wasn’t supposed to do that. These Border magics are so unreliable. Never mind, I know what it said. We’re invited to a garden party on the Hill at my cousin Windreed’s. We must go.”

“I don’t want to go to any party. Not like this.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, “it’s at night. You’ll be beautiful. Again.”

* * *

I’m starting to know my way around Soho. I walk and walk as I search for Trish, which is harder on Rosco than it is on me, but he trots along gamely, wheezing as he goes but refusing to stay back at the House. At night I rub Ms. Wu’s Special Magic Healing Salve into his aching old joints. The stuff makes him sneeze, and he smells like cherry candy, but it seems to be helping.

We go to the places I think Trish might go to: the music clubs and the galleries, the free concerts in Fare-You-Well Park. Yeats Night at the Changeling Theater and the poetry slams at Café Tremolo. I’ve tracked down every bookstore and library this side of Water Street, describing my sister to the clerks: brown hair, blue eyes, and about this tall; a lover of myths, medieval ballads, Celtic harp music, and fantasy trilogies. It finally dawns on me that it’s not exactly a unique description in this town.

I’m the one who stands out here, a long-haired redneck with a scruffy old dog and a heavy old duffel that I carry everywhere. (My tools are in that bag, and I’m *not* letting them get stolen.) I packed up my tools with more care than my clothes, so my wardrobe is kind of limited, just two pairs of

jeans, an old flannel shirt, and a couple of T-shirts from Mr. Fix-It, the repair shop where I used to work. Some of the kids at the Diggers' House are calling me Mr. Fix-It now. I'd been quietly making repairs at the House—just simple things, carpentry and plumbing jobs that don't need any weird magic. If a hinge is sagging or a tap is leaking, it will bug me until I get out my tools.

At night, in my closet, I sleep like the dead, with Rosco stretched out and snoring beside me. The next day we're up and back on the streets: We walk and we walk and we walk and we walk. I stare at strangers; I scan every crowd; I ask everyone I meet if they've seen her. "Maybe," they tell me. She's got that kind of face that you think you've seen somewhere before. And maybe you have. So I follow every lead I am given, and it's never my sister.

Berlin, at the Diggers' House, is sympathetic but not optimistic. She tells me that finding one runaway girl in a city this big will be no easy task. "If she's down here in Soho, then maybe you'll get lucky. But, honey, she could be anywhere—traveling with the traders, or working Uptown, or tucked away in some fancy love nest on the Hill. What are you going to do, spend the next five years knocking on every door from Letterville to Elftown?"

Yeah, I know, needle and haystack. But I've got to try to find her all the same. My family has been broken for thirteen long years now.

And fixing things is what I do.

* * *

Should I stay or should I go?

A solitary violinist was busking mournfully on the southern corner of Ho and Third. Even he was fiddling that same tune. Playing it like a lament.

It was too much. Trish felt like she was going crazy—like the city itself was attacking her, mocking her indecision, magnifying her pain. She whirled around in a circle on the sidewalk in front of Danceland, looking for an escape that wasn't there. She couldn't breathe. She was going to faint—she was going to die—

"Hey." Trish felt a hand on her arm. "You okay?"

It was an elf, tall and blond—a girl with a ponytail and a Changeling Theater T-shirt. It was Cam, the halfie waitress from the Hard Luck Café.

"Here …" Cam tried to ease Trish's backpack off her.

For some reason the lifting of that tiny burden made Trish want to burst into sobs of relief, as though Cam were lifting all her troubles off her back. But she didn't want to cry on the street, in front of some stranger—

"Hey," Cam said again, helping her sit down on the curb. "It's okay. Really. Everyone from the World is going through it. I see it all the time, these days. You're all in shock."

"What about you?"

"I was born here. I've got nothing to worry about."

"Well, um, thanks for worrying about me, then."

"No worries!" Cam grinned. "That's what the kids from Brisbane say all the time. 'No worries!' I think it's cute."

Trish smiled shakily back. No worries.

"So, listen," Cam said. "I'm on my way to work now, but you wanna come over to our place tonight? We're at the Chimera, over on Carmine Street. You know, the big place down from Wish You Were Here, across from the Pumpkin Coach?"

She'd heard of the galleries and shops and clubs on Carmine Street. She'd thought there'd be nothing for her sort of person there. But now, it seemed, there was.

"Okay," Trish said. "Chimera. Do I need a special pass to get in or something?"

Cam laughed. "Hell, no. It's just a squat—well, a squat and a little more. You'll see."

* * *

"You will like this party of Windreed's," his lady said. "Have you ever even been to Dragon's Tooth Hill?"

Anush remembered his disastrous early attempts to collect data there, and kept his mouth shut.

"You will meet and mingle with the finest of our kind. I can show you off, and you can ask all Windreed's Trueblood guests your most impertinent

questions. It will be vastly amusing: They will all be furious, but none will dare retaliate, as you're under my protection."

"Protection?" Anush looked up between his hairy hands. "Is that what you call it?"

"Well …" He shivered as she stroked his hideous head. "You cannot be spelled by two of the folk at once. It's beyond rude, and Windreed's crowd are very point-device."

"Well, that's a relief. I'd sure hate to be ugly day and night. I'd sure hate to upset any more Truebloods. I'd sure hate for my questions to be—"

Her silvery laughter silenced him like a slap. "It's so funny, when your voice gets all squeaky like that—"

"Then fix it!" he shouted—or tried to. He sounded ridiculous, even to his own ears. She was laughing again. He jumped for the table (jumping was something he did well) and swept off a candelabra that only last night had lit a feast for them both, sending it crashing to the floor.

"Beware," she said coldly. "Just because you wear a beast's form does not mean you may behave as one in my presence."

"You want questions?" Anush cried. "Well, here's a question for you! Did you know all along about this thirteen years thing? Was it you? Was it your pals in the Realm, just finding a new way to mess us up and ruin all our lives?"

The woman looked coolly at him. "That was three questions, my creature. You will never thrive in your quest for the truths of the Realm if you do not learn to count."

Anush took a deep breath. It was true; he'd grown up on a diet of myth and fairy-tale books. He did know better. And he dimly remembered being that promising young student out in the World, believing that he'd be the one to crack the secrets of the Realm with his fabulous bicultural understanding of myth and magic. It was just that, when it was real, it was so complicated. He'd landed in the middle of a story himself. And the Truebloods hadn't read the same books.

He tried again, as calmly as he could: "Was it the Truebloods who made thirteen years in the World pass as thirteen days here in Bordertown?"

She walked to the other end of the room. He was learning that when she didn't look him in the eye, didn't face him directly, she was most likely to be telling the truth.

“We do not meddle in the World’s affairs. And I know of none with such power, in the Realm or on the Border. This little spell”—she waved her fingers at him in that irritating way—“is the strongest that I can work here. And even that will break when you pass out of the Borderlands.”

And there it was.

The crux of all his problems.

He could go home, be free of this whole mess … and then land in another one: home again, free all right, free to be Anush Gupta, Total Failure. Failed scholar, failed grad student, the world’s biggest disappointment to his family, the biggest disgrace that the Indian community of Sunnyvale, California, had ever known. Not to mention the fact that every girl his age would be thirteen years older than him.

He pulled on his T-shirt. “I’m going out.”

“By day? Like this?”

“Why not?” he said bitterly. “It’s not like anyone will recognize me.”

* * *

Trish watched Cam walk off down the street. How did you get to look like that? It wasn’t the willowy, angular blondness—that, you had to be born with. It was the bounce in the mismatched shoes, the striped socks, and the Faerie charms dangling from her belt. That was pure Bordertown. Trish could stay here till she was thirty, and she’d never look like that. Would she? She was a jeans-and-T-shirt kind of girl, a simple, serious person. Even at home, she hadn’t been much for dressing up; that was for nonserious girls—and besides, if she could, she would dress in velvets and lace and skirts that swept the floor, nothing you’d ever find in Milltown.

But this was Bordertown. There were vintage shops on Carmine Street. Not that she had anything to buy with, but maybe she’d go there early tonight and just look around to see what was there.…

“Heads up! Monster on the loose!”

The shout rang up the street. Everyone was turning, staring at the thing that ran, scuttling, along the curb, waving its hairy arms and howling. It wasn’t a monkey, but it wasn’t human. Its face was hidden in a tangle of matted hair. Its hair was white—or whitish gray, anyway—and its arms and legs were skinny, the arms and fingers long—

“Gurgi!” Trish shouted, startled. The creature looked (and moved) just like Gurgi from *The Chronicles of Prydain*! She took off after him. Unfortunately, she wasn’t the only one. Whether they were scared or just mean, other kids were after the creature, throwing garbage and even rocks. She saw one hit the creature, heard him give a cry of pain.

“Cut it out!” Trish cried. She stopped, turning, to stand between the creature and the crowd.

“Fuckin’ noob!” a guy cursed her. “Get outta the way!”

“It’s a monster from the Nevernever, bitch! Get it out of Soho before it goes toxic and destroys us all!”

“You goddamned illiterate wastrel,” Trish yelled, so mad she didn’t care that she wasn’t sure how to pronounce it (was it *waste-rel* or *wahss-trel*?). “You ignorant peasant jackass! It’s Gurgi from the Prydain books! Now back off, you brainless wonder, before I rip you a new one!”

Even Gurgi had frozen in the tirade of her wrath. He stood behind her, shaking and whimpering—it almost sounded like giggling laughter.

And the other kids backed off and away, leaving Trish in command of her prize.

The creature peered up at her through matted hair.

“Crunchings and munchings?” it asked hopefully.

Trish grinned. She’d said it was Gurgi, but she hadn’t fully believed it. Nothing in Bordertown was like the books she loved. Until now. But that clinched it; that was exactly how Gurgi talked. She’d fallen into the right story at last.

“Are you hurt?” she asked.

He had his arms crossed protectively over his chest.

His arms were skinny but strong, just like Lloyd Alexander described him.

“Come on, let me see,” Trish coaxed.

His arms fell to his sides.

What is Gurgi doing wearing a Harvard T-shirt? Trish thought. “This is so weird,” she said. “You’re the second … um … guy I’ve seen this week in one of those.”

The shirt hung on his scrawny frame like a nightshirt on a little kid. “Noble lord was kind to Gurgi,” the creature said, his head bobbing up and down.

"*Anush* gave you that? Where— How was he?"

Gurgi pointed to her pack. "Noble mistress give crunchings and munchings to poor Gurgi now?"

Trish said, "Well, I don't really have any food. I was on my way down to Riverside; I heard you can pick up some work by the docks, like, carrying things. We could do it together, and then they'll give us both crunchings and munchings."

The creature looked dubious. "Noble mistress saves Gurgi's poor tender head from fightings and smitings?"

"Of course I will," Trish said. "Come on—I won't let anyone hurt you."

That was what she used to tell Jimmy. As she walked downhill with Gurgi trotting by her side, she remembered Jimmy's first day of kindergarten, when he'd been so scared. *I won't let anyone hurt you. I'll never let anyone hurt you.*

What had happened to her little Jimbo? She hadn't meant to leave him there. Sure, she'd been planning to go away to college, to the banks of the Charles, but she would have come back as often as she could. Hadn't she promised to be home for Christmas? She would have made sure Jimmy had an escape route, too. That he didn't have to go work down at the factory like Grampa and Dad and her three uncles if he didn't want to. That nobody crushed the magic out of him.

* * *

I meet a guy in the stacks at Elsewhere Books who thinks he might have seen Trish. He studies the picture, then passes it to his companion, an Asian girl with her hair in many braids. "I'm sure I've seen her. It was at a music gig. Deki, what's the name of that harper?"

"You mean Ossian?"

"Yeah, Ossian. I can't remember where we were that night. At Sluggo's, maybe? Or The Grand Conjunction?"

I add these names to my list of possible leads and thank them for their help.

I stop by the Poop at least once a day to check the message board. Still nothing there, but on the way out, I see a poster with the name Ossian. He's

playing an afternoon concert in Fare-You-Well Park, so I head in that direction.

I enter the park through the Ho Street gate, pass the buskers (good and bad) and the sidewalk artists (ditto), the mobile health clinic in its horse-drawn Winnebago, and a demented-looking guy who is standing on a soapbox ranting about the Bordertown High Council. The park's bandstand sits on a patchy stretch of lawn beyond the playgrounds and the bowling green. I reach it, and a hippie-looking girl in a "Respect the Realm" T-shirt hands me a concert flyer: "Traditional Music for the Elfin and Celtic Harps, Performed by Sashamia Leaves-upon-the-Water-at-the-Harvest-Moon and Ossian Feldenkranz."

The audience spread across the grass is small, and it doesn't take long to see my sister isn't in it. We're west of the Old City now, and this isn't a Soho crowd; it's mostly old people, a cluster of silver-haired kids from the Elfhaeme Musical Academy (it says so on their bags), and two skateboard punks who look like they belong here about as much as I do.

The concert has already begun. It's the tinkling kind of music Trish likes, not me—but it reminds me of her, so I stay to listen, stretched out on the grass beside Rosco with my head propped on my tool bag. The sun pours down like honey, and the harp music floats upward (*plonk*, *plonk*, *plonk*), drifting over the grass and trees and the background roar of the surrounding city.…

* * *

The Fish and Farmers' Market was all hustle and bustle, but Trish found work with a fishwife who was desperate to fill a huge last-minute order for a party on the Hill.

"What they want with fresh fish at a midnight garden party I do not know," she said in her funny singsong voice, "but you clean 'em up fast and you clean 'em up neat, and I'll pay you in kind."

She set up Trish and Gurgi down by the water and left them to their task. Gurgi didn't say much; he just seemed happy to be with her, happy to help. She found herself pouring out her heart to him as they cleaned and gutted the weird-looking Mad River fish. All the hopes, all the disappointments … the things she'd given up, and the things she'd loved …

“I was class valedictorian! I was on the honor roll! I got the best SAT scores Milltown High had ever had!”

“Oh, wise and noble princess,” said Gurgi encouragingly.

“I’m not a princess. I guess I thought I was, but I’m not. I’m just an assistant pig-keeper, Gurgi.”

“No, no! Noble princess must fill her head with dreamings and schemings.”

“But I did that. And look where it got me. Even in Milltown, we don’t have fish scales all over our hands.”

“Noble princess is on a great quest for things—um, for thinking and blinking!”

She looked around her. “This isn’t turning out to be much of an adventure. Maybe I’d better just go home and see if I can get my old job back. At least at Denny’s we don’t have to clean our own fish.”

“Noble princess is full of yearnings and learnings.”

“Maybe it was my essay.” It was such a relief to say it all out loud to someone, even if it was only Gurgi. “Maybe Harvard hated my essay. Or maybe they want all their applicants to already know French and classical music. Maybe refilling the ketchup bottles doesn’t count as an extracurricular activity. Or babysitting your baby brother. Oh, Gurgi …” she sighed sadly. Maybe she shouldn’t have started thinking about it, after all.

When he touched her hand with his pale, skinny one, she only flinched for a second from the dry, inhuman touch. “Dreamings and schemings,” he whispered in his funny little voice. “Yearnings and learnings. Almost as good as crunchings and munchings!”

Trish smiled a watery smile. “I dunno about that. Right now I’m pretty hungry. And look, it’s getting late. The sun will be setting soon. Let’s collect our pay and go get ourselves a really good dinner!”

“Yes, yes! Noble princess collects, and Gurgi eats!”

“Or better yet, I’ll bring you with me to this party I’m going to, at the Chimera. There might be food there. Maybe I should bring some fish.…”

Paid for their labor with fish and coin, they set out together, the two companions. Some wharf rats laughed and pointed at them, but nobody came near. The sun was setting low over the river behind them, making beautiful colors in the sky above.

As they passed through the Old City Wall into Soho, the shadows deepened. It wasn't that cold, but Gurgi started shivering. Trish stopped and reached into her backpack. She didn't really want to put her only sweatshirt on the hairy creature—he smelled kind of like a wet dog—but what else could she do?

When she turned around again, he was gone.

* * *

I fall asleep, lulled by the harps, and when I wake, someone is sitting beside me. For a moment, seeing only a dark shape against the sun, I think that it might be Trish—but no, it's a wild-looking girl, maybe ten or twelve, rubbing Rosco's hairy belly. He's lolling on his back, looking just about as foolish as an old black hound can look.

"Hey, that's my dog," I say. I don't know why, since this is obvious.

"No," the kid tells me, frowning, "you're his boy."

"Same difference."

"No, it isn't."

The girl has crazy brown hair, pointy ears, and dusky skin with a silvery sheen. She is feeding biscuits to my idiot hound, and I hope that they don't make him sick.

"He doesn't like smelling like cherries," she informs me.

"He doesn't?" I answer, humoring the kid.

She rises, brushes the crumbs from her jeans, then turns her serious little face to me. "He says to ask Ms. Wu for the one that smells like apples. He says to tell you that he'll like that better." Then she gives me a crooked, gap-toothed smile. "And don't worry. You'll find it."

"Apple-scented salve?" I ask, confused.

"Whatever you're looking for. I have to go now. My mama is waiting. Goodbye, Steadfast." She pats Rosco one last time.

"His name is Rosco."

"No, it isn't," she says, and then she takes off across the grass.

* * *

Gurgi had disappeared into the darkness—and the darkness of Riverside was no place to be looking for monsters. Trish took her package of fish up to Carmine Street. It was the only thing she could think of to do. She stopped at a gallery to ask the way.

"Are you doing the Smell Installation?" asked the ridiculously tall elf pinning uninflated balloons to the ceiling on tiptoe. "Because whatever they told you, that's not till next week."

"N-no," Trish stammered, "I'm looking for—"

"Oh," said the elf. "End of the street. Bright pink. Big house. Can't miss it."

She raised her hand to knock, but just as her knuckles grazed the wood, the bronze head of the doorknob shouted, *"It's oooopen!"*

She jumped about a foot in the air. The door opened inward, and she stepped inside.

"Cheerio, m'dearie-o!" It was a halfie with scraggly teeth and even scragglier hair that fell long and yellow from under his battered top hat. Behind him, the high-ceilinged room teemed with people of all shapes and styles.

"Um," said Trish, clutching her bag. "Is Cam here?"

"Everyone's here. We *do* just let in anyone, you know. Oh, fish!" The halfie took the bag. "How thoughtful! Spider will be pleased. He loves to feed the multitudes. Now, who brought the loaves?"

"Tara!" Cam edged around him to hug her. "You made it! Tara, this is Billy Buttons. He doesn't live here, he just acts like he does. Billy, Tara."

The halfie bowed, and declaimed:

> The harp that once through Tara's halls
> The soul of music shed,
> Now hangs as mute on Tara's walls,
> As if that soul were fled.

Ignoring him, Cam pulled Trish deeper into the room and up to a girl with long brown hair and a pointy little chin—a mortal, like her. Good. Trish had nothing against halfies, but she didn't want to be the only human here.

"Tara, this is my girlfriend, Seal."

Seal looked nice. Trish had had a couple of girlfriends in high school. She hadn't gotten around to writing to them from Bordertown yet. Jenny, who had also read *The Lord of the Rings*, and Sue, who worked at Denny's with her and was very funny. They both thought she was crazy to go away to college. Jenny was working at the nursing home, and Sue was staying at Denny's, waiting for her boyfriend to propose so she could quit. Or they had been, thirteen years ago. They were both probably moms by now. All grown up. Thinking about it made her head feel all buzzy again.

"Seal works backstage at the Changeling Theater, like me."

"Hi, Seal!" Trish said brightly. "It's nice to meet you!"

Cam put her arm around Seal, and Seal leaned her brown head on Cam's cute embroidered vest.

Oh. Oh, no.

Was *that* the kind of party this was? Did they think—did they think she … Trish looked wildly around the room. Because she lived at Carterhaugh, did they …?

But Billy Buttons was right. Anyone, everyone, was here. Guys and girls were necking and flirting, and so were guys and guys, doing stuff she thought should embarrass them in public, but apparently not. Cam and Seal were as proper as PTA ladies, by contrast.

"There's apple wine," Cam said happily. "Hector says it's from over the Border, but he's just trying to impress Poplar—"

"Which is pretty hilarious," said Seal, "considering she's actually Trueblood."

"Shhh!" Cam mock-shushed her. "She thinks she's passing!"

"Milords and Ladies of the Royal Court!" A guy with a spiky mustache, in a tuxedo and a white bow tie, had jumped up on a chair.

"Oh, good!" said Cam. "Lord Buckley's here."

"Is he going to do the Gettysburg Address again?"

He was:

"Four big hits and seven licks ago, our before daddies swung forth upon this sweet groovy land a swingin', stompin', jumpin', blowin', wailin' new nation, hip to the cool groove of liberty.…"

Trish had never heard anything like it. She laughed so hard she could barely understand the words. Not everyone was laughing; some were swaying and snapping their fingers, as if Lord Buckley were playing jazz

music—and in a way he was. But it felt so good to be somewhere that people jumped up on chairs and did crazy things. It felt good to have people who were glad to see her.

"Where's the apple wine?" she asked, and Cam said, "Right this way!"

* * *

Anush picked himself up off the sidewalk.

His T-shirt smelled of wet dog. His loose trousers fit around his waist, just barely, and they ended right below his knees. He'd have to go home—but where was home? His elfin lover had silks waiting for him, and an invitation to a party with all the Lords of Elfland. She also, unfortunately, had the keys to his own Plum Street apartment in the pocket of his jeans, hanging in her cupboard.

He made a few furtive steps down the street. Okay, fine. He was himself again. Barefoot, but okay. Down the street there were shops with lights on, colored lights, art installations. Clothes piled into boxes and racks outside one, just a tantalizing few feet away. Did he dare?

"Take one, Leave one," declared a hand-lettered cardboard sign, right on the box. Above it: "If you don't want these, who does?" and "In with the Old, out with the New!"

He could see why the stuff was in boxes outside the shop. Who in their right mind would want a pair of bright green slacks with little blue whales printed on them? Or a T-shirt featuring a giant white cartoon kitten saying "Hello!"? The pants would fit him, though. And at the bottom of the box he found a Star Trek T-shirt that wasn't too bad.

Farewell, Harvard. He laid his old, doggy-smelling shirt on top of the pile. Anush Gupta was an honorable man.

Two kids with instrument cases went past him. Then one turned back. "Ooooh! Is that Hello Kitty? I can't believe that's in the swap box!"

"Dude, cool threads!"

"Are you going to the Chimera?"

No, he started to say, *I'm going to Dragon's Tooth Hill with the elf babe of my dreams to do anthropological research.*

But then he realized he wasn't. Not tonight.

Tonight he didn’t want to be the observer, standing to the side trying to get others to reveal something. Tonight he wanted to stop trying. Tonight he wanted to be among his own kind.

* * *

I’ve lost track of how long I’ve been here now. They say that time is funny here on the Border, even when there *aren’t* big thirteen-year gaps, and maybe that’s the reason my days are blurring into each other, suspended in a kind of timeless limbo. Still no Trish. No leads. No fresh ideas. If I wasn’t so *cussedly stubborn* (Uncle Bud’s words), I’d admit defeat, turn tail, and leave. Bordertown is too big. Thirteen years is too long. My folks need me too much back home.

But Uncle Bud is right: I *am* cussedly stubborn, and I’m not ready to give up just yet. This town is a puzzle I’ve not yet cracked, an engine whose pieces I’m still learning to fit together. I keep my spirits up by setting myself little daily challenges: to memorize the street map of Soho, for instance, or to learn to tell time by the crazy Mock Avenue Clock, or to figure out how spellboxes run (and, okay, I’m still working on that last one).

One challenge involves The Dancing Ferret. I stop there every evening on my way home—I seem to have grown addicted to a Border brew called Piskies Peri, which The Ferret keeps on tap—and I’m determined to make that snooty elfin waitress smile at me, just once. I use my very best manners: I call her “ma’am,” and I always overtip. She just looks down her nose, flicks back her green hair, and walks off like the Queen of Elfland.

Tonight, a small breakthrough. She plunks down my glass of peri soon after I walk in, without first coming over to ask me what I’ll have. She scowls as she does it, but I give myself two points all the same. I’m a regular now.

It’s quiet at this hour. I like to come well before the first act of the evening begins, sitting in the corner writing postcards home while Rosco snoozes at my feet. The band for tonight, Monkeyshines or something like that, has already set up their gear, their spellboxes, and their special effects. They’re running an illusion spell that’s meant to turn these dark, dusty, shabby rooms into some kind of enchanted sylvan glade, complete with

trees rustling in the wind and birds twittering in the foliage overhead. And, yes, it's weird to use words like "illusion spell" and "sylvan glade" out loud. The uncles would laugh me right out of the house if I came home and actually talked like that, but here that's how everyone speaks and what they are called. Like I said, we're not in Kansas anymore.

So I'm sitting writing my uncle Harry on the back of a hand-drawn postcard of Elfhaeme Gate when one of those damn birds tweeting overhead keels over and plops into my drink. I fish it out. It appears to be made of a strange elfin metal, light and pliable, with some kind of a motor inside that is whirring and groaning and ticking faintly.

"Oh, crap," says the Queen of Elfland, swooping by and plucking the creature from my hands. "They've been falling from the ceiling all damn day." She glares at me like it's personally my fault as she moves to put the bird into her pocket.

"Wait a minute, can I see that?" I ask. "I'm curious about how they work."

The waitress snorts (and even her snorts are haughty) as she tosses the bird onto the table. "They *don't* work. They just fall down dead." She whacks it once more for emphasis. "This, sir, is an *ex*-parrot."

For a moment I'm so startled by the Monty Python reference that I just sit there like the village idiot as she shrugs and stalks (regally) away. Then I'm turning the bird over in my hands, eager to determine what makes it, well, tick. A latch is concealed in the creature's belly, which opens to expose a mechanism that is almost clocklike in design—but not like any clock I've ever seen. A wickedly clever arrangement of gears and levers is run by an ordinary little motor, attached to a kind of battery. On second look, the "battery" is a lump of wadded-up paper in battery shape. There are words on the paper in a tiny, tiny hand—some kind of spell, perhaps. Or poetry. Or both.

So what, I wonder, has gone wrong here, causing the mesh of magic and mechanics to fail? It could be a faulty spell, or the famous unreliability of Border magic—but my fingers tell me the fault is in the mundane workings of levers and gears and wires. My fingers are never wrong about these things. If it's possible for human beings to have magic, then my magic is in my hands. Like I said, I can fix almost anything. Even weird little birds with mechanical hearts, drenched in elfin spells and peri.

I have my tool bag with me (of course), and I pull out my smallest screwdrivers, a magnifying glass, an oil rag, and I make a series of small adjustments, testing, listening, trusting in my fingers. Then I've got it. I've *got it.* I know what's wrong, and I fix it with some copper wire, two tiny screws, a piece of gaffer tape, and spit. The sound of the little motor grows steady; the bird flaps its wings, moves its beak, and starts to tweet. I fish out another postcard and write a quick note detailing the repair; then I hand it to the Queen of Elfland as I pay my check. "Tell them it's an easy fix."

She *almost* smiles. "Aren't you staying for the show?"

I shake my head. I never stay. I go outside to my usual spot, where Rosco and I can sit in the shadows and observe the crowd that is gathering. It's the kind of crowd I imagine that Trish might like: heavy on the Faerie velvet and lace, on corsets and frock coats and masks and wings. I wait and watch while they all go in. Then I wait and watch all the stragglers, too. Only when it's clear that Trish is not among them do I rise, whistle for Rosco to follow, and head back to the Diggers' House.

I'm crossing the street and thinking about a bath (for Rosco, too—that candy smell is *strong*) when I hear the sound of shouting behind me. Someone is flying out of The Ferret like a bat out of hell—all arms and legs and long silver dreads, the tails of his long coat flapping behind him.

"Wait!" he's calling, apparently at me. He's breathing hard as he catches up. A hafling, tall and peculiar-looking, wanting to know: "Are you Mr. Fix-It?"

I look down at my T-shirt, where the words are written in boldface type across my chest.

"You fixed my birds, man! You saved my show! You've got to come back and let me buy you a drink!" Now he's pulling me by the arm, back toward The Ferret—while Rosco, my steadfast protector, merely turns obligingly and heads back to the club. "You've got to come see the show," the tall kid insists as he steers me past The Ferret's bouncers, past the Queen of Elfland, and past the club's owner, Farrel Din. "But we've got to hustle," he tells me, pushing through the crowd, "because I'm on in, like, five minutes.…"

* * *

“So you wouldn’t believe what happened!” Trish said. “He opens my bag and goes, ‘Crunchings and munchings?’ ”

“Oh, noooo!” a blue-haired girl screamed happily. “You mean like Gurgi?!”

“*Just* like Gurgi,” Trish said.

“So what happened?”

“He disappeared.”

“Poof?”

“Not *poof*. More like—I dunno, like when you take your baby brother to the mall and you turn to look at a store window, and the next thing you know they’re on the loudspeaker going, ‘Will the sister of a little boy in the striped shirt please come to the information desk?’ Only there’s no information desk here, is there?”

The girl shook her head.

“Who’s Gurgi?” asked the guy sitting next to her in the Mumford & Sons T-shirt.

“You wouldn’t understand. It’s a book. You noobs don’t read.”

“We do, too! Who said we don’t read? I’ve read Harry Potter, like, five times!”

“Oh, yeah, and what else? I bet you’ve read whole screens’ worth of text. Like, ‘U R 4 me, imho.’ ” Laughing, the girl drew the letters with her finger on his chest, and they rolled onto the floor together.

Trish looked around for Cam and Seal. They were slow-dancing to a guy playing music in a corner of the room. It looked like he was running a violin bow across an upside-down saw. Maybe he was. It sounded weird. But they looked so happy. Kind of like Mom and Dad, when they thought the kids were in bed and their favorite song came on the radio … Oh god, were they still all right? What if she never saw them again—

“May I have this dance?”

It was him. The Harvard guy. Wearing incredibly ugly pants and a Star Trek T-shirt, but still. Smiling at her with that beautiful smile.

“Um, I don’t dance,” she said. “Not like that.”

“That’s good.” He sat down next to her. “Neither do I. I just thought it was a great opening line. You know, like in the movies. I’ve never tried a line like that. But I thought, ‘I’m in Bordertown. What do I have to lose?’ ”

He held out his hand. “I’m Anush. I mean, I guess you know that already, but I’m being extra polite tonight.”

Was he *flirting* with her? Or just being nice?

“Trish,” she said, shaking his hand. Oops. “But my name here is Tara.”

“That’s a pretty name.” His eyes were so dark, his lashes so thick.

“Why didn’t *you* pick a new name?”

“Well, I wanted Legolas or Gwydion, but …” He shrugged and grinned. She understood.

“Can I ask you something?” Trish said. “I don’t mean to be rude, but … where are you from?”

“California.”

“No, I mean before that.”

He gave her a long, cool look. “My parents came from India, if that’s what you’re asking. But I was born here—like you.”

“We weren’t born here. Either of us. This is Borderland.”

He picked at a frayed thread on one of the tiny whales on his pants. “True. And we both came here on a quest to learn something, didn’t we?”

“You too?”

Anush nodded. “Oh, yeah. See, when I left … I thought …” He worried at the thread, not looking at her. “I guess I wanted to be Vyasa and Ganesha, both at once—” He stopped. “You don’t know anything about them, do you?” Trish shook her head but kept her eyes on his face, hungry to learn. “Vyasa was the man who narrated the great Hindu saga the *Mahābhārata*, while the god Ganesha wrote it down.” He stopped for a moment. “But Vyasa was part of the story as well. He’s an important character in it, the father of princes.”

“What kind of princes?” Trish asked.

“Oh, the usual kind. Brave, reckless, beautiful, doomed. Indian princes.”

“Did you study that at Harvard?”

“No, my mom used to tell me those stories.”

“Wow, that’s so cool!” said Trish. “The real oral tradition!”

Anush grinned. “But transcribed first by an elephant-headed god.”

“With excellent penmanship. That’s right, you said. So you didn’t read them as part of that class on myth and fantasy literature?”

He picked at the whale again. “Um, no. We only looked at Celtic myth. All the classic fantasy novels are based on that, or Northern European

material. Nobody writes about Indian stuff." Trish nodded. "Kind of too bad, really, because it could be really cool—I mean, Vyasa's son, Dhritarashtra, for instance, was a blind king; his brother, Pandu, was a great archer, but cursed.…"

This is it, Trish thought as the night went on. *This is what I came here for. Maybe not to be in a story, after all, but to hear them.* She loved listening to him explain things. She loved watching his hands move and his face shift as he told her of the great war between the two families, of the heroes and the strange and noble women in both of them … while around them at the Chimera there were people singing, dancing, talking, joking, eating, and, maybe, changing their lives.…

* * *

The tall kid has not been exaggerating: He *is* due on the stage in five minutes. The band has been announced, the house lights are dimming, the birds have commenced swooping (safely) overhead—and I'm soon standing in the wings with a tall, cold peri, Rosco curled up on some coats behind me. Even here in shadows, I feel conspicuous and stupidly out of place in my jeans and T-shirt and old Frye boots, while the band on the stage is all tattered old velvets and lace, like the crowd that's come to see them. For a moment I think about turning and leaving … but that's when the music starts.

The tall halfling (whose name, I've learned, is Spider) now stands in the very center of the stage, a gangly scarecrow in a coat of elfin cloth worn over an old Scottish kilt and hobnailed boots. His silver dreadlocks hang heavy on his back, speckled with random bits of leaves and moss, and his wrists are weighted with Faerie gold and gems that sparkle in the stage lights. The other musicians are fanned out behind him, each one looking more outlandish than the next—except for a skinny human with a little goatee, dressed so plainly that he's odd, too. Spider holds a bizarre-looking instrument that must come from the lands beyond the Border: intricately carved and painted, shaped a bit (but not entirely) like a fiddle, its six strings played with a thin white bow that looks twice as long as it ought to.

The crowd falls completely silent as the halfling kid begins with a single note, so soft it is barely audible, and then it slowly, slowly rises in volume

until it fills the entire room. It's not music, exactly. Not what I call music. It's more like a moaning kind of sound, like wind in a cave, like a woman in the throes of passion, and I can *feel* that note as well as hear it. It rises, rises … turns from a moan into a groan like boulders shifting deep inside the earth … or a groan of pain, deep inside my own belly, aching and awful and endless. I catch my breath, and all around the club I can hear other people gasping, too—but this, this is *my* pain; this is *my* grief. It's Trish disappearing and the folks growing old too fast and a dozen other deeply private things … and yet it is also *everybody's* pain, every person there, shared and multiplied, unbearable … and then suddenly it breaks, like a wave … like window glass shattering into shards of sound and light, and the moaning is now the wind in the trees, and I've never felt so free in all my life.

Then a fiddle appears in the skinny human's hands, its music sliding sideways into the web of sound, of light, of motion and emotion that Spider has been making, conjuring, weaving with his body, his breath, the lightning movements of that overlong bow. The fiddle music, by contrast, sounds almost coarse; it is human, earthy, raw … and powerful due to all those things. It is a sound that my ears can more easily understand as *music*, and it anchors the elfin sounds and draws them closer to the human sphere. Then there are drums. Maybe two, or five, or ten. Or is it dozens, stationed all around the room? Or maybe it's just one young woman, dark hands a blur of motion, making all that sound. Next, a flute, or something like a flute, making … *noises* (not unpleasant, just strange) that I have no words to properly describe. Followed by an instrument that looks a lot like a mandolin, and sounds like one, too.

Overhead the birds add their song to the tapestry of sound and flit through the spectral trees, and I know they're made of a mishmash of magic and mechanics, but they look so goddamn *real.* An illusionary wind rustles my hair, and there are tears in my eyes. I don't know why. I don't even know if I *like* this music—it's too strange, too hard, too sad, too full of longing for something that I can't even name. But I'm rooted to the spot. And then suddenly the tall kid shouts, and it all changes.

Electric guitars appear onstage, corralling all the other sounds into a danceable beat that is wild and insistent. These are rhythms I know; this is good ol' rock and roll—so loud, so raucous, and so damn good that all of

the kids in the club are now on their feet and they're shouting, too. Shouting, stomping, clapping, jumping up and down, and dancing. Oh my god, are we dancing, so fast and hard that the floor starts to shake. Okay, I've never been much of a dancer—I'm a shuffle-from-one-foot-to-the-other kind of guy—but this music is so good (weird as anything, but good) that I have to move, have to shake it up inside me, and if I look demented, I just don't care. For the next two hours, I forget about Trish and my folks and every other thing on this earth, and I live only in that music, in sweat and motion, in that heaving crowd of kids. Trish used to say that dancing can be a sacred thing, and I think that I now know what she meant. Something happens when you share that high, that joy, with a room full of equally blissed-out strangers. You change, they change, and by evening's end, no one is quite such a stranger anymore. We roar and stomp, and when the set comes to its close, we will not let the band off the stage. They're back for encore after encore, and I dance and shout and do not want the night to end.

Eventually, however, the last notes of the fiddle fade and the birds overhead grow still. The club grows quiet; people whisper or they leave in silence. No one wants to break the spell. I find my coat, my tool bag, and my sleepy dog. My legs are sore but I am feeling … lighter. I find myself smiling at everyone as I head for the doors, Rosco trotting at my heels. And the Queen of Elfland, who is wiping down the bar, catches my eye and—damn!—she smiles back at last.

I'm heading home when it happens again: Spider bursts through the doors of The Dancing Ferret and comes charging down the cobbles of Carnival Street. "Wait! The night's not over!" he's shouting, so I stop and wait for him to reach me. "We're going to catch Lambton Wyrm's last set at Sluggo's," he tells me, "then grab some food from Taco Hell. There's an after-party at the Chimera … and then an after-after party after that. Come with us. Come meet the rest of Widdershins, my band. The night is young, my friend!"

I hesitate. I don't know this kid at all.…

He grins. "Don't worry. Us halfies don't bite."

"No, it's not that," I tell him quickly. I don't care about that; I'm just cautious by nature—or at least that's how I was back home. But here? I find

myself smiling easily at Spider. “What the heck,” I say. “Sure. I’ll come along.”

Spider takes my tool bag onto his own shoulders and is chattering away now as we go back up the street. “We’ll stash this at The Ferret. It’ll be as safe as houses. And the dog can come along with us, no worries. They’ll love your pooch at Taco Hell … maybe not at Sluggo’s, but, hey, we’ll get him in. Look at those stars, my man! That moon! It’s a glorious night, and it’s only just beginning! It’s Jimmy, right? People call you Mr. Fix-It, did you know that? Groovy shirt. That vintage truck-stop look is cool. My drummer thinks you’re cute, but, hey, don’t tell her that I told you. Here’s The Ferret. Let’s drop this off and … wait, where’s Yidl? Did he leave already? Balls! No, there he is. Yidl! Come meet Jimmy. He’s Mr. Fix-It. You remember. He’s the guy I was telling you about.”

Yidl is the human fiddle player, a sometimes-member of Widdershins, though he plays with klezmer and gypsy bands, too. He’s something of a legend here in Soho, and even a noob like me knows his name. “Jimmy, is it? Good to have you in the band,” he says cheerfully as he shakes my hand.

“Oh, no, I’m not joining—” I begin to protest, but he waves away my words.

“That’s what they all say. That’s what *I* said.” Then he nods in the direction of my new best friend. “They don’t call that boy Spider for nothing, you know. You’re in his web now—enjoy. A fix-it guy, huh? That’ll be useful.” He claps me on the back, laughing at my expression. “There’s no point fighting fate or Spider, my friend. It’s *beshert*—meant to be. Welcome to Widdershins.”

* * *

The Chimera was getting noisy. Still talking, Trish and Anush moved toward the door.

“Going so soon?” It was Billy Buttons again. “Our little party’s just beginning. Or it will be, as soon as Spider returns with the band. Stick around, why don’t you?”

“Maybe later,” Anush said. “We’re going out for some air.”

“Plenty of air in here. But suit yourselves, m’dearie-os.” With a flourish, Billy showed them the door.

Carmine Street was alive with kids out in the galleries, the funky little cafés, and the sidewalk market lit with colored lanterns. Trish and Anush drifted through Soho, talking, the stars bright overhead. They left the ancient Indian tales behind and moved on to their own histories. As they passed through the dark, silent streets around Whisthound Square, crossed through the crowds and fairy lights on Carnival, then up along the crumbling elegance of Mock Avenue, Trish told him about Mom and Dad and Jimmy. He told her about his parents, born into a struggling, emerging India torn by partition and war, their arranged marriage, their settling in America.

"All they care about is making safe choices for a safe life, and a job with security," he said. "I know, I know, after what they went through, I can't really blame them. But still."

"I know." She nodded. "My parents are all about security, too. Why can't they understand that things are different for us now?"

"What do *you* want?" Anush asked.

"What do I want?" Trish hugged herself, as if she would fly apart without her two arms holding her together. All around her, the world was sharp and strange and full of promise. "There's so much I want! I want to read every book in the world. I want to live a beautiful life and have friends who talk about books and music and poetry. I want to hear every story. I want to learn about everything there is—"

Anush leaned forward. Trish felt the warmth of his hands on her shoulders. "You're going to college," he said.

"I'm not going back to Milltown for community college, not after this."

"Real college," Anush said firmly. "Doesn't have to be Harvard—maybe it's Barnard, or Bryn Mawr, or Oberlin or Carleton or UMass or … or Berkeley. But you're going."

"I'm going? Just like that? But my parents don't have the money—"

"There are plenty of scholarships, Trish—and there's other kinds of financial aid. There's a whole world out there waiting for you, I swear it."

"But … but I just got here—"

"You don't want Bordertown," he said firmly. "You thought you did, but you said it yourself in the Hard Luck—this isn't the kind of magic that you came for. You don't want elves and runaways and cold-water squats and installation art. You want the other kind of escape: an ivory tower with a

view of the library. Unlimited stacks privileges and a study carrel of your own." His words sounded like an incantation. She didn't even know what those things were. "There's no reason you can't have that. None."

"But I didn't get into Harvard," Trish protested. "I'm not good enough —"

"Look, you were first in your class. Class valedictorian, honor roll … I bet your personal essay was just fine. And your new one will be even better —'cause for life experience, what beats some time in Bordertown? Schools will be fighting over you!"

"You really think so?"

"Definitely."

"But what about a job? What about after college? That's the first thing my parents are going to ask."

"Grad school, more scholarships, grants—hell, if you like it, you could become a professor and just stay in the ivory tower, studying and writing and—"

"I can *do* that?" she gasped. "Make a living, get paid, just for learning and reading books?"

"Of course you can. It'll take hard work—it's a competitive field—but others have done it, so why not you? You made it here, didn't you? Use the same courage and determination and you'll do fine."

It was the most perfect night of her life. Hardly night anymore—the sky was getting ashy, the stars were fading overhead. She wanted this night to never end.…

"Oh, shit," Anush said suddenly. "Oh, no. Look, Tara, I really have to go. It's late … I … I'm so sorry, Trish, I—"

"Oh, okay," she said quietly. "Never mind."

"No, look—I'll find you. We'll talk. I'll see you later—"

Just like that.

Gone, as the dawn broke over the suddenly grungy-looking, desolate streets of Soho.

Had he really run away from her, run off down the street like she was infected or something?

But if he suddenly hated her, what did he mean about *later*?

And how did he know she'd been class valedictorian?

* * *

Anush scuttled back to his lady's loft, transformed again. His Star Trek T-shirt hung low around his knees; he'd stripped off the whale pants as he raced through Soho, ducking in and out of alleys trying not to be seen. The mysterious latch opened to his pale, hairy fingers. He climbed the stairs, using his long arms to aid his short legs. It was funny how he could always find his way back here—as if he were a dog that knew its own yard.

Was part of him a beast in mind as well as body? How much of him was still himself now? He remembered pretending to be Gurgi for Trish—was it just yesterday morning?—coming up with all those stupid, funny things to say to her. Of course, he knew the books, so it was easy. A little too easy? Where did mind end and body begin?

Scratching his back with those tough, long fingers felt really good. Too good? He made himself stop. But he really wanted to—

Hold on, fella, he told himself. *You'll be okay. Just hold on until tonight; you'll be yourself again as soon as night falls.…*

"Ah, there you are." It was his lady, cool and bright and beautiful as ever. He realized she'd never told him her name.

Nervously, he started scratching again.

"You missed an excellent party," she said. "There was tilien, fresh from the Realm. But perhaps you would not have liked it, after all."

Goddammit, why hadn't she turned him into something cool? Instead of cursing him with beasthood, why couldn't she have said, "To truly know what it is to be of the Blood, you must walk as one" and made him look like an *elf*? He would really love to know, just once, what it was like to be tall and blond. And besides, it would have been helpful for his research.

But no. He had to get picked up by a Trueblood tourist looking for a holiday fling in Soho. He just hoped he survived her summer vacation—and that she'd lift the curse before she left. Whenever that might be.

* * *

Yidl's right—there is no point fighting fate or Spider, and I've given in to both. I've been helping out with the band this last week (just until I find

Trish and head home, I tell them), and Rosco and I have moved into Spider's squat, the Chimera.

The Chimera is a big ol' house at the end of Carmine Street—past the vintage shops and cafés so new and hip that the paint on the wall hasn't dried, past those weird little art and "happening" spaces (like Jama Pajama and House of Foof), past the dance studio and the Pumpkin Coach and that bad elfin pizza place (whose bright idea was that?). You can't miss the house, which is tall and narrow and painted Pepto-Bismol pink. Downstairs there are large, once-elegant rooms where a party is perpetually in progress, no matter what time of day or night you drop by.

This is Spider's domain, the center of his web. He lives up in the attic with his instruments, his books, his spell-casting workshop, and a fat ginger cat called Godzilla. The middle two floors of the squat are inhabited by a fluctuating number of kids, most of them halfies ("Don't say halflings," Spider tells me. "It's gauche"), and most of them artists or actors or fire-eaters or otherwise odd. Spider cooks for everybody ("Spell-casting and cooking are not unrelated," he says) and anyone else who happens to drop in: stray musicians, stray painters and poets and potters, stray noobs who come and go, and occasionally total strangers who wander upstairs from the party, looking dazed and hungry.

No one really knows where Spider comes from; the past is a door he refuses to open. "I was born on the day that I set foot in Soho," he says. "Let's just leave it at that." No one knows his birth name either (he says it's High Elvish and unpronounceable); he's been going by Spider ever since some sidewalk shaman told him that it was good luck. He *is* a spider, reaching out with those long, double-jointed fingers of his to pull everyone he meets into the web of his schemes and adventures. Not in a sinister way; there's not an evil bone in that boy's whole body. He pulls people into his world because it's fun there, and Spider wants *everyone* to have a good time.

I'm just the latest to be pulled in. Everyone is friendly to Rosco and me, but I'm a fish out of water on Carmine Street, and Spider doesn't seem to see that. "We're all misfits here," he says, almost proudly. "That's why I started this squat, after all. For people like us, who don't fit anywhere else. Halfies and homos and hopeless romantics, the outcast and outrageous and terminally weird. That's where art comes from, Jimmy, my friend. From our

weirdnesses and our differences, from our manic fixations, our obsessions, our passions. From all those wild and wacky things that make each of us unique."

"But I'm not an artist," I keep trying to tell him. "I fix things. That's all. I'm an ordinary guy."

"Balls!" he says. "But you go on pretending that's true, if it makes you happy."

I am attempting to earn my keep by working on special effects for Widdershins, hanging Spider's ideas and spell-work on a steadying framework of mechanics. No, I'm no artist, but what I *can* do seems to be useful to people here: I am able to work in the in-between space where magic and machines are spliced together. Now, wizards are a dime a dozen in this town, and there are plenty of World-trained scientists, mechanics, and engineers, too, but folks who can work with the hybrid technologies of the Border seem to be less common. It's supposed to be almost incomprehensible if your brain isn't wired a particular way, but I've been tinkering with the stuff since I got here, and to be honest, it just isn't that hard.

It all makes me remember the original Mr. Fix-it, whose repair shop I used to work in after school. Ernie, the old man's name was, and I still use the tools that his wife gave me when he died. There aren't any shops like his anymore; everything is so cheap now that folks just chuck stuff out and buy replacements from China. Ernie would have hated seeing that. I wish he could see what we're doing here; I think, of all people, that old man would get it. There's no rule book for how to blend magic with science; there's no surefire recipe; there's only instinct, intuition, trusting your fingers—all of which I first learned from him. My sister might understand it, too—not *how* this stuff works, but *why* it works. She's the one who taught me about magic, after all, by leaving a roomful of books behind—all those myths and legends and fantasy novels—and maybe that's why the language and logic of spell-work don't rattle me now.

Here's what I've built in the last few days alone: a circuit board powered by a three-part riddle song, a soundboard yoked to the lunar tides, and a spell-powered motor in which the poetry of the moving parts is as crucial as their function. I've discovered that the hybrid creations that work best can be beautiful, whimsical, diabolically clever, or even disarmingly simple—

just so long as they're not purely *functional*. Everything we make, or use, or fix has an animating spirit of its own, or it breaks.

Spider is an absolute genius when it comes to the art of weaving illusion and music together. I'm guessing that he learned both his music and his magery in the Realm (an unusual thing for a halfie, if true), but this is all part of the Spider Life Story that's posted with "Keep Out" signs, so I don't ask. He has crazy ideas that are like no one else's, and when they work, the results can take your breath away. He's not quite so good with the technical side—with the careful, methodical, logical grunt work that meshes his magery with human mechanics, but that's fine by me; that's the part I like: the puzzle to be untangled. So we work as a team, drinking endless cups of gritty elfin tea at the Pumpkin Coach while we sketch ideas, scribble calculations, dream, scheme, boast, and argue all night. Then we go back across the street, climb up to his workshop in the Chimera's eaves, and pull out our tools, our diagrams, our maps, and put our ideas to the test. Most of them fail spectacularly, of course, but a few of them … well, we're working on those. You have to build such things slowly, step by step, or it all crumbles like Faerie gold.

There are other people who want my help, too—everything from plumbing and wiring work to lighting at the Magic Lantern, and I like helping out, since everywhere I go is another place to look for my sister. People keep telling me they might have seen her—maybe yesterday or maybe last week—and then it always turns out to be some *other* girl with curly brown hair and a knapsack full of books. But I follow every lead, and one of these days the trail is going to lead me straight to Trish. It has to. It's why I'm here.

And in the meantime, Mr. Fix-It is open for business.

* * *

"Did you hear?" a kid in the next booth was saying. "There's a new monster in town."

Trish was getting breakfast in the Hard Luck Café. She had a whole booth to herself, and she'd just spread out a copy of *Nightlife* to read with her eggs.

“Oh, that’s just the noobs being dumb,” another kid sneered. “Every time one sees Wolfboy out buying groceries, they go completely splaa.”

Trish was a little worried about Gurgi. She hadn’t seen him for nearly a week. But if he wanted to find her, he’d find her. Magical creatures were like that. Maybe if she went back to Riverside, he’d be there. She hated cleaning fish, but she needed the money. She still didn’t know if she should stay or go home, but she was going to need cash either way.

Cam came over with more toast for her, and Trish decided to ask her about the other thing on her mind: “Hey, Cam? Remember that Harvard guy, Anush?”

“I haven’t seen him since the Split. Maybe he went Worldward. A lot of people are leaving.”

“No, I saw him after the Split. He was at the Chimera the same night I was.”

Cam raised one eyebrow. “With or without the elf babe?”

Trish felt herself flush. She didn’t want to, and she certainly didn’t want Cam seeing it. So she pretended to blow her nose. “Without. We talked. He thinks I should go to college. But I don’t know.…”

“Well, while you’re thinking about it, I wonder if you could do me a favor? We’re putting on *Mary Poppins Goes to Mars* at the Changeling Theater next month, and I really need to put in more time there if the show’s going to work. Do you think you could pick up some shifts here for me? The pay is lousy, but the tips—”

Trish leaned across the table and hugged her.

* * *

Widdershins is playing The Ferret again tomorrow night. It’s going to be a terrific gig. Althea Windbreaker is the opening act (doing some kind of a capella thing with Nightingale and Wicker Leaf-and-Tree), and Widdershins has some new dance tunes that are sounding great in rehearsal. Spider wants to use some of our new special effects. I don’t think we’re ready yet—I’m not convinced we’ve worked out all the bugs—but Spider says the only way that we’re going to find out is to try.

Maybe I’m just a “nervous old nanny goat” like he says, but I want the effects to work perfectly. This will be the first time Widdershins uses stuff

that I helped make, and I *am* nervous, but also excited, and I want it all to run like clockwork. So I'm up half the night tinkering with the very last bits, trying to leave nothing to chance. Okay, it's only a few new effects in the whole show, and if they're not perfect, no one will notice but me … but I'm proud of them. And Spider, of course, doesn't fail to notice.

"So tell me again how you're not an artist, you're just the fix-it guy," he says smugly. He laughs as he dodges the roll of gaffer tape I throw at his head.

I finally go to bed at four a.m. Calculations are still running through my head, but I think that Spider's right: It's all going to work fine. I fall asleep to the sounds of Rosco snoring and the music of the party below me. Then, this morning, I wake in panic. I'm shivering, in a total cold sweat, thinking, *What the hell is going on? What on earth am I doing?* I came to the Border for one reason only: to find my sister and to bring her back home. My mother and family are waiting for me. Real life is back there in Milltown, not here. I can't just turn into somebody new. Mom is counting on me. Trish is counting on me. I didn't come here to join a rock band.

I find Spider in the kitchen in his threadbare bathrobe, striped socks, and curly toed slippers, his long silver dreads sprouting twigs and leaves as though birds have been nesting in the coils. He is cooking for a small army as usual—squat members, band members, assorted waifs and strays, and one very drunk elf lord. "Morning, sunshine," he says when he sees me. "You're just in time for some grub. Grab a plate."

I don't know how Spider comes up with this food, but there is always just enough somehow. The table is crowded, but everyone scootches around it to make a place for me. And then suddenly I am fighting back tears, and it's stupid, I know, but *I want it so much.* This place at the table. It feels good. It feels right, this sense of belonging.

But I am the dependable one in the family. Not the one who disappears on the Border.

* * *

The sun was slanting in the windows to the west.

"I hear," Anush's lady said, "that there is a half-breed who plays the Trueblood music with your kind and ours, and makes a kind of magic with

it. Widdershins. The people dance, and even rock out, they tell me. Why do you laugh?"

"Never mind," Anush said. "Go on."

"Poor, cast-out, deluded Farrel Din keeps the club where they play. It's called the Dancing Parrot."

"The Dancing Ferret. I know it."

"Good. You will take me there tonight. For, sweet as our nights together have been lately, I feel the need of more company. And pure Trueblood conversation is still a bit … above your head."

"Whose fault is that?" Anush said bitterly. "You could teach me."

"Teach you?" She turned an opaque gaze on him. "Are your kind capable of learning?"

"I'm not an animal, dammit."

Her silvery laugh cut like a knife. "Aren't you? Take a look in the mirror."

"That's it," he said. "I'm out of here."

No knowledge was worth this—not even his delectable, firsthand, up-close-and-personal intimate knowledge of the sexual practices of Trueblood ladies fresh from the Realm. She was great at night—but did she ever ask him any questions? She didn't give a damn who he was or where he was from, what he knew and what he wanted. That schoolgirl, Trish or Tara or whatever her name was, was worth a hundred of her.

He was going home.

"Farewell," the lady said. "And best of luck to you. Be careful as you leave the Borderlands."

Something in her tone made him pause. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Magic is chancy on the Border," she said, avoiding his eye, stroking the links of the silver chain belt that girdled her slender waist—one of her truth-telling postures. "I know that once you return to the World, you will no longer change shape. But who can say, at the moment when you quit these lands, what shape will be yours?"

"Who can say?" Anush exploded. "*You* can, right now! Quit messing with me. Undo your spell."

"Who are you to command me?"

But she didn't sound very sincere. And indeed: "Oh, all right. This is getting boring. The sun sinks low. As soon as you're in manly form, we'll

go out clubbing, and then, in the morning, I'll undo the curse."

"Undo it now. I want an extra hour to primp."

"What will you give me if I do?"

"I'll buy you a beer." He was in an agony of anticipation. "Come *on*."

"I shall miss your funny squeaking," she said. But she raised her hands and did her twisty thing, and spoke some words.

His back itched. He reached around to scratch it.

"It didn't work."

"Of course it worked," she said. "It just isn't sunset yet."

But sunset came and went, and nothing changed.

"Fear not," she said. "It is, perhaps, some strange phase of the moon at work. Tomorrow we will try again."

"Tomorrow," Anush growled, "I am going to strangle you with my bare hands."

"I can change them," the lady said silkily. "So I suggest you be on your best behavior."

He shuddered to think what another of her attempts might bring.

"Now come, my pet. Let us go out and hear sweet music."

Anush buried his head, his unspeakable head, in his huge, hairy hands.

* * *

Trish tried hard not to think of Anush. But every time she caught a glimpse of a dark-haired guy just a little taller than she was walking into the Hard Luck, she had to check to see if it was him.

It never was. So probably he hated her. He'd thought she was all smart and collegey, but then she must've said something wrong that night. Maybe she shouldn't have told him about her parents. Maybe he couldn't deal with them not being high school graduates. His parents were the kind of people who told him stories about magical princes and who thought going to college was, like, his actual job.

Plus, he was really into elves. He had that amazing girlfriend. He was getting to *live* the story, the *right* story, here in Bordertown. Why should he bother with her and her stupid dreams?

"Check, please! Hold the mayo!"

For once it was Trish who was serving Cam at the Hard Luck. It felt funny, but kind of nice. Cam and Seal sat at the counter, sharing a single milkshake with two straws. They were both dressed up to go out.

"The Dancing Ferret," said Cam. "Come when you get off shift. You might miss part of the opening act, but the real show will be Spider's band. He's found this new guy to help Widdershins with tech. One of the noobs, but he's super-nice. We want him to help us with special effects at Changeling, if we can pry him away from Spider long enough. They've been cooking up some secret wahoo for tonight they swear will blow us all out of the water."

"I don't really like loud music," Trish said.

"Me neither," said Seal, "but this is different."

"Real music out of Elfland," Cam cajoled, "but it has a good beat, and you can dance to it!"

"Okay, I'll think about it. If I'm not too tired."

Trish had no intention of going to The Dancing Ferret. She was saving her money and was not in the mood for a Saturday-night club crowd. Besides, she wasn't dressed for it.

But when she picked up the glass, she found for her tip that Cam had left a red disk on a silken string. It was stamped with the words "Widdershins Guest Pass: Flashing Eyes, Floating Hair … and Others. Enter if you dare."

She put the string around her neck. She dared.

* * *

I'm following Spider, Yidl, and the others into The Dancing Ferret when a bouncer stops me with a hand on my chest. "Where are you going?" she says suspiciously.

Okay, I don't exactly look like the others, but before I can draw a breath to explain who I am, the Queen of Elfland appears and says, "Relax, Laura, he's with the band. Let him in."

I'm probably wearing a big, stupid grin, and I don't know which one tickles me more: my second smile from the green-haired waitress or hearing those words: *He's with the band.*

It takes us an hour to haul in the equipment, set up the spell and audio amps, cast the illusions, test the sound, and make sure everything is in the

right place. Meanwhile the club is filling up. There are people here for the a capella set, and people here for a Widdershins stomp, and people here just because The Ferret's the place to be on a Saturday night. The gig starts promptly by Ferret time, which means an hour later than advertised, and by then the place is packed and the bouncers are turning folks away at the door.

I'm so nervous I can barely sit still long enough to listen to the opening set. Althea Windbreaker is probably every bit as good as everyone says she is, and her backup singers, too, but I couldn't tell you—I don't hear a single note. I'm as restless as a tomcat.

Spider puts an ice-cold peri into my hands. "Relax, my friend. It's going to be a good night."

He's not nervous at all. He's enjoying himself, enjoying the scene, enjoying the anticipation of making music. It's all good to Spider, who must be the single happiest person I've ever met. Whoever said you have to suffer to make art clearly doesn't know squat.

"Thanks for this," I say, and take a steadying gulp of my favorite elfin brew.

He grins. "It's not from me, dear boy. It's from that green-haired nymph behind the bar. Like I said, it's going to be a good night. Now pick your jaw up off the floor and pay attention to those nice ladies on the stage."

* * *

The red disk was a magic token that let her sweep through the door of the club like a princess. The club was hushed; three women were onstage, singing so beautifully, their voices entwined, that Trish felt the hair rise on the back of her neck. She stood by the door, unable to move, as though the singing were a spell they held her in.

There was a long hush when they finished. And then the room broke into wild applause. There were encores, and flowers flung through the shifting club light, flying through the air like strange birds. At last the singers left the stage, and the crowd headed toward the bar. She wondered if the disk would get her a free drink, too, or if she'd have to use her tip money to pay for one. The place was so crowded there was barely room to stand. Trish couldn't see Seal or Cam, or anyone else she knew.

Then, behind her, she heard someone cry, "*Eeeew*—monster!"

In the doorway stood the elfin lady, Anush's girlfriend, magnificently dressed in a silver gown. But it wasn't Anush beside her; it was Gurgi, shrinking from the staring eyes of those close enough to see.

The bouncer said, "You can't bring that thing in here."

"Oh, please," said the elf, proud as Lucifer. "He's with me." As though that were enough.

The bouncer shrugged. "Can you keep him under control?"

The elf woman smiled a smile Trish did not like one bit. "Can I not? Come, my pet."

Gurgi flinched but came in with her.

And then Trish knew.

She'd gotten the story all wrong.

* * *

It is finally time for the Widdershins set. As the band prepares to go on, I whistle for Rosco and head for the wings, double-checking the spell amp cables as I go. The house lights dim and the crowd begins to quiet, and I'm so excited that I'm almost feeling sick.

Spider now stalks to the center of the stage, a long-legged crane in a flapping velvet coat, with his *krel* (as I've learned the instrument is called) and his long bow in his hands. He starts, as always, in the traditional elfin manner: with a single long, low note that rises slowly, filling the room like mist rising. And indeed, there *is* mist rising; that's one of our cool new special effects. It rises through the forest that now appears, with birds (improved) flitting overhead and animals (new) rustling in the undergrowth … and it's all so real you can feel and smell and taste the magic in the air. This time I'm ready for the waves of emotion that the music of the *krel* stirs up in me: that rising, rising, the agonizing rising, bringing everyone's emotions to a fever pitch … and then the break of the wave … and the joyous relief … and that sparkling feeling of lightness after. Now the drums, the fiddle, the other acoustic instruments, each weaving into and adding to the sound, forming a rich, dense tapestry of music, emotion, and illusion. And now this music, too, is rising, rising.… It will build up to another wave, sounding stranger and stranger, louder and faster, until the guitars come crashing in—but wait! Not yet! The wave will

reach its crest, and then comes the effect that I have been waiting all night for.… Here it comes. Here it comes. I suck in my breath as the fiddle and the *krel* chase each other up and up and up and then … stop. And in that sudden shocking, sweet silence, Spider whirls, dreads flying, and holds up his instrument … and it turns into a flock of birds that lift and disappear into the trees.

At least, that's what's supposed to happen, and damn it, that's very nearly what happens. But then the magic of the Border hiccups, sending ripples of disturbance so strong they probably reach all across the city. The spell gets stuck, the mechanics sputter, my fail-safes fail, and this is what happens: The illusion we've built is flickering in and out—flock of birds one moment, instrument the next—while Spider stands frozen like a rabbit in the headlights and the rest of the band falls suddenly silent.

Because it's not just our spell flickering in and out, it's every damn thing inside the entire club that's been enhanced by some kind of illusion: blue and pink hair turns dishwater brown, curls go straight, tattoos disappear, skirts of fine elfin brocade turn to rags, and Faerie jewels turn into plastic and paste. Some kids stand practically naked as bits of their clothing vanish altogether. Even the drinks are affected, with elfin brews changing into water or sludge (I'll never drink those particular brands again), and Farrel Din's famous Realmwood bar is revealed to be made of cheap plywood. Things flicker like strobe lights back and forth between their enchanted and unenchanted forms, and people are laughing or crying or pointing or shrieking or doing all four at once. Spider is doubled over and laughing so hard there are tears streaming down his face, while the rest of the band looks on, aghast, at the chaos our spell has unleashed.

I run for the nearest spell amp, hoping I can do something to break the circuit, when suddenly Rosco starts growling and I turn and look behind me. And stop dead in my tracks …

* * *

At first it was kind of funny—all the people losing their clothes and their glamour. Then, behind her, Trish heard a scream of pure rage. "By the Apples of Death! Who dares to stand against me?"

The elf lady was magnificent in her fury. But Trish saw only the man at her side, a dark-haired man without a shirt who stared at his own smooth hands, amazed.

“Anush!” Trish cried. “Anush Gupta!”

He smiled at her. She ran to him and threw her arms around him. Because if his story was really Tam Lin, then she was Young Janet, and she had to hold him fast and fear not, while his lady worked more terrible transformations on him, until she won him free.

“Was it you who did this deed?” the lady cried, just like in the story. Trish shivered and held tight, and Anush’s strong arms went around her, too. “Have you no decency?” the lady raged. “No sense of personal property? Do you know who I am?”

“It’s not all about you, lady,” the bouncer said mildly. “Look around this room—”

“Collateral damage,” snapped the elf. “Proud mortal, how dare you?”

Everyone was staring at them. The lady lifted her slender white hands, and Trish prayed that whoever had worked Widdershins’ magic would know how to save them. She squeezed her eyes shut, and Anush clung to her—

And then there was fur all over her, and hot breath and a slobbering tongue on her face, but she held tight and tried to fear not—

“Down, Rosco! Down, boy!”

It wasn’t Anush; Anush was still holding her with one bare arm and trying to push away a dog with the other, a big black mutt jumping all over her like he was her long-lost buddy.

The bouncer was pinning the elfin lady’s arms to her side—but there was a sudden puff of fuchsia smoke, and the bouncer had hold of nothing.

“Out.” A fat guy was making his stately way through the crowd, which parted before him.

“I don’t like a fuss in my club,” said Farrel Din. The fuchsia smoke cleared, and a silver snake writhed on the floor at the bouncer’s feet. “Out, and regain your true shape on the other side of my door.”

Trish held on to the dog, who wanted to chase the snake.

And a big guy came rushing toward them, shouting, “Rosco, what are you— Oh my god. Trish!”

Who was this guy? How did he know her real name?

“Trish, it’s me! It’s Jimmy!”

“Jimmy?” She stared at the tall man in the Mr. Fix-It T-shirt.

“I’m Jimbo—your brother!”

How could it be Jimmy? Jimmy was her baby brother. This was a grown man, her age or even older, with a big, muscular frame and large, hard hands and long brown hair pulled back in a rubber band. He looked like a factory worker, like Dad or her uncle Al.

“And this is Rosco, Trish—remember Rosco, our puppy?”

The big hound licked her with a long pink tongue. And then she started crying. It was a good thing she had the dog to hold on to, to bury her face in while she sobbed for the lost years.

* * *

Anush looked helplessly down at the weeping girl and then at the big guy who was her brother. Not knowing what else to do, he held out his hand. “Anush Gupta,” he said. “I’m a friend of Trish. This is, um, what I really look like. When I’m not messing around with elves.”

“Nice to meet you.” The brother shook hands. “I’m Jimmy. She just calls me Jimbo. Nobody else does.” Anush heard the warning, and nodded. “Kind of a shock for her, huh?”

“Kind of.”

“I’m with the band. Special effects.”

“Really?” Anush was impressed. “Then I’ve got you to thank for helping me out. Indirectly. You must have blown every magic fuse in B-town.”

Jimmy ducked his head. “No big.” He glanced behind him at the chaos that still reigned. “Listen, I’d better get back there and try to fix things. But … could you look after Trish for me? I’ll talk to her as soon as I can. But meanwhile, tell her I’m here for her. Tell her it’s all gonna be okay.”

“Sure.” Anush nodded. “There’s just one thing—do you think you could find me a shirt?”

Jimmy grinned and untied the flannel shirt from around his waist. It was a little wrinkled, but at least it didn’t smell like wet dog.

Up on the stage, a tall, spidery guy with silver dreadlocks took the mike. “Folks!” he said. “Lords and ladies of Soho, please try to control your flashing eyes and floating hair—because the Show Must Go On!”

There were cheers and jeers from the floor.

“Elfies, halfies, and long-leggity beasties … you came for music, and music you shall have! After we—and maybe some of you—perform a few minor technical adjustments. Meanwhile, however, I am glad to say that we have with us in the house tonight, Soho’s very own harper of high renown, the Master of Melody, the Sultan of String, the great—though not the late—*Mister* Ossian Feldenkranz!”

* * *

Trish looked up as the harper took the stage. He settled on his chair and lifted his hands. *Oh, please,* she thought, *oh, please.…* She buried her fingers deep in Rosco’s fur, willing it to happen. And the harper struck the opening notes of the song she needed him to play.

How can there be an apple
Without e’er a core
How can there be a house
Without e’er a door …?

My head is the apple without e’er a core
My mind is the house without e’er a door
And my heart is the palace
Wherein she may be
And she may unlock it
Without e’er a key

At last, Trish heard the answers to the Riddle Song.

My head is the apple without e’er a core.… My mind is the house without e’er a door.…

She’d thought no one understood that. But long ago, someone somewhere had known and had written a song.

She felt a hand on her head. She prepared herself to look up, full of apologies, at Jimmy.

But it was Anush, tentatively stroking her hair. He crouched down beside her. “You okay?”

Trish nodded.

He handed her a hankie. “Want to stay? Your brother’s some kind of genius.”

“I know.”

“He’s with the band. He said he’ll be back.”

“Okay,” she said.

“I think we might have to dance, though.”

“I could do that,” Trish said with a smile.

* * *

The gig’s a crazy success. Widdershins makes its magic even without the rest of our special effects (we don’t dare turn on the spell amps again just yet), and people dance, and the music rocks, and everyone’s happy. The band. The audience. Farrel Din. Me, I’m probably the happiest of all. I’ve finally found my long-lost sister.

Afterward, Spider sweeps us all up and off to the Hard Luck Café for some celebratory (or is it commiseratory?) beers: the whole band, Cam and Seal from the Chimera, Trish, Anush the monster guy. Even the Queen of Elfland comes along. You know Spider, he doesn’t take no for an answer, and soon we’re all out the door and on our way. My sister keeps looking at me funny, a little bit shy and a little bit freaked out. I guess it’s weird for her. She’s the Trish I knew, but I’m just some big, galumphing guy who turns up in Bordertown one day and claims to be her younger brother. Correction, her older brother now. No wonder it’s a little stiff between us.

It’s so late that the streets of Soho are almost quiet, or at least as quiet as they get—even on Ho Street, where the lights of Danceland are turned off, the Saturday-night crowds have melted away, and there’s only a single busker playing a mournful violin near Snappin’ Wizards. The Hard Luck is open, as it always is, and it’s crowded even at this hour. There’s a table just big enough for us all at the back if we crowd around.

An elfin guy at the grill looks up and says, “Hey, don’t bring that Hell Hound in here!”

“Relax, Nabber,” says Cam. “That’s no Hell Hound—that’s just Rosco. He’s with us and he’s completely harmless.”

“What is the thing with elves and dogs anyway?” I ask Cam as the menus are passed around.

Spider exchanges a look with the Queen of Elfland; then the two of them start snickering behind their hands. Cam just rolls her eyes and says, “Don’t even bother asking, Jimmy. It’s just one of those weird Realm things.”

That’s it? That’s all? There’s no more explanation than that? But what the heck, I take her advice and let it go. Like so many things about the elves, this, too, will remain a mystery. They are strange in ways we humans can’t begin to fathom, and no doubt we’re just as strange to them. And it doesn’t even matter. We’re all friends around this table, human, elf, halfling, and wheezing Hell Hound.

My sister orders some kind of weird tea, then sits quietly ruffling Rosco’s fur with a wistful, inward look.

“Hey, sis,” I say, and take hold of her other hand. She’s startled, because we’re not a touchy kind of family—but she leaves her hand resting in mine and finally looks me straight in the eye.

“Hey,” she says. “It’s okay. Really.”

“It’s all kind of strange, isn’t it?” I say.

“It’s not what I expected.”

If she means Bordertown, I have to agree. It’s so much *better.* I let go of her hand as the drinks are plunked down and smile at her—but my sister’s not smiling back. Trish isn’t even looking at me now.

And then it hits me. She’s knows I’ve come to take her home. And of course she doesn’t want to go. I wouldn’t either, if I were her. No wonder she’s being so quiet.

“Look, Trish,” I tell her quickly, “if you don’t want to come back, I guess I can understand that now. I’m not gonna drag you back to Milltown.”

I have her full attention now.

“I’ll explain it to the folks. I’ll tell them that I saw you, that you’re doing fine, and that you belong here and ought to stay.”

Trish puts her tea down with a thump. “Well, then, you would be lying,” she says to my surprise. I see her exchange a look with the monster guy, who seems to figure in her life somehow. Then she leans forward, looking through my eyes straight into my soul, like she always could.

“You’re the one who belongs here, Jimmy. Don’t give me that look. It’s so completely obvious. How else do you explain all this?” she asks, her

gaze sweeping around the crowded table. “You’ve been in town for, what, five minutes, and you have a home and a band and a café full of friends. Just like you used to on the playground, where you were always at the center of things, remember?”

“Oh, hey—” I start to say, embarrassed. Like she has to bring that up in front of everybody?

“Okay, you’re not the little Jimbo I once knew, but some things never change, do they? And the thing about you that hasn’t changed is that when you’re happy, you practically shine.”

The table has suddenly gone quiet. Everyone is looking at me and Trish.

“*You’re* the one who has to stay,” she says.

“Of course he’s staying!” Spider chimes in, and there’s a raucous wave of agreement from the others.

But of course I can’t. I want to, but I can’t. I try to explain it to Trish, to everyone. “Somebody has to go back to the World and look after our family.…”

“That somebody will be me,” says Trish firmly. “I’m the one who is going home.”

“But—”

“I *want* to go back to the World, Jimmy. Not to stay in Milltown, but to go to college like I’d always planned. Anush is going to help me find a school where I can study myth and all the things I like. There are schools that might be even better for me than Harvard, and we’re going to get scholarships. And wherever it is, I’ll keep an eye on Mom and Dad. Good heavens, Jimmy, they’re not *helpless.*”

“*We’re* getting scholarships?” the monster guy pipes up.

“Of course,” she says. “You need one, too, don’t you?”

“Tara, I mean, Trish, I don’t even know if I can get back into school anymore.”

“Then you’ll write your fantasy novel instead,” Trish says in the decisive way that I remember from years ago.

“What novel?” he asks her, baffled.

“The one that no one else has written yet,” she tells him, as if it’s obvious. “The one based on that Indian saga you were telling me about.”

My sister’s friend blinks, like he’s had a revelation. (Trish has that effect on people, I remember), and Spider says, “Well, then, my friends, it’s all

settled," and he calls for another round.

Is it really settled? Is it possible? Trish sees my expression and begins to laugh. "You may be six feet tall and nearly nineteen now, but you're still my *little* brother, Jimbo. So listen to me. You're staying. I'm going. End of discussion. Now drink your beer."

Monster guy gives me a long look over the beer. "Your big sister always this bossy, kid?"

"Oh, yeah," I say. "You get used to it."

Conversation now turns to other things (to the gig, to the spell that went awry, to Farrel Din's face when all the club went crazy) as I sit quietly, my drink in hand, entirely dumbfounded. I look over at the Queen of Elfland, who gives me a dazzling smile (my third!), and I know that my sister has read me right. I want to stay. I want more crazy nights like this. I want to finally learn that elfin girl's *name.*

"I guess that means Rosco is staying, too," I say quietly to Trish. No one but that friend of hers is listening now. "If you're sure—I mean really, one hundred percent sure—that Mom and Dad are going to be okay …?"

This time, Trish gives me a little smile.

"Don't worry, cuddlebunny," she assures me. "You'll write. And you'll be home for Christmas."

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SHANNON'S LAW

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When the Way to Bordertown closed, I was only four years old, and I was more interested in peeling the skin off my Tickle Me Elmo to expose the robot lurking inside his furry pelt than I was in networking or even plumbing the unknowable mysteries of Elfland. But a lot can change in thirteen years.

When the Way opened again, the day I turned seventeen, I didn't hesitate. I packed everything I could carry—every scratched phone, every half-assembled laptop, every stick of memory, and every Game Boy I could fit in a duffel bag. I hit the bank with my passport and my ATM card and demanded that they turn over my savings to me, *without* calling my parents or any other ridiculous delay. They didn't like it, but "It's my money, now hand it over" is like a spell for bending bankers to your will.

Land rushes. Know about 'em? There's some piece of land that was off-limits, and the government announces that it's going to open it up—all you need to do is rush over to it when the cannon goes off, and whatever you can stake out is yours. Used to be that land rushes came along any time the United States decided to break a promise to some Indians and take away their land, and a hundred thousand white men would wait at the starting line to stampede into the "empty lands" and take it over. But more recently, the land rushes have been virtual: The Internet opens up, and whoever gets there first gets to grab all the good stuff. The land rushers in the early days of the Net had the *dumbest* ideas: online pet food, virtual-reality helmets, Internet-enabled candy delivery services. But they got some major money while the rush was on, before Joe Investor figured out how to tell a good idea from a redonkulous one.

I was too young for the Internet land rush. But when the Way to the Border opened again, I knew there was another rush about to start. I wasn't the only one, but I will tell you what: I was the best. By the time I was seventeen, there wasn't anyone who was better at getting networks built out of junk, hope, ingenuity, and graft than Shannon Klod. And I am Shannon Klod, the founder of BINGO, the lad who brought networking to B-town.

I'll let you in on a secret, something you will never find out by reading the official sales literature of the Bordertown Inter-Networkers Governance Organization: It was never about wiring up B-town. It was never about

helping the restaurants take orders from Dragon's Tooth Hill by email. It was never about giving the traders a way to keep the supply chains running back to the World. It was never about improving the efficiency of Bordertown's bureaucracy.

The reason I rushed to Bordertown—the reason I pulled every meter of copper and attached every spellbox, heliograph, and carrier pigeon to a routing center, the reason I initiated a thousand gutterpunks and wharf rats into the mysteries of TCP/IP—had *nothing* to do with becoming B-town's first Internet tycoon. I don't want money except as a means to getting my true desire. You may not believe this, but I gave away nearly every cent I brought in, literally threw it into the street when no one was looking.

The reason I came to B-town and set up BINGO and all that glorious infrastructure was this: I wanted to route a packet between the World and the Realm. I wanted to puncture the veil that hangs between the human and elfin domains with a single piece of information, to disorder the placid surface of the membrane that keeps these two worlds apart.

I wanted to bring order and reason and rationality to the Border. And gods be damned, I think I succeeded.

* * *

You may have heard that the Net was designed to withstand a nuclear war. It's not true, but it's truthy, in the neighborhood of true. You may have heard that the Internet interprets censorship as damage and routes around. This also isn't true, but it's also truthy enough to quote.

The fact is, the Net is *decentralized* and *fault-tolerant.* That means anyone can hook up to it, and when parts of it break down, the rest keeps going. In this regard, it is one of the most stupendous creations our stupid species can lay claim to, right up there with anything our long-lived cousins from the other side of reality can cite. They've got their epic magicks and their enchanted swords and their fey lands where a single frozen moment of deepest sorrow and sweetest joy hangs in a perpetual balance that you could contemplate for a thousand lifetimes without getting the whole of it.

But gods be damned, *we* invented a machine that allows anyone, anywhere, to say anything, in any way, to anyone, anywhere.

“Shannon! Shannon! Shannon!” They chanted it from the base of the spiral stairs that led up to my loft, my motley crew of network engineers, cable pullers, technicians, and troubleshooters. More reliable than any alarm clock, my army knew that I could not be roused until the world had arranged itself into a state of sufficient interestingness. “Shannon!” they chanted, and the smell of coffee wafted up through the hatchway whence cometh the stairwell’s top. They had my espresso machine down there, and it had a head of steam. The regular *thunk-tamp-hiss-thump* of Tikigod pulling shots of lethal black caffeine juice was a fine rhythm section for the vocals.

The universe had attained liftoff. It was time to meet my public.

Back in the World, I’d had a ratty and much-loved bathrobe I’d made my mom buy me after I read the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* books. I’d brought the bathrobe with me to B-town, but I got rid of it after I found my loft and realized that the regal effect of descending a wrought-iron black spiral staircase before your marshaled troops faded if they could look up at your dangling junk while you made your way. I’d had a seamstress on Water Street run me up a set of checked flannel pajamas instead and got myself a pair of matching carpet slippers. All it wanted was a pipe and a basset hound and I’d have been the picture of middle-class respectability.

“Good morning, all and sundry,” I said, clenching my hands over my head like a prizefighter, celebrating my victory over sleep, another round lost by Morpheus, that candy-ass lightweight. “Let there be coffee!”

The secret of my success? Coffee. Black Cat Mama was B-town’s most reliable coffee supplier, thanks to superior communications technology: She used my networks to coordinate with a variety of suppliers in the World and hadn’t run out of inventory since we put her online. She’d been trapped in B-town during the great Pinching Off and didn’t really grok networks, but she grokked coffee. She paid me in espresso roast beans, and we ground them ourselves—rather, Tikigod’s legion of love slaves ground them for her, hand-cranking the burr grinders to a fine powder that ranged from 200 to 250 microns, depending on the humidity, the beans, and the vagaries of the *crema*, as determined by Tikigod each morning.

Bottom line: If you worked for BINGO, you had coffee, all day long, enough to set every hair on your body on end, enough to make the tip of

your nose go numb, enough to make you clamp your jaws and tap your teeth together just to hear the bony click in your skull.

The secret of my success? Work for BINGO and no matter how hard you danced the night before, no matter what you poured down your throat or smoked or ate, you would be a thrumming bowstring for your workday. Oh, yes.

They cheered me, and Tikigod's love slaves ground the beans, and the boiler hissed as its spellbox sang a high and tight note, and the black waters flowed, and the milk frothed, and the network began its day.

* * *

You know what pisses me off? The whole business: the Border, B-town, the Realm, all of it. Here we have this amazing thing, this other *universe* sitting there, only one hairbreadth from the universe we've been untangling for centuries, and what do we use it for? Fashion. Music. Bohemia. Some trade, some moneymaking.

Nothing wrong with any of it. But am I the only gods-be-damned human being who wants to sit down with whatever passes for a scientist in Elfland and say, "We call this gravity. It decreases at the square of distance and makes its effects felt at the speed of light. Tell me what you call it and how it works for you, will you?"

We say that magic and technology are erratic in the Border, but that's just a fancy way of saying we don't know how they work here. That we haven't applied systematic study to it. We have regressed to cavemen, listening to shamans who tell us that the world can't be known. Screw that. I'm going to unscrew the universe.

But first someone's got to get the heliographers to stop pranking the carrier-pigeon handlers.

The Net's secret weapon is that it doesn't care what kind of medium it runs over. It wants to send a packet from A to B, and if parts of the route travel by pigeon, flashing mirrors, or scraps of paper cranked over an alleyway on a clothesline, that's okay with the Net. All that stuff is slower than firing a laser down a piece of fiber-optic, but it gets the job done.

At BINGO, we do all of the above, whatever it takes to drop a node in where a customer will pay for it. Our tendrils wend their way out into the

Borderlands. At the extreme edge, I've got a manticore trapper on contract to peer into the eyepiece of a fey telescope every evening for an hour. He's the relay for a kitchen witch near Gryphon Park whose privy has some magick entanglement with the hill where he sits. When we can't get traffic over Danceland in Soho because the spellboxes that run the amps and the beer fridges are fritzing out our routers, our kitchen witch begins to make mystic passes over her toilet, which show up as purple splotches through the trapper's eyepiece. He transcribes these—round splotches are zeroes, triangular splotches are ones—in 8-bit bytes, calculates their checksum manually, and sends it back to the witch by means of a spelled lanthorn that he operates with a telegraph key affixed to it with the braided hair of a halfie virgin (Tikigod's little sister, to be precise). The kitchen witch confirms the checksum, and then he sends it to another relay near the Promenade, where a wharf rat who has been paid handsomely to lay off the river water for the night counts the number of times a tame cricket sings and hits a key on a peecee in time with it. The peecee pops those packets back into the Net, where they are swirled and minced and diced and routed and transformed into coffee, purchase orders, dirty texts, desperate pleas from parents to runaways to come home, desperate pleas from runaways to their parents to send money, and a million Facebook status updates.

Mostly, this stuff runs. On average. I mean, in particular, it's *always* falling apart for some reason or another. Watch me knock some heads and you'll get the picture.

The heliographer's tower is high atop The Dancing Ferret. Everyone told me that if Farrel Din could be persuaded to get involved with BINGO, all of Soho would follow, so I did some homework, spread some money around, and then I showed up one day with a wheelbarrow filled with clothbound books that I'd had run up by the kids who put out Stick Wizard.

The fat elf came out of the stockroom with a barrel of dandelion wine and a thoughtful look. "What the hell is that?"

"It's Wikipedia, Mr. Din. Let me explain." And that was the start of a beautiful friendship. I'd printed and bound every Wikipedia entry as of the day the Border reopened (I'd put a copy on a memory stick on my way out the door), as well as the discuss link for every page. It filled two hundred volumes, each as big as a phone book, and Din installed a special set of spelled bookcases for it on a wall of the bar, fronted with glass that would

only swing open twice for every drink you bought. It created an entirely new trade for his establishment, a day crowd that turned up to drink small beer and pore over the collected and ridiculous wisdom of the World.

The Dancing Ferret's door stood open to catch the spring breeze when I got there, sometime before lunch. One of Farrel Din's flunkies had set out sofas around the bookcase, and they were crowded with elves and halfies and even humans. I figured the humans were people who'd lived through the Pinching Off in B-town, trying to figure out WTF had happened to the World in the blink of an eye.

Din came out of the back room looking just as he had the day I'd met him, three years before. Elves age much slower than us, and our little mayfly lives must zip past them like a video stuck on 32X fast-forward. He shook his head at me and pulled a face. "They're at it again, huh?" He rolled his eyes at the ceiling, indicating the tower on the roof and the mischievous heliographers.

I nodded. "Kids will be kids." Yes, I was only a couple years older than them, but I wasn't a kid; I was a respectable businessman. *Someone* had to be the grown-up at BINGO. "I'll get 'em into line." I nodded at the crowd poring over the books. "Looks like you're doing pretty good there," I said. There were even a couple of suits from up the Hill, proper businessmen and straight cits who you wouldn't ever think to find in Soho, let alone slumming it at The Dancing Ferret. But knowledge is power and knowledge is money, and I'd given Farrel Din a very concentrated lump of knowledge.

He made another face. "Bah." He actually said "Bah," like someone in a fairy tale. Gods-be-damned elves. What a bunch of drama queens. "Used to be you could have a real, proper, no-fooling, bona fide pointless bar argument around here: a fight over someone's batting average or how many moons Jupiter has or what the Eight Wonders of the World are. Now"—he shook a fist at the bookcases and the customers who sat before them—"someone just goes and *looks up the answer.* Where's the romance in that? I ask you. Where's the chance to use rhetoric, force of personality, style, and wit to *prove a point* in a world where any tight-assed fool can have an *answer*, a *fact*, in a second?"

I tried to figure out if he was pulling my leg. It was nearly impossible to tell. Elves.

“Okay, well, you just let me know if you want me to take them out again.” I’d heard that there were three more print shops working on their own Wikipedias, brought from the World on thumb drives and laptops, more up-to-date than what Farrel Din’s fifty-odd linear feet of shelving supported. I welcomed the competition: Once there was a thriving market for Wikipedias in B-town, I’d unveil my secret weapon—a BitTorrent client I’d rigged up right on one of our fastest nodes, downloading a daily tarball of the latest Wikipedia edits. In other words: let them try to compete with me, but I would always have the most up-to-date version.

Farrel Din grinned suddenly, without any mirth, his fat face somehow wolfish. “Not on a bet, sonny. Those things have sucked up so much—” He used an elfin word that I didn’t recognize, though it sounded like the word for “curiosity,” like they shared a common root. “I figure they’ll be ripe in a few years, and then …” He got a faraway look in his eyes. I shook my head. Elves. In a few years, I’d have punctured the Border; I’d have plumbed the unplumbable; I’d have—

“Okay, whatever you say, Mr. Din. I gotta go bang some skulls now.”

He waved absently at me as I ascended the narrow ladder that led to The Dancing Ferret’s roof. The rungs had some minor spell on them that was supposed to make them grippy and safe, but the magic didn’t work as advertised (surprise, surprise). Some of the grips were so sticky it felt like they’d been covered in honey, others felt like splintery wood, and one right up at the top felt like it had been coated in Vaseline. Gods be damned. I’d have to come back here with a roll of skateboard tape and take care of it the old-fashioned, brute-force World way.

Up on the roof, I planted my hands on my hips and squinted at the tower top high above me, where the heliograph’s disk winked. Holding the angry-dad pose, I waited for my wayward children to glance down at me, feeling slightly foolish but committed to ensuring that they knew there was about to be hells to pay for their shenanigans.

Nothing. Indeed, as I watched, someone swung the heliograph’s glittering mirror around suddenly, tilting it downward, and raucous laughter emanated from the tower top. I imagined I could hear the outraged squawk of a distant pigeon as it was blinded by the burst of light, sent veering off course along with its payload of precious data.

Bugger this. I put my tongue behind my teeth and my hand in my pocket and mimed a whistle as I touched the spelled-carved cricket I keep in my jeans. Everyone respects someone who can whistle so loud it's like a physical blast, a "missile whistle," but the truth is, I can't manage anything more than a squeak. It's the carved cricket, made from a piece of knotty fig from Australia and tweaked by an Elfmage so that it fires off a positively violent sound, like the blast from a referee's whistle, and if I do the mime at the same time, you'd never know it wasn't me.

Two heads poked over the parapet of the semaphore tower. One was shaved and one sported a huge spray of pink hair whose split ends were visible from the ground. There was one missing. I made with the whistle again, emphatically tracing out the rune over the cricket's back. A third head poked out, with deliberate slowness, this one topped with a mop of green dreads that hung down like long snakes.

"Ladies, gentleman," I said, cupping my hand to my mouth. "If I might have a quiet word?"

I fancied that I could see their guilty expressions despite the distance, all but Jetfuel, my bright and reckless little protégé with the dreads, a natural leader who, it seemed, couldn't help but make trouble wherever she went.

They continued to stare at me. "Down here," I said. "*Now.*"

Gruntzooki and Gruntzilla (Baldy and Pink Hair) came down the ladder, keeping three points of contact at all times. But Jetfuel stood up, hiked up her greasy, torn jeans, and stepped off the platform, snagging the bug-out pole with one hand just before gravity snatched her out of the sky and dashed out her pretty brains. She coiled her powerful legs around the pole, squeezing it with her thighs to slow her descent so that she touched down at the same time as her colleagues.

They lined up like the naughty children they were, so comical that I had to struggle to keep my face serious. "Who's winning?" I asked.

They shifted uncomfortably.

"Come on. Who's in the lead?"

Gruntzilla and Gruntzooki pointedly didn't look at Jetfuel. I leaned toward her, noticing that she'd added some new piercings since I'd last seen her—two studs in her left cheek that she'd threaded with a genuine, old-school punk-rock safety pin. I had to admit, it looked good.

“Oh, Jetfuel?” I said sweetly. I could tell she was trying not to laugh. It was an infectious laugh. A pandemic laugh. “How many points ahead are you?”

“Three hundred and seventeen,” she said, and the laugh was in her voice. Jetfuel is a halfie with a supernatural gift for juggling routing tables in her head, and I’ve never figured out if she had some kind of glamour that made her so impossible to get properly angry with, or whether it’s just that she’s beautiful, smart and good at her job, and doesn’t give a damn about anything.

“How many points per pigeon?”

“Fifteen.”

I’m good at math. “You’ve zapped twenty and one fraction of a pigeon?”

“I got two extra points for knocking a Silver Suit off his bike.”

Oy vey. “So, besides hardworking avians and the duly-appointed officers of the law, is there anyone else you’ve been zapping with that highly polished, highly critical, and highly expensive mirror up there?”

She pursed her lips, making a show of thinking. “I got a dragon once,” she said. “That time a big old bastard came down from the Border along the Mad River? I got it right in the eyes. But no one else saw, so it didn’t count.”

I whispered a charm that was supposed to keep away the evil eye (“hinky-dinky-polly-voo, out, out, bad spirits, this means you”). “You’re joking.”

She pursed her lips again, shook her head. “Nuh-uh. It looked like it had found true love for a second, then turned and flapped away. Guess you could say I saved B-town from being incinerated by a giant, fire-breathing mythological beast, huh? Sure wish I’d had a witness. Dragons should be good for like a *thousand* points.”

It’s a glamour that keeps you from getting angry with her. It *must* be. I was trying *so* hard, but I wanted to grin. “Jetfuel,” I said, “we’ve talked about this. You are a truly kick-ass heliograph operator, and I think you’re a very nice person and all, but if you zap one more pigeon—”

“You’ll turn her into a goon?” Gruntzooki snorted and Gruntzilla hid her mouth with her hand.

“I’ll turn you into an unemployed person,” I said. “With no coffee.” I nodded at the thermos clipped to her belt with a carabiner that had been

imported from the World at great expense. “When was the last time you bought even a featherweight of beans? How long do you imagine you could function once you had to pay street price for your jet fuel, Jetfuel?”

I could see that one hit home. She slumped a little.

“Shannon,” she said. “It’s just that it’s *so lame*. We don’t need the pigeons. They crap everywhere. They have crazy latency. Cats eat them.” I recognized her tone, and it warmed my heart: the sound of a techie who was offended at the existence of an inelegant solution to a challenging problem.

I nodded at Gruntzilla and Gruntzooki, then tipped my head toward the unoccupied tower. They took the hint and clambered up the ladder, and a second later, their mirror was winking furiously at the other towers we’d put up all over B-town. All over town, dozens of router managers made note of the fact that The Dancing Ferret station was up and routing again.

“Over here,” I said, walking to the edge of the roof and sitting with my legs dangling over the street below. Jetfuel sat down beside me, unscrewed her thermos, and titrated some caffeine into her bloodstream. I fished some black licorice gum out of my shirt pocket and popped it into my gob. We all have our vices. “You remember when I got here? You remember what I wanted to do?”

She’d been the first one who’d believed in my ideas, and she’d brought a dozen of my first recruits into the shop, trained them herself, climbed buildings in jingling harness to set up repeaters.

She screwed up her face into an improbably pretty look of disbelief. “You mean the Elfnet?” We’d called it that as a joke, but it stuck.

I nodded.

“Oy,” she said. She’d gotten that from me. “Really? Now?”

“Why not now?” I asked.

She flapped her arms over Bordertown, arrayed before us. “Because,” she said, “it’s all *working* now. You’ve got one hundred percent coverage; you’re signing up customers as fast as you can punch down nodes and kludge together peecees to stick on them. Shannon, you’re *rich.* You’re practically *respectable.* They write about you in the good newspapers now, not just the free sheets.”

“Why are you zapping pigeons, Jetfuel?”

“What has that got to do with anything?”

“Answer the question. Honestly. What did those poor birdies ever do to you?”

She shrugged and looked down at her dangling feet. “I guess …” She shrugged again. “I dunno. Bored? That’s it, just bored.”

I nodded. “Once it’s good, once it all runs tickety-boo, the challenge goes out of it, doesn’t it?”

She looked at me, really looked at me, with the intensity I remembered last seeing through the lenses of a pair of binocs as we stared at each other across a mile of freespace, trying to get our first two mirrors lined up exactly right. Most of my people saw BINGO as a maintenance problem, keeping the whole hairball running. But Jetfuel was in it from the start. She saw the mission as *building stuff.*

“Oy,” she said.

“Oy,” I said.

She finished her coffee and screwed the lid back on, then stood up and dusted off her hands on the seat of her torn jeans. “All right,” she said, holding out a hand to me. “Let’s go storm Elfland.”

* * *

No human can enter the Realm. No information about the Realm can pierce the Border, except in the mind or scrolls of an actual elf, and from what I understand, the information *changes* somehow when they pass through the Border. Like the information has an extra dimension that can’t fit into our poor, stupid 3-D world.

There’s a book called *Flatland*, about all these two-dimensional beings who can only move from side to side and are visited by a 3-D person. It’s a good book, if a little weird. But the thing is, it *is* possible for the 3-D and 2-D people to talk to each other; they just need to work it all out.

That’s why I think I can do it. The Internet is designed to be fault-tolerant and transport-independent. I can route a packet by carrier pigeon, by spell, by donkey, or by runic script written on vellum and tucked into a diplomatic pouch behind the saddle of a highborn courier. My architecture doesn’t care if the return volley arrives late; it doesn’t care if it returns out of sequence. That’s fault-tolerant. That’s transport-independent.

The first-ever Internet connection wasn't much to write home about: A computer at UCLA and a computer at Stanford were painstakingly wired together, and a scientist at UCLA began to log in to the remote end. He typed "L-O," and then the computer crashed. From those first two bytes, the network was gradually, inexorably improved upon, until it was the global system that we know and love today. That's all I need: a toehold, a crack I can jam a lever into and *pry*, until the gap is as wide as the whole world. Just let me round-trip one packet over the Border and I'll do the rest. I know I can.

Jetfuel and I walked down to the river, headed for BINGO headquarters. Our heads nodded together in solemn congress, as they'd done countless times before, when BINGO was just a dumb idea.

"Have you found a remote end?" Her voice had an odd quality, a weird and almost angry sound that I hadn't ever heard in it before.

"No," I said. "Not yet. But there are so many Highborn on the Net these days, I thought I'd just look around at our best customers and see if anyone's name jumps out as a good candidate."

"It's going to be a delicate operation," she said. "What if you ask someone to help you and he rats you out instead?"

I shook my head. "I'm not sure there's anyone to rat me out *to*. It's not like there's a law against piercing the Border, right? I mean, there's like a *natural* law, like the law of gravity. But you don't go to jail for violating gravity, right?"

She snorted. "No, usually you go to the hospital for trying to violate gravity. But, Shannon, that's the thing, you don't understand them. They don't have *laws* like you think of them. There isn't a Trueblood Criminal Code Section Ten, Article Three, Clause Four that says 'Humans and human communications apparatuses are prohibited from engaging in real-time congress across the Border that separates our realities.' The laws of the Realm are more like"—she waved her long, slim fingers, all chipped glitter nail polish and anodized hot-pink death's head rings—"they're like paintings."

"Paintings."

She twisted her face up. "Okay, ever see a painting and go, 'Whoa, that's some painting'?"

I nodded.

“You ever wonder why? Why it grabs you by the hair and won’t let go? Why it *compels* you?”

I shook my head. “I don’t really look at a lot of paintings.”

She snorted again. “Shannon, you’ve lived in Bordertown for *three years.* You are *surrounded* by paintings and sculpture and kinetic art and dance and music. How is it possible that you haven’t been looking at paintings?”

“I look at JPEGs,” I said.

“All right. JPEGs work, too. Ever wonder why sometimes you’ll see something, something made up, something that never happened—maybe something that looks like nothing in the real world at all—and you’ll want to look some more? Why a line of music that doesn’t sound like any words your mind can turn into meaning still stops you in your boots and makes you want to listen?”

“Sorta. I guess.”

“Shannon Klod, I absolutely refuse to believe that you don’t have any aesthetic sense. You don’t live in a cardboard box. You don’t sleep on plain sheets. You don’t cut your hair with children’s scissors when it gets in your eyes and forget about it the rest of the time. You’d rather eat good food than bad food. You can pose all you want as a robotic techie who has no time for all this artsy-fartsy crap, but it doesn’t wash with me.”

This is the thing about Jetfuel: She’s had my number since the first time we talked, her demanding to see one of the peecees I’d brought from the World after the Pinching Off. I knew better than to argue when she got like this. “Fine,” I said. “Fine, fine. I am as dainty an artiste as any you’ll find starving in a Mock Avenue garret. My life revolves around plumbing the unplumbable and reveling in its mystery. There are shades of green and blue that move me to tears. What’s your point?”

“This is the point: Art moves you in some way. It fits and feels right, or it doesn’t fit in a way that feels deliciously wrong. You can talk all you want about brushstrokes or shades of green and blue, but none of those are the things that move you, right? It’s something else: something you might call *spiritual.* Art is art because it makes you feel artful. And that’s the basis for the Realm’s legal system.”

I shook my head. We were getting close to the BINGO office, where once again I’d have to be Responsible Grown-up Shannon Klod, but for now, I was really enjoying this moment with Jetfuel, recapturing an excitement I

hadn’t felt since the first two nodes went live. “I don’t understand,” I said. It felt good to admit this—Shannon Klod usually had to have all the answers.

“Human laws and rules are based on, what, mutual understanding. Someone says, ‘I propose a law that makes it illegal to take a dump over here where we all get our water, because that way we won’t all die of poo-poisoning.’ The wisdom of that law is obvious, so, after some debate, we make it a law. But in the Realm, they make laws because the laws make the world a more interesting place—interesting in the way that a painting or a dance or a song can arrest your interest. So you might say, ‘I propose that people who take a dump here should be made to perform a penance by making a willow stop weeping.’ And just like most people understand why poo and the water supply don’t go together and can agree on the human rule, Highborn respond to their rules by their aesthetic sense and agree to the ones that are most beautiful or the most ugly—the ones that make the best art.”

“You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack. So there’s not a law against running a network drop into the lands beyond the Border the way that you think of laws existing. But it’s still forbidden, and the penalties are real.”

“Like what?” I said, thinking of all the money BINGO was bringing in, more than I knew what to do with. “What kind of fines are we talking about?”

“Oh, not fines,” she said. “Those, too, I’m sure. But smuggling carries *serious* penalties: your heart shrunk to the size of a marble and placed on a cairn in the Grove of Despair for a hundred winters, all the songs snatched from your throat for a time not to exceed the reign of the Blood Queen Under the Sea, that sort of thing.”

I stopped and searched her face. “Tell me you’re joking.”

She shrugged. “Shannon, you’ve been dreaming about this for years, but you’ve never asked me what I know about the Realm. Perhaps it’s time you started.”

I almost said, *Of course I didn’t ask you—you’re a B-town halfie!* But I knew that would be the wrong thing to say. “How did you find out all this stuff?” I said, trying for delicacy.

“You mean, how did a B-town halfie find out all this stuff, right?” Anger moved across her face, then departed. She smiled her don’t-give-a-damn smile and said, “My big sister came to visit.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister,” I said. I hadn’t ever met Jetfuel’s family, though she’d pointed out their house once as we stood on a rooftop with a cable spool and a witch who dusted it with blessings and wards as it unspooled yard after yard of insulated category-five enhanced wire.

“Half sister,” she said. “From my dad’s first wife.” And I understood. Her father was an elf, a proper one, from what I gathered: highborn and high-blooded with the titles and fancy underpants that went with them. So his first wife, whoever she was, was probably another elf, from before he fell in love with a human woman, and that meant that Jetfuel’s big sister was—

“Your sister’s an elf?”

She nodded and rolled her eyes. “Like, seven feet tall, legs up to here, waist you could wrap one hand around, wrists like twigs, eyes like a cat’s, hair as fine as spun gold. The whole package.” We were standing across the road from BINGO now, neither of us wanting to go inside and break the spell that had come over us, the old excitement. “She came through a year ago. She was ever so excited about this networking stuff. Wanted to see it for herself. Dad’s glad to have her but doesn’t want her hanging out with me in case I corrupt her ever-so-pure highbornedness. So of course she sneaks out to see me every chance she gets.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “She sounds *perfect*,” I said. “Why didn’t you tell me about her?”

She looked shifty. “I wasn’t sure you were still interested, you know. You’ve been so busy with all this Big Business stuff—”

I could have kissed her. Well, not really. In fact, specifically, I was not under any circumstances going to kiss her. That would be *so* inappropriate. “Jetfuel, I am most assuredly still interested. I would like to meet your sister at the first possible opportunity. What’s her name, anyway?”

“Don’t laugh,” she said. “Okay? Promise?”

“Cross my wires and hope to fry,” I said.

“She calls herself Synack. She’s in love with the seven-layer OSI network model.”

I held my hand over my heart and faked a swoon. “Oh my bars and starters. You think she’ll do it, even if it’s risky?”

She nodded, her green dreads flying around her face, wafting a little of the warm-bread smell of her scalp that I'd always tried so hard not to notice. "In a second."

"Get her," I said.

"Zero perspiration," she said, and struck off for BINGO. "She'll be online. She's *always* online."

* * *

Here's what I wanted to do: I wanted to send a message to Faerie. Not a whole packet, but at least something machine-generated that traversed the Border, arrived in its recipient's hands, and then confirmed its receipt to me.

Here's how I planned to do it. I'd have a computer generate a hundred random digits:

```
11001111010011011011001011101100010010110011011
11101101111011111011010001011001000111101010000
10010
```

and divide them into four lines of twenty-five:

```
1100111101001101101100101
1101100010010110011011111
1011011110111101101000101
1001000111101010000010010
```

and then add another digit to each row and column so that each one had an even number of 0s and 1s:

```
1100111101001101101100101 1
1101100010010110011011111 1
1011011110111101101000101 0
1001000111101010000010010 0
0011000110001100011101101
```

This last digit was the “error-correcting code”—it meant that if any of the digits in my rectangle of numbers got flipped, you could tell, because you wouldn’t have the right number of 0s and 1s anymore. If the number checked out, the recipient would know for sure that it hadn’t gotten foobarred in transit.

Then the recipient would generate a ten-digit random number and multiply my number by it and make another rectangle of 0s and 1s for me. She’d transmit that back to me with the same encoding. I’d verify the message, then divide the new number by the first one I’d sent, which would leave me with the random number. I’d encode that the same way and transmit it back—now we’d both know that we could faithfully transmit numbers to each other.

Once I’d made that tiny little bit of headway, I could build on it, piece by piece, until I was sending entire Internet packets back and forth across the Border. Do that a couple billion times, and you can send someone a copy of Wikipedia. For now, though, all I wanted to do was get a single number there and back again. If information can emerge from the Realm, then we can reconcile its physics with our physics. We can begin to turn its mysteries into facts and truths. We can start to heal the world, make it one place again.

I don’t care if my packet is carried on the backs of butterflies or spelled into the sky by a wizard. I don’t care if the checksums are computed by an Elfmage on a scroll of living parchment or added up by a peecee with a spellbox. I don’t even care if an elf princess who smells *just* like fresh-baked croissants has the packet shipped to her with her cloaks and paint boxes and returns it hidden in the margins of a portrait of her beloved father.

Which is exactly what Synack is proposing to do. Jetfuel neglected to mention the croissant smell, but apart from that, she had every detail right. Synack looked like the elf princesses who’d spent two hundred fifty years stalking the runways of every major fashion show for the years that the Border was closed off from the World, cinematically perfect, cat-eyed and pointy-eared, with cheekbones you could use to grade a driveway. And she dressed pure Realm, in shimmery fabrics that draped like they meant it, lots of layers and watery prints. When she breezed through BINGO’s reception area, every conversation fell silent and every eye turned to her. She looked

at us through cool silver eyes, raised a graceful hand, and said, “Hey, dude, is this where you keep all the Internets?”

Jetfuel snorted and slugged her in the shoulder. Side by side, you could see the family resemblance, though Jetfuel was like something a talented comix maker might do with a box of crayons, while her sister looked like something painted by a Dragon’s Tooth Hill artiste with fine brushes and watery inks.

I coughed to cover my spacey moment and said, “Yes, indeed, this is where we keep the Internets. Can someone get the elf lady a bucket of Internets, please? You want a large bucket or a small one?”

Synack smiled and let her sister guide her back to the meeting room, which was where we brought our best corporate customers, so it had a minimum of obscene graffiti, and most of that was covered over with network maps and pricing schedules. Jetfuel excused herself to get us all coffees—she’d had two while we waited and had quizzed Tikigod intensely over the grind she was using that day and the *crema* it generated—leaving me alone with Synack.

“How long since you left the Realm?” I said.

Synack looked up, as if counting hash marks on the inside of her eyelids. “About a year. Jetfuel and I had been writing back and forth, and she sent me the Wikipedia entry on Caer Ceile, which is our family’s estate. It was so weirdly wrong in such an amazing way that I knew I had to come to the World and see it for myself. I’ve been begging my father to let me apply for a visa to leave the Borderlands and go to one of the easy countries, like Lichtenstein or Congo, but he’s worried I’ll get cut up and left in a Dumpster or something. So I can’t get onto anything near low-enough latency to edit Wikipedia in real time.”

“You should try the guest terminal here,” I said. “Most days around two p.m., there’s a thirty-minute window where we get down to about ten microseconds to our next hop, a satellite uplink in North Carolina. We’ll pull something like five K a second then. If you hit Wikipedia with a text-only browser, you should be able to get at least one edit in.”

Her eyes crossed with delight, and it was so cute that I wanted to put a pat of butter on her nose to see if it would melt. “Could I?”

I shrugged, trying for casual (as casual as I could get with this radiant elf princess wafting her croissant smell at me). I was rescued by Jetfuel, who

had three handmade cups filled with three handmade cappuccinos, each dusted with a grating of my private reserve of 98 percent cacao chocolate, stuff that was worth more, gram for gram, than gold. I kept it under my mattress. She met my eye and smiled.

Jetfuel sipped her coffee, licked the foam off her lips, and turned to her sister. “Here’s the deal. We’re going to put a number in your luggage, and it will follow you back to Caer Ceile. It’ll be short—less than one K. We’ll put it in your paint box, engraved on one of your brushes. When it arrives, you generate the acknowledgment—use something good for the randomizer, like a set of yarrow stalks—and paint it into the border of a landscape of the fountains. Send it to Dad, a present from his wandering daughter. I’ll copy it off, generate the confirmation, and, well, get it back to you.…” She trailed off. “How do we get it back to her?”

I shrugged. “It sounded like you had it all planned out.”

“Two-thirds planned. I mean, I guess she could put it in a letter or something.”

I nodded. “Sure. We could do the whole thing by mail, if necessary.”

Synack shook her head, her straight ash-blond hair brushing her slim shoulders as she did. “No. It’d never get past the contraband checks.”

“They read all the mail that crosses the Border?”

She shook her head again. More croissant smell. It was making me hungry, and uncomfortable. “No … it’s not like that. The Border …” She looked away, searching for the right words.

“It’s not really directly translatable in Worldside terms,” Jetfuel said. “There’s a thing that the Border does, on the True Realm side, that makes it impossible for certain kinds of contraband to fit through. Literally—it’s the *shape* of the Border; it is too narrow in a dimension that we don’t have a word for.”

I must have looked like I was going to argue. Jetfuel crossed her eyes, looking for a moment *just* like her sister. “This is the part I could never get you to understand, Shannon. Once you cross from the Realm over the Border, you enter a world where *space isn’t the same shape.* Your brain is squashed to fit the new shape, and it can no longer even properly conceive of the idea that the Realm operates on.”

I licked my lips. This was the kind of thing I lived for, and Jetfuel knew it. “So it sounds like you’re saying that it’ll be impossible to do this. Why

are you helping me?”

“Oh, I think it’s totally possible. As to why I’m helping you”—she gestured at herself, flapping her hands to indicate her decidedly halfie appearance—“it’s pretty much inconceivable that the Lords of the Realm would ever deign to let a mule like myself through their gate, though it’s technically possible. I am *never* going to get across the Border. I am never going to be able to directly experience that state, the physical and mental condition of being *in* the True Lands. This is the closest I can come.” She looked so hungry, so vulnerable, and I saw for just an instant the pain she must live with all the time, and my heart nearly broke for her.

Her sister saw the look, too, and she squirmed, and I wondered what it must be like to be the sister who wasn’t an object of shame. Poor Jetfuel.

I dragged the conversation back to technical matters. “So why will the paintbrushes pass? Or the painting?”

Synack said, “Well, the brushes are beautiful. And the painting will be beautiful, too. Plus, it’s poetic, the juxtaposition of the data and the art. It changes their shape. Beauty camouflages contraband at the Border. Ugliness, too.”

I felt my heart thudding in my chest. It must have been the coffee. “That’s the stupidest technical explanation I’ve ever heard. And I’ve heard a few.”

“It’s not a technical explanation,” Synack said.

“It’s a magical one,” Jetfuel said. “That’s the part I keep trying to explain to you. Here in B-town, we get used to thinking of magic as something like electricity, a set of principles you can apply through engineering. It *can* work like that—you can buy a spellbox that’ll power a bike or a router or an espresso machine. But that’s just a polite fiction. We treat spellboxes like batteries, take them to wizards for recharging, run them down. But did you know that a ‘dead’ spellbox will sometimes work if you try to use it for something tragic, or heroic? Not always, but sometimes, and always in a way that makes for an epic tale afterward.”

“You’re telling me that there’s an entire advanced civilization that, instead of machines, uses devices that work only when they’re aesthetically pleasing or dramatically satisfying? Jesus, Jetfuel, you sound like some poet kid fresh out of the World. Magic is just physics—you know that.” I could hear pleading in my own voice. I hated this idea.

She heard it, too. I could tell. She covered my hands with one of hers and gave a squeeze. “Look, maybe it is physics. I think you’re right—it *is* physics. But it’s physics that depends on the situation in another dimension that brains that have been squished to fit into the World can’t think about properly.”

Synack nodded solemnly. “That’s why the Highborn don’t trust Truebloods who were raised here. They’ve spent their whole lives thinking with squished brains.”

Jetfuel took it up again. “And that’s why what we’re doing here is so important! If we can connect both planes of existence, then we can transmit events happening here to the Realm to be viewed with the benefit of its physics! Anyone in the World can use the Realm as a kind of neural prosthetic for seeing and interpreting events!”

I started to say something angry, then pulled up short. “That’s cool,” I said. Both sisters grinned, looking so alike that I had to remind myself which was which. “I mean, that is *cool*. That’s even cooler than—” I stopped. I didn’t really talk much about my idea of using information to lever open the barrier between the worlds. “That is just wicked cool.”

“So how do we get the confirmation back?” Synack said.

Jetfuel finished her coffee. “We start by drinking a lot more of this,” she said.

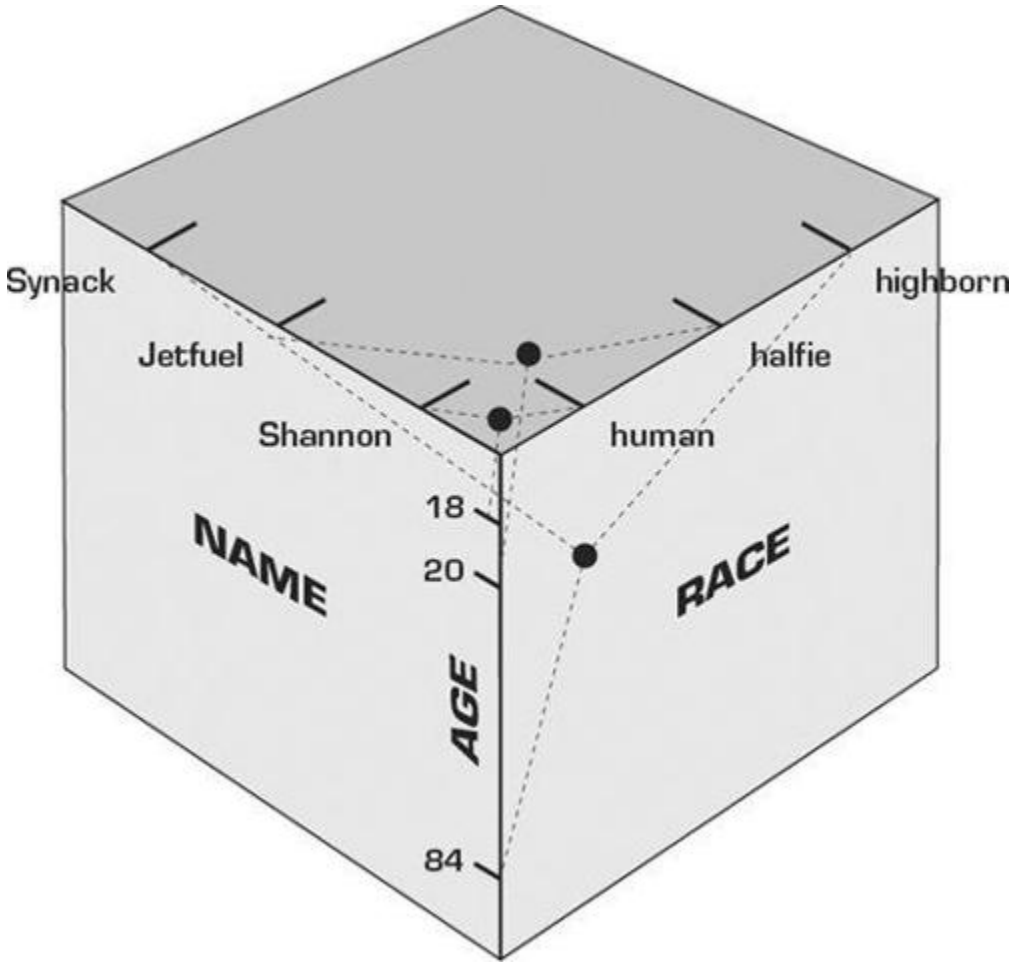
* * *

More dimensions are easy. Say you’ve got a table of names and ages:

ShannonJetfuelSynack

201884

If you were initializing this as a table in a computer program, you could write it like this: (shannon,20)(jetfuel,18)(synack,84). We call that a two-dimensional array. If you wanted to add race to the picture, making it a three-dimensional array, it’d look like this: (shannon,20,human) (jetfuel,18,halfie)(synack,84,highborn). If you were drawing that up as a table, it’d look like a cube with two values on each edge, like this:



That’s easy for humans. We live in 3-D, so it’s easy to think in it. Now, imagine that you want the computer to consider something else, like smell: (shannon, 20, human, coffee)(jetfuel, 18, halfie, bread)(synack, 84, highborn, croissants). Now you have a four-dimensional array—that is, a table where each entry has four associated pieces of information.

This is easy for computers. They don’t even slow down. Every database you’ve interacted with juggles arrays that are vastly more complex than this, running up to hundreds of dimensions—height, fingerprints, handedness, date of birth, and so on. But it’s hard to draw this kind of array in a way that a 3-D eye can transmit to a 3-D brain. Go Google “tesseract” to see what a 4-D cube looks like, but you’re not going to find many 5-D cube pictures. Five dimensions, six dimensions, ten dimensions, a hundred dimensions … They’re easy to blithely knock up in a computer array but practically impossible to visualize using your poor 3-D brain.

But that’s not what Jetfuel and Synack mean by “dimension,” as far as I can tell. Or maybe it is. Maybe there’s a shape that stories have when you look at them in more than three dimensions, a shape that’s obviously right or wrong, the way that a cube is a cube and if it has a short side or a side that’s slanted, you can just look at it and say, “That’s not a cube.” Maybe the right kind of dramatic necessity makes an obvious straight line between two points.

If that’s right, we’ll find it. We’ll use it as a way to optimize our transmissions. Maybe a TCP transmission that’s carrying something beautiful and heroic or ugly and tragic will travel faster and more reliably. Maybe there’s a router that can be designed that will sort outbound traffic by its poetic quotient and route it accordingly.

Maybe Jetfuel is right and we’ll be able to send ideas to Faerie so that brains with the right shape will be able to see *their* romantic forms and dramatic topologies and write reports on them and send them back to us. It could be full employment for bored elf princes and princesses, shape-judging, like an Indian call center, paid by the piece to evaluate beauty and grace.

I don’t know what I’m going to do with my network link to Faerie. But here’s the thing: I think it would be beautiful, and ugly, and terrible, and romantic, and heroic. Maybe that means it will work.

* * *

The calligrapher was Highborn. Jetfuel assured me that nothing less would do. “If you’re going to engrave a number on a paintbrush handle, you can’t just etch it in nine-point Courier. It has to be *beautiful*. Mandala is the unquestioned mistress of calligraphy.”

I didn’t spend a lot of time up on Dragon’s Tooth Hill, though we had plenty of customers there. The Highborn don’t like Border-born elves, they have very little patience for halfies, they really don’t like humans, and they really, *really* don’t like humans who came to B-town after the Pinching Off passed. We weren’t poetic enough, we newcomers who’d grown up in a world that had seen wonder, seen it vanish, seen it reappear. We were graspers at wealth, mere businesspeople.

So I had halfies and elves and such who did the business on the Hill.

The calligrapher was exactly the kind of Highborn I didn't go to the Hill to see. She was dressed as if she had been clothed by a weeping willow and a gang of silkworms. She was so ethereal that she was practically transparent. At first she didn't look directly at me, ushering us into her mansion, whose walls had all been knocked out, making the place into a single huge room—I did a double take and realized that the *floors* had been removed, too, giving the room a ceiling that was three stories tall. I kept seeing wisps of mist or smoke out of the corners of my eyes, but when I looked at them straight on, they vanished. Her tools were arranged neatly on a table that appeared to be floating in midair but that, on closer inspection, turned out to be hung from the high ceiling by long pieces of industrial monofilament. Once I realized this, I also realized that the whole thing was a sham, something to impress the yokels before she handed them the bill.

She seemed to sense my cynicism, for she arched her brows at me as though noticing me for the first time (and thoroughly disapproving of me) and pointed a single finger at me. "Do you care about beauty?" she said, without any preamble. Ah, that famed elfin conversational grace.

"Sure," I said. "Why not." Even I could hear that I sounded like a brat. Jetfuel glared at me. I made a conscious effort to be less offensive and tried to project awe at the majesty of it all.

She seemed to let that go. Jetfuel produced her sister's paint box and set the brushes down, *click-click-click*, on the work surface, amid the fine etching knives, the oil pastels, and the pots of ink. She also unfolded a sheet of paper bearing our message, carefully transcribed from a peecee screen that morning and triple-checked against the original stored on a USB stick in my pocket. She had refused to allow me to print it on one of the semi-disposable inkjets that littered the BINGO offices, insisting the calligrapher wouldn't deign to handle an original that had been machine produced.

The calligrapher looked down at the brushes and the sheet for a long, long time. Then I noticed that she had her eyes closed, either in contemplation or because she was asleep. I caught Jetfuel's attention and rolled my eyes. Jetfuel furrowed her brows at me, sending me a shut-up-and-don't-make-trouble look that was hilarious, coming from her. Since when was *Jetfuel* the grown-up in our friendship? I went back to studying my shoes.

“I don’t think so. I think you wouldn’t recognize beauty if it poked you in the eye. I think you care about money and nothing but money, like all humans. Silver-mad, you are.”

I had to rewind a bit to figure out that she was replying to something I’d said ten minutes before. She’d opened her eyes and was staring at me, finger out, little half-moon of nail aimed directly at me like she was about to spell me into oblivion.

I was angry for half a second; then I chuckled. “Lady, you’ve got the wrong guy. There’s plenty of things wrong with me, but my love of money isn’t one of them.” *Besides*, I didn’t add, *you clearly didn’t get this swanky mansion by caring only for beauty.* “And since you’re not doing this job for free, let’s just both admit that neither of us are adverse to a little cash now and then.” I thought I saw a hint of a smile cross her face; then she scowled at the paper again.

“This is what I am to engrave upon these brushes?”

We both nodded.

She looked longer at it. “What is it?”

I looked at Jetfuel and she looked at me. “A random number,” I said.

She ran her finger along it. “Not so random,” she said. “See how the ones appear again and again?”

“Yeah,” I said. “They sure do. That’s how random numbers work. Sometimes you get ones that seem to have patterns, but it’s like the faces you see in the clouds—just illusions of order from the chaos.”

“No wonder you in the World are so poor in spirit, if you think that it’s impossible to scry from the clouds. That’s powerful magic, sky magic.”

The last thing I wanted was an argument. “Well, let me put it this way. We chose this number at random. If it’s got a message from the gods or something in it, we didn’t put it there, we don’t care about it, and we don’t know about it. Can you engrave it?”

The calligrapher folded her hands. “I will dance with these numbers,” she said. “And perhaps they will dance with me. Come again tomorrow and I will show you what we have found in our dance.”

I waited until the door clicked shut behind us before I hissed, “Pretentious, much?” and rolled my eyes. Jetfuel snorted and socked me in the thigh, giving me an instant—but friendly—deadleg.

“She’s the best,” Jetfuel said. “If anyone can turn a hundred-twenty-eight-bit number into art, it’s her. So don’t piss her off and maybe she’ll ‘dance’ our number across the Border.”

* * *

Jetfuel was the first person to really *get* what I was doing with BINGO and B-town. Oh, there were plenty of geeks who thought it was all cool and nerdy and fun, and plenty of suits from the Hill who wanted to invest in the business and cash out with a big fat dividend. But Jetfuel was the only one who ever understood the *beauty* of it all.

Somewhere along the years, she became a mere heliographer and I became a mere businessman, and until that fateful day on the roof, we barely spoke to each other.

Tomorrow, it will all change. Tomorrow, we will begin to make beauty—instead of money—again.

We sat in my bedroom, listening to the techs moving around below us, shouting and typing on peecees and squabbling and sucking down coffees. I had my chocolate stash out, and I’d set it down between us on the windowsill where we sat, looking out at the Mad River and its meandering course all the way into Faerie. As I reached for the chunk of black, fragrant, slightly oily chocolate, our hands brushed and I felt something race up my arm to my spinal cord and up into my brain, like a ping that passes between two routers. I could tell she felt it, too, because she jerked her hand away as fast as I had.

We were saved from embarrassment by the arrival of Synack, looking even more elfy-welfy than usual, her hair topped with a coronet made from silver leaves, her feet clad in sandals whose straps climbed up her long legs like vines. As we turned to her, I had a jolt of something entirely different—a feeling of *nonrecognition*, a feeling that this wasn’t the same kind of being that I was. This was a person whose brain sometimes pulsed and thought in dimensions I couldn’t grasp. This being was the product of a different set of physical laws than the ones my universe obeyed, physical laws that made exceptions for beauty and terror. Suddenly, Synack was as alien as a lobster, and her long legs and shimmering hair were as attractive as a distant star or the craters of the moon.

“I leave in an hour,” she said, out of breath from the climb up the stairs and the excitement of her impending departure. Her words broke the spell, and she was a person again, someone I could relate to and care about.

Jetfuel sprang from the windowsill and threw herself around her sister’s neck, tumbling her to my unmade bed. “I’ll miss ya, sis!” she said over the racket of small electrical components bouncing off the bed and side tables and rolling to the floor. The two of them giggled like any sisters, and I shook off the feeling of unreality and tried to recapture my excitement.

I stood up and wiped my hands on my jeans. The two of them stopped laughing and looked at me solemnly, two pairs of eyes, one silver and one brown, staring with complex looks that I couldn’t quite understand. “You’ve got your brushes?”

Synack nodded. “And I’ve been telling Father all about the painting I’ve been planning to make for him for days now, and he can’t wait to see it.”

We all looked at each other. “And you’ll come back once you get the reply transmission, right?” This was the hardest part, figuring out how to confirm with her that her message had arrived safely back at BINGO. The plan for this stank: Jetfuel was going to reduce her sister’s return volley to a hash—that is, a shorter number arrived at by running the long number through a prearranged function. The new number should be only ten digits long, which means that the odds against her guessing the correct value by random chance were 1:1,000,000,000. Pretty rare. Ten digits were easier to sneak over the Border than a couple hundred. Jetfuel swore that she could work them into a poem about the painting that she could mail back to her sister and that this would be beautiful enough to traverse the Border.

I hated this part. How the hell could I tell if it was a reasonable plan or totally nuts? I couldn’t see into this dimension where beauty could be measured and agreed upon. Neither could Jetfuel or Synack, but at least their brains were theoretically capable of it, on the other side of the Border.

“I’ll come back. With Father here in the World, I’m the mistress of Caer Ceile. That makes me gentry, properly speaking, with all the rights and entitlements, et cetera. Father will be furious, of course—he’s so glad that his precious daughter is getting out of mean old Bordertown.” She fell silent and carefully avoided looking at Jetfuel. The question hung unspoken in the air: *If Synack is the precious daughter who’s too good for B-town, what is Jetfuel?*

We all waited in the awkward silence. Then Synack said in a voice that was practically a whisper, “He does love you, you know.”

Jetfuel put on a big, fake smile. “Yeah, yeah. Every father loves all his children equally, even the half-breeds.”

“He left the True Lands for a human.”

Jetfuel’s smile vanished like a popped soap bubble. “It’s a vacation. A half century in the World, and then he can go back to the Realm.” She spread her hands out, miming *unlike me.*

“Um …,” I said. “Not that it’s any of my business, but this is totally not any of my business.” They had the good grace to look slightly embarrassed.

“Sorry,” Synack said. “You’re right.” Somewhere in the distance, one of B-town’s many big clocks chimed four. “Is that Big Bend?” she said.

“Sounds like Old Tongue to me,” I said. B-town’s clocks kept their own time, but if you knew which clock was bonging, you could usually approximate the real time. Whatever real time was.

“I’d better get going.”

Jetfuel gave Synack another hug that seemed within three microns of being sincere. “Take care of yourself. Come back soon.”

Then Synack gave me a hug, and it was like hugging a bundle of sticks. That smelled like croissants. “Thanks for this, Shannon,” she said.

“Thank *you*!” I said, unable to keep the surprise out of my voice. “You’re the one taking all the risks!”

“You’re the one trusting me to take them,” she said.

Then she turned and left, going down the wrought-iron staircase like a … well, like an elfin princess picking her way delicately down a spiral staircase.

* * *

We didn’t get drunk. Instead, we went out onto the roof, climbing along the window ledge to where there was a convenient overhang that we used to chin ourselves onto the top of the building, which bristled with antennae and dowsing rods and pigeon coops and a triple heliograph tower. Back in the day, we’d practically lived on the rooftops of B-town, amid the broken glass and the pigeon poop and the secret places where the city slumbered

like an ancient desert even as the streets below thronged with life and revelry.

Back in those days, it had been too much work to descend to street level with all our gear and then haul it back up onto the next roof. Instead, we got in touch with our inner parkour, which is to say that we taught ourselves to just *jump* from one roof to the next. Actually, technically, *Jetfuel* taught herself to jump from roof to roof, and then stood on the far roof shouting things like “Jump already, you pussy!”

She looked at me and shook out her whole body, from her dreads to her toes, like a full-length shiver. It was a moment of pure grace, the sun high overhead making her skin glow, her motion as fluid as a dancer. She gave me a smile that was as wicked as wickedness and then one-two-three *hoopla*! She ran to the edge of the roof and *leaped* for the next roof, which was a good two feet lower than the BINGO building—but was also a good eight feet away. She landed and took the shock in her whole body, coiling like a spring, then using the momentum to pop straight up in the air, higher than I thought it would be possible to jump. She turned and waved at me. “Jump already, you big pussy!”

It took me three tries. I kept chickening out before I took the leap. Jumping off a roof is *dumb*, okay? Your body knows it. It doesn’t want to do this. You have to do a lot of convincing before it’ll let you take a leap of faith.

At least mine did.

Jumping off a roof is dumb, but I’ll tell you what: Nothing beats it for letting you know that you are, by the gods, *alive.* When my feet crunched down on the next rooftop, my body accordioning down as it remembered what to do when I was hurling it through the sky, I had a jolt of pure *aliveness* that was a lot like what coffee is *supposed* to feel like but never quite attains. It was not getting drunk. It was the *opposite* of getting drunk.

She gave me a golf clap and then smiled again and one-two-three *hoopla*! She was off to the next roof. And the next. And the next. And where she went, I followed, my chest heaving, my vision sharper than it had ever been, my hearing so acute I could actually hear individual air molecules as they hissed past my ears. People looked up as we leaped like mountain goats, and I felt like physics might have actually suspended itself for our benefit, like we had stumbled onto something so beautiful and heroic (or so

dumb and awful) that the universe was rearranging itself for us, allowing us to leap through a dimension in which the distance between two points was governed by how wonderful the journey would be.

We must have covered nine or ten roofs this way before we finished up atop a notorious Wharf Rat nest, right by the river, with nowhere else to go. Most people wouldn't go near the building, but we'd had a repeater on its roof for more than a year, and the rats knew that it was good to have friends at BINGO, so they didn't touch it. And there was the repeater: a steel box with a solar cell and a spellbox bolted to it, the whole thing in turn bolted to the roof. Two antennae sprouted from it, phased arrays tuned to reach other nodes, off in the distance.

We panted and whooped and thumped each other on the back and laughed and eventually collapsed onto the roof. It was hot high noon now, and the streets below thronged with people going about their business, oblivious to the data and the people flying over their heads. I was sweating, and I took off my shirt and wiped off my hair and armpits with it, then stuck it through a belt loop. Jetfuel shook out her dreads, and drops of sweat flew off her chin. She sat down abruptly. I sat down, too, and she pulled me to her. I leaned my sweaty head into her sweaty shoulder, and the distance between us telescoped down to microns, and time dilated so that every second took a thousand years, and I thought that perhaps I had found a way to perceive additional dimensions of space and time after all.

* * *

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That's the number that was worked into the twisting vines that twined around the frame of the painting of Caer Ceile that Synack sent back. I knew that it *must* be a beautiful painting, because it went through the

Border. But I thought it was kind of flat and uninspiring. It looked like the pink castle at Disneyland, complete with the pennants and the shrubbery around it, and the mythical beasts that gamboled around its walls only completed the feeling that we were looking at something that came out of Fantasyland, not the Realm of Faerie. Maybe it was the composition. I don't know much about painting, but I know that good paintings have good composition and that this one didn't have something, so maybe it was the composition.

"That's the family place, huh?" I said after I'd examined it. It hung in a dining room in which you could have fed fifty people. Jetfuel's father's dining room, which was paneled in somber woods that turned into seeking branches at waist height, living branches that grew straight up to the ceiling, supporting a network of leaves that absorbed the sound, giving the room the acoustic properties of a library or a forest glade.

A servant—a human servant, a middle-aged lady—padded into the room carrying a silver tray, which she set down on the long, lustrous table. The woman gave Jetfuel a warm hug and gave me a suspicious look before offering me a cup of tea. She fussed with small biscuits and cakes but didn't bother us as we moved around the painting, which dominated one wall, using a spell-light to cast a bright spot on each leaf, each of us writing down each number in turn, checking each other's work. My network operators did this all the time, but it had been years since I'd had to do it, and I'd lost track of how tedious it was. My people earned their pay.

We sat down to eat our biscuits just before her father's keys rattled in the front door lock. Even before the knob had turned, Jetfuel's back had stiffened, all the fun going out of her face. She set down her cookie and pursed her lips; then she stood and crossed to the doorway, looking down the hall as the front door swung wide. I trailed after her.

Her father looked like your basic Business District suit: conservative hair, a Worldly suit cut to emphasize his long, slender torso and limbs and neck. But for the silver eyes and pointed ears, he might have been a skinny banker on his way to Wall Street. He stepped into the cool dark of his hallway, already unbuttoning his jacket, and was just turning to hang it on a burnished brass coat hook when he caught sight of Jetfuel.

The war of emotions on his face was unmistakable: first delight, then sadness, then irritation. "Sweetheart," he said. "What a nice surprise." He

made it sound real enough. Maybe it was.

Jetfuel jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “Dad, this is Shannon. I’ve told you about him. Shannon, this is Baron Fenrirr.”

He snorted. “You can call me Tom,” he said. He stuck out his hand. “Heard so much about you, Shannon. Good things! What you’ve done for our city—”

I shook his hand. It was cool and dry, and the fingers felt as long as patch cables. “Nice to meet you, too.”

And then we all stood, a triangle of awkwardness, until the baron said, “Right, well, plenty to do. Will you stay for dinner?”

I thought he must be asking Jetfuel, but he was looking at me. I looked at Jetfuel. She shook her head. “Plenty to do,” she said. “Got to get back to BINGO.”

That look of sadness again on his face, and then he nodded. He took one step toward the staircase that led to the upper rooms, where, I suppose, he kept his study. Then he turned again and shook my hand goodbye. “Nice to meet you. Don’t be a stranger.” After he let go, he turned and grabbed Jetfuel in a hug that was so sudden she didn’t have time to back away. She stiffened again, as she had at the table, but he kept squeezing, his face lowered to the top of her head, where it smelled, I knew, of bread. He kept on holding her, long beyond what a normal parental hug might have demanded. She slumped into his arms and then, tentatively, hugged him back.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay, enough.”

He let go and she slugged him in his skinny shoulder, and they smiled an identical smile at each other. He went upstairs. We grabbed our notebooks and our cookies, and Jetfuel called out a goodbye to the maid, and we stepped out into the day and started the walk to BINGO, where we would send back the third part of the protocol.

* * *

I thought Jetfuel’s poem was funny:

> Five is a respectable digit,
> But seven makes it look like a midget.

Nine puts them both to shame,
Weird old zero’s at both ends of the game.
Four’s quite square and not at all prime,
And you might say the same of our old friend the nine.
Two is prime and even as well,
Five is quite right to think that’s weird as hell.
Four’s for foreplay,
Which comes before six.
This poem’s full of numbers,
A rather good trick.

Jetfuel squinted at the sheet of paper and scowled at it and made ready to ball it up and toss it to the bedroom floor along with the previous fifty attempts. I stopped her hand, grabbing it in mine and bringing it up to my lips. “Stop already. Enough. It’s a funny poem. *I* think it’s beautiful. As beautiful as a financial report, anyway, and tons of those get across the Border.”

She shook her hand away from my lips and glared at me, then flopped against the pillows and nuzzled her head into my chest. “Financial reports aren’t contraband. This needs to be beautiful enough to pass on its own merits.”

I shook my head. “It’s beautiful. Enough. You’ve written a hundred poems. This one’s got everything—sex, midgets, and math jokes! *That’s* what I call beauty.”

“ ‘Six’ doesn’t rhyme with ‘trick.’ ”

“Sure it does. Six trick, six trick, six trick, six trick. Rhyme.”

She looked out the window at the twinkling Faerie dust streets of B-town. “I’ll take another crack at it in the morning,” she said.

“Put it in an envelope, affix postage, and give it to a runner downstairs to bring to the couriers on Ho Street.”

“You are the world’s worst boyfriend,” she said.

“And yet here we are,” I said, and kissed her.

* * *

How beautiful was the poem? I don’t know. Maybe it was beautiful enough to traverse the Border, and maybe Synack received it at Caer Ceile and stitched a beautiful embroidered frame for it and hung it on the wall, or maybe she burned it by moonlight or fed it to the unicorns or something.

Maybe Synack never received it and will spend the rest of her days as the mistress of Caer Ceile, attending Elf Parliament in gossamer dresses and tabling motions to increase the Faerie dust allotment to Narnia.

Maybe Synack received it and clutched it in her hand tightly and set off for the Border to hand it back to us, to prove that a single bit could traverse the invisible barrier that separates two worlds—two universes—but as she approached the Border from the Faerie side, she pricked her finger on a spinning wheel and fell into a thousand-year sleep. Or perhaps no time has passed for her as she crossed the Border, but the years have stretched by here.

In case you’re wondering, we still haven’t heard back from her.

Jetfuel’s dad installed a peecee in his study, and he sends Jetfuel email three times a day, which she almost never answers.

Some kid from the World just showed up with his own Wikipedia server that he’s running out of a Net café on Hell Street, and he’s maintaining the canonical B-town pages. Farrel Din is *pissed.*

I still think Jetfuel’s poem was beautiful. She gets up earlier than I do, and her pillow smells of warm bread, so I get to bury my face in it until the smell of the coffee and Tikigod’s shouting rouses me every morning.

With thanks to Seth David Schoen for technical assistance.

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CRUEL SISTER

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Two daughters had the butcher’s wife,
  Alike as day and night,
Alike as dross and gold, the two,
  As moon shadow and light.

As tots one pinched and bit and tore,
  Laughed at the other’s cries.
She smacked her sister with her dolls,
  Pulled off their staring eyes.

One sister fled her mother’s arms,
  Chortled at her chiding,
Would not sit still for song or tale,
  And mocked her mother’s guiding.

The other learned to sew and weed,
  To count and read a book,
She weighed chops in the butcher’s shop,
  And helped her mother cook.

The one grew willow-tall and pale,
  Green eyes like leaves in frost,
Hair of milk and moonlight mixed,
  Bright smile freely tossed.

The other was of earth and mold,
  Fox teeth and foxfire hair,
Eyes shy and wide like wild things
  Warned early to beware.

The one loved night and air that smelled
  Of wine and sweat and smoke.
She danced and drank the night away,
  Crept to bed as others woke.

The other craved the sun and earth,
  Dug and hoed and planted,
Buried with each seed the thought
  Her sister was enchanted.

One said yes to all the men
  And no to all their hope.
She let them love, then laughed at them,
  Let them curse and mope.

The other loved but one kind man,
  True in word and kiss.
Her sister teased and laughed and flaunted
  The beauty he would miss.

He did not see the one for love
  Ablaze in the other’s heart.
She took his hand, he sang with her,
  They knew they’d never part.

Her father smiled at their news,
  Invited all the town,
Her mother cried and stitched her tears
  Like pearls in the wedding gown.

But on their day she found her veil
  Torn from hem to crown,

Her shoes dirt-filled, her flowers tossed,
  Her cake thrown upside down.

“Beautiful sister, cruel sister,
  Why must you torment me?
You have all I have and more.
  Why can’t you let me be?”

From her sister’s eye there came a tear,
  The first that ever fell,
Hard and cold as diamond
  Forged in a special hell.

“No sister of mine are you,” she said.
  “No mother did we share.
Mine brought me here and took my heart,
  Then left without a care.

“You are human, these paths are yours
  That map the human heart.
The stony streets I walk lead back
  To the hollow where they start.”

“Then, sister mine,” the other said,
  “My elfin rose and thorn,
You must leave and follow moonlight’s path
  To find where you were born.”

The one touched her and held her fast
  For a breath, another tear,
The other still as a wild thing
  Encircled by her fear.

Then she was out the door and gone,
   The other with love and rue
Smiling in the wreck of her wedding day,
   Tipping the earth from her shoe.

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A Voice Like a Hole

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The trouble is, I ran away when I was fifteen. Everyone knows you run away when you're sixteen. That's the proper age. At sixteen, a long golden road opens up before you, and at the end of it is this amazing life. A sixteen-year-old runaway walks with an invisible crown—boys want to rescue her and they don't even know why. Girls want her to rescue them. She smells like peaches or strawberries or something. She's got that skittish, panicky beauty that makes circuses spontaneously sprout in the tomato field outside of town, just to carry her off, just to be the thing she runs away to. Everyone knows: you run away at sixteen, and it all works itself out. But I couldn't even get that right, which is more or less why I'm sitting here telling you all this, and more thanks to you for the ear.

My name is Fig. Not short for anything, just Fig. See, in eighth grade my school did A *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and for some reason Billy Shakes didn't write that thing for fifty overstimulated thirteen-year-olds, so once all the parts were cast, the talent-free got to be nonspeaking fairies. I'm not actually talent-free. I could do Hermia for you right now. But I was so shy back then. The idea of auditioning, even for Cobweb, who barely gets to say "Hail!" felt like volunteering to be shot. Auditioning meant you might get chosen or you might not, and some kids were always chosen and some weren't, and I knew which one I was, so why bother?

I asked the drama teacher: "What can I be without trying out?"

She said: "You can be a fairy."

So to pass the time while Oberon and Titania practiced their pentameters, the lot of us extraneous pixies made up fairy names for each other like the ones in the play: Peaseblossom and Mustardseed and Moth. I got Fig. It stuck. By the time I ran away, nobody called me by my real name anymore.

Talking to a runaway is a little like talking to a murderer. There was a time before you did it and a time after and between them there's just this *space*, this monstrous *thing*, and it's so heavy. It all could have gone so differently, if only. And there's always the question haunting your talk, the rhinoceros in the room: *Why did you do it?*

Because having a wicked stepmother isn't such a great gig, outside of fairy tales. She doesn't lay elaborate traps involving apples or spindles. She's just a big fist, and you're just weak and small. In a story, if you have a

stepmother, then you're special. Hell, you're the protagonist. A stepmother means you're strong and beautiful and innocent, and you can survive her—just until shit gets real and candy houses and glass coffins start turning up in the margins. There's no tale where the stepmother just crushes the girl to death and that's the end. But I didn't live in a story and I had to go or it was going to be over for me. I can't tell you how I knew that. I just did. The instinctive way a kid knows she doesn't really love you because she's not really your mother—that's how the kid knows she'll never stop until you're gone.

So I went. I hopped a ride with a friend across the causeway into the city. The thing I like best about Sacramento is that I don't live there anymore, but I'll tell you, crossing the floodplain in that Datsun with a guy whose name I don't even remember now—it was beautiful. The slanty sun and the water and the FM stuck on mariachi. Just beautiful, that's all.

My remaining belongings sat in a green backpack wedged between my knees: an all-in-one *Lord of the Rings;* the *Complete Keats;* a thrashed orange and white Edith Hamilton; a black skirt that hardly warranted the title, little more than a piece of fabric and a safety pin; two shirts, also black; $10.16; and a corn muffin. Yes, this represented the sum total of what I believed necessary for survival on planet Earth.

I forgot my toothbrush.

* * *

So here's Fig's Comprehensive Guide for Runaways and Other Invisibles: during the day, sleep in libraries. If questioned, pretend to be a college student run ragged by midterms or finals or whatever. I've always looked older, and libraries have couches or at least an armchair to flop on. I flopped in shifts, so as not to arouse suspicion. Couple of hours asleep, an hour of reading, rinse, repeat. I got through *Les Misérables, Madame Bovary*, and *Simulacra and Simulation* before anyone even asked me what school I went to. Don't just drop out—if you bag one life, you have to replace it with something. And when it comes to filling your head, those dead French guys usually have the good stuff: R-rated for nudity and adult concepts.

It's best to stay off email and computers. They can find you that way. Just let it go, that whole world of tapping keys and instant updates: *poof.* Like

dandelion seeds. I could say: *Don't do drugs; don't do anything for money you wouldn't have done before you ran away.* But the truth is, drugs are expensive, and you kind of have to want to crack your head open with those things, to get in trouble. You have to set out to do it. Save your pennies, like for the ice cream man. And hell, I just didn't have the discipline.

At night, I stayed up. All things considered, as a teen wastrel you could do worse than Sacramento, California: warm, lots of grass and trees and open spaces. But not if you run away in February, like I did. Then you're stuck with cold and rain and nowhere to go. So I went where everyone my age ends up: Denny's.

See, Denny's won't kick you out, even if you're obviously an undesirable —making it the beloved haunt of goths, theater kids, and truckers alike. You're always welcome under the big, benevolent yellow sign—so long as you don't fall asleep. If you nod off, you're out. So I availed myself of their unlimited $1.10 coffee and stayed awake, listening to conversation rise and fall around me, writing on the backs of napkins and in the blank pages in the backs of Tolkien, Keats, Hamilton. I never understood those pages, why they left them blank. Seemed like such a waste. But I filled them up with line after line. Songs. Poems. Anything.

I fit in; before I left home I had the means to dye my hair a pretty choice shade of deep red-purple, and nobody looks twice at a girl in black with Crayola hair scribbling in a Denny's booth. But as time went by, my roots took over. My hair is naturally kind of a blah dark brown, and it kept on growing all dark and ugly on top of my head, like a stair back down to home, getting longer and longer, more and more impossible to take.

Around six a.m., the commuter light rails start running and back then you could get on without a ticket and dodge the hole-punch man from car to car. Or if you don't give a shit and are a somewhat pretty girl who doesn't look like trouble, just sleep by the heater and take the fine the man gives you. It's not like I was ever going to pay it. He could write out all the tissuey pink violation tickets he wanted. The morning March light came shining through the windows, through the rose-colored paper, and the train chugged and rattled along, and even though I was always so hungry it took my breath, I thought that was beautiful, too. Just beautiful. That's all.

And so I went, day in and day out. Eventually my $10.16 ran out, and I was faced with the necessity of finding some other way to pick up that

$1.10 for the bottomless coffee cup, sitting there like a ceramic grail night after night on my Formica diner table—*drink of me and never sleep, never die.* At sixteen, you can get a work permit. At fifteen, you're out of luck.

I didn't want to do it, but sometimes a girl doesn't have any nice choices. Remember—I said I wasn't talent-free.

I could always sing.

Not for a teacher, not in front of parents at talent night, not for Oberon and Titania. For a mirror, maybe. For an empty baseball diamond after school. For a forest. And when I say I could sing, I don't mean I could sing like a Disney girl, or a church choir. No chipmunks and doves alighted at my feet when I sang. I mean I could sing like I was dying and if you got just close enough you could catch my soul as I fell. It's not a perfect voice, maybe not even a pretty one. A voice like a hole. People just toppled in. I stood outside the Denny's, and god, the first time it was so hard, it hurt so much, like a ripping and a tearing inside of me, like the hole would take me, too, my face so hot and ashamed, so afraid, still Fig the nonspeaking fairy, can't even say *hail*, can't even talk back, can't even duck when she sees a fist coming down.

But I opened my mouth, and I turned my face up to the sunset, and I sang. I don't even know what I sang about. I just made it up, brain to mouth to song. Seemed better than singing some love song belonging to somebody else. I don't know anything about music in a technical sense, and I hated the jolt of it, hearing my own voice break the air, to stand up there and sing down the streetlights like I was better than them, like it mattered, like I deserved to be heard at all. So I just kind of went somewhere else when I sang. Somewhere dark and safe and quiet, and when I came back the song was over and my feet were covered in coins. Usually. Sometimes I got a dollar or two.

That was my life. Sleep, read, sing, stay awake, stay awake, stay awake. Ride the train, all the way around the circuit and back to Starfire Station. I'm not even kidding—that's what it was called, the station nearest my Denny's and my library. I'd get on the train with the morning sun all molten and orange on a beat-up blue sign: "Starfire Station." The rails glowed white. I thought: *Maybe something wonderful will happen here, and I could tell people about it later, but no one would believe me, because who names a train station that?*

I didn’t talk to other runaways much. It was always awkward, dancing around how bad you had it in some kind of gross Olympic event. And even if I made a friend, we’re sort of a transitory race by nature. It got repetitive:

“Fig. That’s a stupid name.”

“Thank you.”

“Where’d you come from?”

“Over the causeway.”

“Where’re you going?”

“I don’t know.”

I didn’t see the point. I had my routine.

But I heard about it.

Of course I heard about it. There used to be a place for kids like us. Some kind of magical city half full of runaways, where anything could happen. Elves lived there. Wizards. Impossible stuff: unicorns and rock singers with hearts of gold. A girl told me about it at this shelter once—and let me tell you, shelters are fucking *mouse traps*. A warm bed and a meal and a cage overhead. All they want is to send you back to your parents on the quick, so they rate your crisis level and if you’re below their threshold they up and call the cops on you. I went to one called Diogenes. I liked the name. I knew it from books—I’d moved on to philosophy by then. Diogenes searched the world for one good soul. Never found one, but that’s not the part that matters. It’s the looking, not the finding.

They called my stepmother. I didn’t have bruises anymore. Not bad enough. But she didn’t come to get me. No one ever came for me. She thanked them and hung up the phone, and the next morning they sent me on my way. I guess I wasn’t their one good soul.

But the night before my expulsion from particleboard paradise, this girl Maria talked to me, bunk to bunk, through the one a.m. shadows.

“It’s like this place between us and the place where fairies come from,” she said dreamily, looking up at me from her thin bottom bunk. She had black curly hair all over the place, like wild thorny raspberry vines. Her eyes were kind of hollow, but they just looked delicate and wounded in that way that makes everyone want to rent a white horse just to save you. She wound one finger in her hair while she went on about this obviously ridiculous thing.

“And there’s, like, rock bands with elves in them and no one gives you any shit just for *being*, and there’s *real magic*. Okay, supposedly it’s kind of broken and doesn’t work right, but still, if it’s not working right, that still means it *works*, right?” She sighed like a little kid, even though I knew she was sixteen—I’d seen her file while I stood in the office and they called the candy house and took the witch’s advice on child welfare. Maria emphasized her words like she was underlining them in a diary. How did this kid last five minutes out of a pink bedroom? Whatever happened to her must have been really bad—I don’t even know what kind of bad—to make some girl still drawing unicorns in her spiral notebooks take off. She sighed dramatically, enjoying the luxury of being the source of information. “But it disappeared or something, years ago. No one’s been there in ages. Sometimes I think the city ran away, just like me. Something happened to it and it couldn’t bear anything anymore, and so one night it just took off without leaving a note. But I’ll get there, somehow. I will. And I’ll *dance*, you’ll see. I’ll dance with the fairies.”

And for a second I could see it like she saw it, all the colors, and Maria dancing in the town square with bells in her hair. It struck me just then: she was really beautiful. Actually beautiful, not like an actress, but like the characters actresses play. Like Titania. I just wanted to keep looking at her all night. I guess that’s what you look like when you do it right, when you’re sixteen and on the road, and you don’t write poems, but poems get written about you. I was already writing one in my head. I figured I could fit it in the margins of J. R. R.’s appendices.

One of the other kids hissed at her from the second bunk in our four-loser room. “They don’t like to be called that. Fairies.”

“What do you know about it, Carmen? Fuck off,” Maria spat, all the pink bedroom gone from her voice. And all the colors, too. She had me for a second, but I know better. In the end, I always know better than to believe anything.

“More than you,” snarled the older girl. “Hey, chica,” she said to me, chucking her hair back. “You know how in school they said we’d never get social security, because by the time we get old, our parents will have used it all up?”

“Sure,” I said. Carmen was seventeen, too late, where I was too early. Too old.

“Well, it’s like that.” She sighed, and I could almost see her frown in the dark. “It’s all used up. Nothing left for us kittens.”

“You don’t really believe this stuff, do you? I mean, it sounds great, but it doesn’t pay for coffee, you know?”

Maria scowled up at me. It hurt, that scowl. After a long, pointed silence, she said:

“Fig is a stupid name.”

I rolled back over on my miserable striped mattress.

“I wish I could be like you,” I whispered, but not soft enough that the whole room couldn’t hear. “I wish I could believe, just like I wish I could believe the church kids when they say they can save me. But no power on this earth, girl. No power on this earth.”

No one said anything. They ignored me. I had broken the spell they’d worked so hard to cast. I’d ruined it. Only the quiet of all of them breathing and angry was left.

I didn’t believe even half of it. Remember when those homeless kids in Florida started talking crazy about the Blue Lady and how she’d come and save them? I thought it was like that. Something pretty to think about when you’re cold and hungry. It’s nice to think someone beautiful is protecting you. It’s nice to think there’s a place you can go if you want it bad enough. A place where everything you ever read about is real.

And of course it went away. Of course it did. I mean, that’s like the job of magical places, to vanish. Atlantis. Avalon. Middle Earth.

And even if it was real for someone, sometime, it wouldn’t be real for me. I ran away when I was fifteen. When Bordertown had already run away itself. I did it all wrong. Maybe other people could go there, but not me. That kind of shit is for Oberon and Titania. Not Fig, shuffling in the background with paper leaves glued to her T-shirt. I don’t live in a world with places like that. I live on the train, and in Denny’s, and in the Citrus Heights Public Library, and that’s all.

* * *

Spring came, dry and full of olive pollen. No one came looking for me. I kept singing and reading (*Les Fleurs du Mal* in May, and my Keats for the millionth time). Any time I managed to eat meat I just went wolf-blind with

starving for it. I had become completely nocturnal, sleeping through the whole route from Starfire Station out to the suburbs and back again, my green backpack nicely padded with no-fare fines. *Light rail. Rails of light. That's me, speeding along toward Starfire on a rail of light.* I rode longer and longer into the day, chasing the sun, and maybe I wanted to get caught. My roots got longer and I didn't know where I was going, I just wanted to go somewhere.

I can't say it was lonely—it's more like you flip inside out. Everyone can see your business on the outside—too thin, hollow, bruised eyes, clothes worn into oblivion—and on the inside you just go hard and impenetrable, like metal. I stopped talking when I didn't need to—that's for social animals, and boy, I just wasn't one anymore. I was something else, not a girl, not a wolf, something blank-eyed, tired, running after meat, running after trains.

One time, just before it happened, the ticket taker shook me awake.

"Kid," he said. "Come on. Wake up. You gotta go somewhere else. I see you here every day. You can't stay. You gotta go somewhere else."

He had blue eyes. With the seven a.m. sunlight shining slantwise through them, they looked silvery, like crystals.

"I'm going, I'm going," I grumbled, and stretched. I wasn't really listening. I was thinking about how totally amazing breakfast was, I mean, as an invention. Bacon and bread. I only thought about food abstractly anymore. The way you think about paintings. Anything I got I just tore through so fast, it didn't really seem to exist in a cosmic sense. Hungry before, hungry after. I frowned at the fine-dispensing man. I didn't hate the guy—adults just lived in this other world, this forbidden world, and in that world I only looked like a problem. Not his fault. Not mine. You can't see one world from where you're standing in the other, that's all.

But he didn't shove me off at the next station. Nobody else was in the car, and the sun gleamed on everything, glittering on the chrome like little supernovas. I settled back into my seat, hunching down so anyone who did come in would know to leave me alone. It's an easy psychic telegraph: *Keep out.* Like a body is a clubhouse.

And that morning, when a grayish lump of girl got on, hauling a stiff rider of morning wind, she did leave me alone. She dropped into a heap in a seat on the far side of the car, and I was pretty sure she didn't have a ticket

either. Her clothes were thrift-store mishmash, green skirt, dingy tank top under a ragged coat with a furry, matted hood. As the train got up to speed, her head dipped back and she started to snore. The hood slid off.

It was Maria.

I mean, you wouldn't have recognized her. But I have a memory for faces. Everyone, all the time. If I've seen you, I've seen you forever. And it was Maria, beautiful Maria, the girl who knew everything. But she was messed up, a hundred years older. Her cheekbones were cutting shards, one eye swollen like she'd been hit. Her skin was half-sunburned, half-clammy, and she had hacked all her hair off, shaved her head. It had grown back a fuzzy, uneven half inch, a thin black cloud. She had sores on her arms; her lips were cracked and bleeding. My lips peeled back like a dog's. Her whole body was like a threat, a ransom note that said: *Fast-forward, and this is you.*

"Hey," I whispered. She stirred sleepily. I felt awake all of a sudden, sharp. "Maria?"

I went to the girl and slid into the plastic seat beside her. Her eyes slitted up at me.

"Lemmelone, I gotta ticket," she mumbled.

"Maria, it's me. Fig. Diogenes, remember?" One good soul.

Her eyes rolled, unfocused. I could see the ridges in her sternum, like a bone ladder. "Fig's a stupid name," she slurred.

"Yeah," I said. "It is."

I didn't ask her what happened to her, why she didn't just go home if she was so busted. It's not polite. Her breathing got shallow and she fell asleep again. Maria smelled—kind of sweet, and kind of rotten, and kind of sour. Like meat. She slumped against me and started coughing, spattering my arm with gooey strands streaked with pink. Not coughing blood like some movie girl with one big number left in her, but just about as bad.

"God, I fucking told you, Maria!" I yelled at her suddenly. "There's no such thing as fairies or magic, and there is no city waiting for you at the end of this train. Look at you, puking your guts out on my arm. Where's your magic? Where is it?" I was almost crying, shaking her. She promised me that stuff was real. She said we could go there. How could she do this to me? Her head flopped back and I caught it up, like a baby's. I could see the whites of her eyes, and it just stopped me cold. Like a fist.

“Hey, hey,” I said, softer. “I’m sorry.” I tried to push her upright. “Wake up, Maria. I didn’t mean it. Wake up and tell me what a bitch I am. Come on. Don’t put this on me. I can’t take it. Wake up.”

But she didn’t. Her heart was racing, but her skin was cold. She just sagged into my arms like a puppy. I kept thinking: *Oh god, oh god, have a seizure, whatever, just don’t die on me here, I cannot handle this. This is a safe place. Bad things don’t happen on the train. What did you take, what did you do, what was so bad you couldn’t dream about magic anymore?*

“Maria, sweetie,” I said, and held her. I kissed her forehead. I couldn’t say it, but my heart filled up with the image of her glowing, pink-bedroom face below me on the bottom bunk, in the dark. *This wasn’t supposed to happen to you. The beautiful one. Titania.* And under that thought, the next one, black and ugly: *It was supposed to happen to me.* “Baby girl, just open your eyes. Like in the story. Just open your eyes and wake up.” She moaned a little and put out her hand to find my face. Housing developments with red roofs whispered by outside the windows—she coughed again, greenish, specks of dark, ugly blood in it this time.

“Okay, Maria, okay.” I shifted to hold her better and started rocking. *Shit, just stay awake till the next stop. Just don’t die. Come on, kid, you gotta go somewhere else.*

“Just listen to me. Remember that place you wanted to go? Think about that place; think about the elves and the magic and you dancing with the fairies who don’t like to be called fairies. You can’t go there like this; they’d never let you in. You gotta wake up. Listen, listen.”

And I sang to her. The words just came and I sang them into her ear, her shorn head, her phlegm and her sternum and her unicorns and her wizards, and my voice came rough and quiet but it came, and I hoped I wasn’t singing her death, I hoped I was singing something better, for both of us, my broken voice and her broken body. I sang because if she could get that far gone, I could; if she wasn’t a good-enough soul for Diogenes, I never would be; if she could die, I would never get to be old. The panic in me was like a spider, a crawling, hungry thing. I rocked her and went to that other place I go to when I sing, and the song poured out of me into her. *Think about that place, that place, that place. Let’s run away. That other place. Nothing bad ever happened to you. Nothing bad ever happened to me. We’re just two girls taking the train to school. We’ll go to class and talk*

about Grecian urns. You can copy off my homework. We'll have lunch in the grass. I sang and sang, and my voice got big in me, big enough to hurt, big enough to echo. Big enough for her. A voice like a hole. I pressed my forehead to hers and the world went away.

* * *

The sky shuddered from full daylight to stars and black and no moon at all with a hard lurch and a snap, like blinds zipping down.

> Come on, kid. You gotta go somewhere else.
> Nothing left for us kittens.

The train car was gone, and I was sitting on a long bench with a red cushion, with Maria in my lap. We rattled along on some part-stagecoach, part–city bus beast, something out of an old movie, like we'd jumped frames. Jangling silver and bone bells hung from several posts of some kind of twisted black horn; nodding black flowers drooped from their crowns. Several long benches stretched behind me, with some folk asleep, some awake. A woman was knitting quietly in the starlight. I sat up front, Maria's legs curled on the seat, her head in my arms. The driver wore a top hat covered in living moss with tiny clovers and thistles growing in it. The coach heaved and jerked as though horses were pulling it, and I could hear the *clop-clop* of hooves, but even in the dim light I could see that no animal pulled us along.

I started shaking—I didn't mean to, but my body rejected what it saw, what it felt, and I couldn't think of anything to do or say, with this girl in my lap and this utterly wrong thing happening. There was no horse pulling the carriage-trolley, but I could hear the hoofbeats, and like a kid I seized on that, that one thing wrong out of everything, everything wrong.

I cleared my throat. I felt unused to talking to adults. "Sir," I said to the driver. "There's no horse."

"This is Bordertown's own Ye Olde Unicorn Trolley. Famous, like. I'm Master Wallscrew, at yours."

I laughed a little, nervous. "Where's the unicorn?"

The driver turned to grin at me from under his fuzzy green hat.

“You’re it, kid. It only works with a virgin on board. Sure and it’s not me.”

I blushed deeply, and at the same moment it hit me, hard as a broken bone: He said *Bordertown.*

I shook, and felt cold, and felt hot, and my hands were clamped so tight in Maria’s coat, my fingers got fuzzy with lost circulation. I had been wrong. There was a moon out, low in the sky, almost spent, a slim rind left, hanging there like a smile. I laughed. Then I put my face in Maria’s neck and cried.

“What is it, girl?” gruffed the trolley master. “I can’t abide girls crying, I’ll warn you. Shows a fragile disposition, and brings amorous types to wipe tears away, which would pretty much sort our whole conveyance issue. Sniffle up, before some silver-haired Byron gets your scent.”

“It’s a mistake,” I said quietly.

“What’s ‘it,’ now?”

“A mistake. I’m … I’m nobody. I’m nobody. I’m not supposed to be here. It’s for her.”

I had made it and didn’t even audition. Maria auditioned with her whole heart. She had the discipline. She went down into the dark, where I was never brave enough to go. I was supposed to mess around in the back and say nothing. I wasn’t supposed to suddenly have to function in Athens, with a lost kid in my skirts. This was Maria’s place, and she couldn’t even see it.

“Wake up, Maria, wake up,” I sobbed. “Wake up. There’s unicorns, like you said, sort of, and magic, and …”

She didn’t stir. But her breathing was better, deep and even, and she had locked her arms around my waist.

“Well, Nobody,” the driver said softly, “where to?”

I rubbed my nose, flowing with snot and tears. “What about these people? Don’t they need to get … places? Go where they want to go. We don’t care.”

“Tourists.” He shrugged. “They wait for the … uh … fuel stop, and go where the trolley goes. It’s exciting—they never know what they might see. Besides, the old monster’s not too reliable as a method of mass transit. The kids come on sometimes, to haze each other—if it goes, well, they’re not as tough as they say. But mostly we just *glide,* child. It’s part magic and part machine and neither of the parts work quite right, so sometimes you’ll say,

‘Dinner at Café Cubana, hoss,’ and it’ll take you pert as a duck to Elfhaeme Gate and you’ll be dining on fines and forms. Sometimes it’s nice as you please, right up to the door at Cubana and no fuss. Not its fault, you understand. The magic wants to go Realmward and the machine wants to go Worldward, and in a mess like that you can’t ask for any straight lines.”

“Then why ask where we’re going?”

The driver looked down at me, his blue eyes dark in the starlight, like crystals.

“It don’t run without desire, kid. Nothing does.”

Well, what do you do when you don’t know what to do? What you’ve been doing. I wanted somewhere for Maria to get well, to get fed, to get happy again. Something like a benevolent golden Denny’s, something I could sing in front of, somewhere with coffee all night for $1.10 in a cup like a grail and just a little more room on the blank pages in the backs of my books. Just a little more room.

I didn’t say it. I didn’t say anything. But the Unicorn Trolley veered off sharply into the shadows and light of the city, into the sound of it like a wall.

And I looked over my shoulder, back toward the moon and the gnarled, thorny weeds of the road. Something banged there, hanging from an iron pole, banged in the wind and the night. On a scrap of tin that might have once been painted blue, I read: “Starfire Station.”

And just then, just then, Maria opened her eyes, bright and deep as a fairy’s.

* * *

And that’s my story, Mr. Din. If you don’t mind I’ll take that beer now. I still need a little something to be brave. I guess that’s better than not being brave at all. It’s Titania’s world and I’ll never be Hermia, and not Helena either. Just Fig, but not in the background. Not anymore. I still stand with the fairies with glued-on leaves, but oh, you’d better believe I’ve got lines to sing. Hail, mortals, we attend. Well met, and what ho, and all that jazz, every word, down to the last verse.

Now, I see a microphone up there, and my girl and I are hungry. May I?

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STAIRS IN HER HAIR

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There is a girl with a stair in her hair
made of thorn and thistle and bone.
There is a girl with a stair in her hair
and she climbs it to be alone.

There is a girl with a coin in her fist
made of breath and hunger and cold.
There is a girl with a coin in her fist
who buys whatever she's sold.

A girl with a voice and a girl with a name
a girl with strong hands and eyes like the rain
a girl who's too young and too easy to bruise
a girl with nothing to lose, oh
a girl with nothing to lose.

Here is a girl with a stone on her tongue
plucked from a wave on the shore.
Here is a girl with a stone on her tongue
that keeps her from asking for more.

Here is a girl with a key in her palm
and here is a door with a lock.
Here is a girl with a key in her palm
wondering if she should knock.

A girl with a voice and a girl with a name
a girl with strong hands and eyes like the rain
a girl who knows all of her lines and her cues
a girl with nothing to lose, oh

a girl with nothing to lose.

I am a girl with a stair in my hair.
I climb it to be alone.
I am a girl with nothing to share
but thorns and thistles and bone.

I am a girl with a coin in my fist
but I have learned to be bold.
I am a girl who will never be missed
if she’s borrowed or broken or sold.

I am a girl with a voice and a name
a girl with strong hands and eyes like the rain
a girl who can fight and a girl who can choose
a girl with so much to lose, oh
a girl with so much to lose.

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INCUNABULUM

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There was blood on his shirt.

Not a great deal, not so much that a death lay behind it—though there might be more of it elsewhere from the same source. He did not think it was his. It blotched the white linen like ink in the harsh conjured light of the lamp stabbing at his eyes. He could smell it, faintly: the rank odor of butchery after a hunt. His thoughts ran, spun, hurtled against each other and the walls of his mind like a herd of captive …

Captive something. Penned. With small, hard hooves and delicate ears … Even as he grasped after the picture, it scattered. He held nothing but the vision of his thoughts in frantic disarray.

"Name." A grating voice without music from beyond the lamp.

His shirt felt dry against his breast, at least.

"Name!" the voice repeated, and the light shifted until he could peer through it to the pale, fair face of the one who held it. "Come, my merry flower, my own fleeing rat, you may withhold whatever else you like, but your name we will have before you pass us."

He ground the heels of his palms into his eyes. Sight was thought's widest window; perhaps in wiping the glass he might freshen his mind.

"*Drunken* rat," another spoke from beyond his inquisitor. That new voice was bright with amusement and sweetly pitched. "And if that blood's not yours, make sure you don't do whatever you did back home on *this* side of the Gate. Because if you try it in Bordertown, we'll see you don't run away from the consequences."

"Perhaps he has no speech?" suggested the first voice.

"Maybe he doesn't want to use it out here in public."

Hard fingers fastened on his upper arms, pushed and dragged him sideways, though he clutched at the earth with his toes and twisted against those unfriendly hands.

His toes? Why had he no boots? Or even slippers suited for the smooth floors of … of … But he had crossed floors, he was certain.

Then he was under a roof, where the light was gentle and general. He gathered his scattered wits and senses and bid them work.

It was a tiny room; the wooden table and unmated chairs nearly filled it, and the people fit themselves in as best they could. The walls were made of

ruddy bricks in their lower parts and ridged and painted metal in their upper, like a tree with trunk below and leaves above. Lamps that burned some foul-smelling fuel hung from the low beams overhead, darkening the night to oily black through the single window.

Those who gripped his arms so tightly, one to each side, were of the Blood. They were as tall as he, and as pale. The grim-mouthed woman on his left had hair the color of milk and a warm tint to her eyes like tarnish on a spoon. The hair of the man on his right was so white and brilliant it might have been bundled threads of glass, and his eyes were silver touched neither with gold nor blue. Both wore some glossy gray livery without crest or insignia, in a fabric soft with wear and washing.

He had trespassed, perhaps, in some private or forbidden place. He tried to recall if he knew of any such within his common reach.

But he couldn't remember what his common reach *was.*

Seated across the table from his guards (they must be guards) and himself was a woman with curling hair red as corn poppies and skin brown as an acorn shell. Her features, her very silhouette, were softly rounded, as if she were made of clouds and not hard bone. A human, he realized. He had seen them depicted, but had never been in the presence of one, alive and moving and exuding a warm animal scent like the fur of a cat.

She, too, wore the gray. The little silver oak leaf on her breast might have been an ornament or a badge of rank. A ledger lay open before her, and the gold-nibbed pen she held had smudged her fingertips with ink.

"Name," she said without looking up. The guards eyed him with an air of expectation.

His name. That was what they wanted.

He felt the mindless terror of a dumb beast entrapped when he realized he had none.

He jammed his heel against the wooden floor and twisted. The two who held him were braced, perhaps, for something else. A burning, bruising pressure against his arms, the pop of breaking linen threads, and he was free.

He was half through the doorway of the hut when someone behind him said a word. He stuck there like a leaf caught in ice.

"Thought that might come in useful. Get a decent grip on him this time, and we'll try again."

His two guards pulled him back to his place before the table. Like ice, the spell in the door seemed to have stolen the warmth from his blood. It shamed him to shiver before these strangers, but he had no choice.

The poppy-haired human gazed up at him. “Look. This is just a formality. You haven’t done anything wrong in B-town, as far as we know. Yet.” Something in her words seemed to amuse her. “We just need a name. Over on your side they got their ears in a clamp over having lost a bunch of kids during the Gap, so we have to keep records now. It won’t help, but we have to do it anyway. So try not to make trouble when you don’t have to.”

He parted his lips to speak. A wave of new fear rose in him when at first he couldn’t. Was it true that he had no voice? He gave a ravenlike croak, and coughed, and found that fright and disuse had dammed his throat, but there were words behind the obstruction after all. “I don’t remember. I don’t remember my name.”

The human lifted her eyes to the smoke-stained ceiling. “Oh, good grief. A drama llama. My shift is officially perfect.”

“Drama llama?” echoed the fair man whose hands held fast to his right arm.

“Heard it from the New-Come. They practically invented a whole new language out there, seems like.”

“And in your scant hours of rest,” said the woman on his left, her words seasoned with laughter, “you disport yourself in Soho’s clamorous dens?”

His captors’ grips were strong, but by their talk they might as well have forgotten him. He found no solace in it; it touched him, indeed, like an insult.

“Just honoring my roots, hon. All right, then.” The mortal woman lowered her pen nearly to the paper’s surface and held his eyes with hers, brows lifted. “What name was it you’ve forgotten again?”

Without an answer, they would not let him pass. And he must pass. Why, he also could not remember, but he was as certain as he was of body and breath that he could not return whence he came.

“Perhaps he bears a curse,” offered the woman on his left.

The man on his right made a rude noise in the back of his nose. “Or just a lot more beer than is good for him.” He leaned closer and made much of sniffing the air. “Or brandy? Don’t drink it if you can’t hold it, boy.”

“All right, you two, don’t rile him up. I’d like to get home for breakfast.”

The woman at his left with the tarnished eyes pinched his arm fiercely through his shirt and smiled when he flinched. “Do as your fellow winsome emigrants, and speak a false name. We neither know nor care for the truth, stripling.”

Her companions did not correct her, but only waited.

Desperation drove all names from his head, not merely the one he owned. He cast his eyes about the room, seeking any object that would offer a word to call himself by. The human woman’s pen hovered over the ledger, impatient to tie him to this place with ink and paper—

“Page,” he declared, too loud, and he was grateful they would accept a lie, for no one would have believed it true. “I am called Page.”

“I’ll just bet address and place of birth are a great big mystery, too.” Had the red-haired woman been of the Blood, he would have judged her both annoyed and entertained.

The thought of being anyone’s entertainment revolted him. He closed his lips and lifted his chin, and was almost glad the vacancies of his mind left him nothing to tell her.

She nodded and gave her attention to her ledger. “No … fixed … address,” she pronounced, the pen point skipping and scratching across the paper.

For all he knew, he was a vagrant indeed, and all his pride was false.

“There. Was that so hard? Welcome to Bordertown. Enjoy your visit. Stay out of trouble.”

As if her words were an incantation, the bruising fingers on his arms unclenched. He drew himself up tall and brushed his sleeves, pretending he might tidy away the creases and the lasting soreness. The man with the brilliant hair observed the motion and shot a mocking smile at him, straight as any arrow.

You shall regret what you’ve done this day, he thought. But why? One fey boy with nothing but the clothes he stood in, and those fouled and torn—were he to say aloud “You shall regret,” the room would riot with laughter. Even the human would laugh at the elfling with his bloody shirt and false name.

But he inclined his head as if acknowledging those of lesser rank, turned on his heel, and strode boldly from the hut.

He faltered in the ill-lit street. What he'd thought was a hut while inside was only an anteroom for the larger building behind. Along one of its brick flanks stretched a gray stone terrace, breast-high, as if it had been built to stand above some seasonal flood. Doors yawned down its length, each one tall as two men and wide as two with arms outstretched. A flat wagon on iron wheels backed up to one door; two people unloaded its freight of cloth-wrapped bales and stacked them on the terrace, where another figure seemed to be inspecting them. He couldn't tell if the workers were human or of the Blood.

To his right stood the Border that marked the bounds of the Realm. It fluttered, luminous, alive with motion like a curtain in a breeze. It looked soft as fog, but where it met the humans' buildings of brick and stone it seemed to slice through like a blade through a neck. Did the structures' other halves exist beyond that wall? He couldn't remember.

An arch of some material like poured stone rose above the pavement. Its pillars stood square and simple on the earth; but as they rose higher their surfaces roughened, forked, until the apex of the arch seemed made of braided branches of a stone tree, its bark scaled like a serpent's skin. In the deep shadows of the carving, specks of light came and went, like stars obscured by a passing cloud. There was nothing to be seen between the pillars but the shifting glow of the Border.

Through that Gate he had lately passed. He could not go that way now.

He turned left, down the street between blocky human-built structures that smelled of oil and dirt, strange spices, and mortality.

Even in darkness, he felt naked and small on the broad way that led from the Gate. Was he a fugitive? He turned at the first street-joining, then turned again and again, until he'd lost the route back. Always he walked downhill. Down was farthest from where he'd begun.

At first he did not properly see the avenues and passages he walked; he did not look, for fear of being looked upon in turn. But as his breath grew short and his steps slowed, he gawked like …

Word and image failed him, as if water had spilled across the surface of his thoughts and washed memory away. Frustration knotted his throat and wetted his eyes. He shook his head fiercely. He would not weep where strangers might see.

Now he noticed that much in the city was not human-built. Beyond the crossing of two streets, he found the way bordered by a high hedge made of glass roses. A hammered silver gate set in the hedge showed him his own face, distorted. Among the nodding, glittering canes above his head he glimpsed silver-latticed windows.

Farther along the street stood a tall, narrow dwelling made (or so it appeared) of polished dark leather sewn with gold wire. Surely humans did not make such places? They seemed common and strange at once, as if he had been told of them but had never seen them.

Standing flank to flank with the coarse brick and stone of the old human city made them stranger still. Even the humans' sharp-edged boxes were softened with touches of fey beauty: tiny night-blooming vines crept along the mortar between bricks, and stone wore painted tracery that shivered and crawled and shone. Did those of the Blood live side by side with mortal folk here, tossed and jumbled like leaves heaped by the wind?

The city, he knew, rose from the Uncertain Lands like a pin thrust into a map, named not for its founder or for great deeds done on its soil, but for its relation to other places. Bordertown. Had he been here before? Was he here of his own will? He thought not, but he could not be sure.

There were humans here, and people of the True Blood, and chimerae, results of a mating between the two. He considered his feelings and found he did not fear humans, but knew they were untrustworthy, changeable in action and mood as all short-lived things, ill companions and worse servants. But his own kind—ah, from that quarter a threat might arise, if threat there was. For the blood on his shirt most certainly came with him from the Realm.

Before all else, then, he must have another shirt, and a weapon. His fingers dropped of their own will to his belt. It was a purse they sought, but he had none. No name, and now no wealth; the second frightened him nearly as much as the first.

The sky was fading with dawn when he came to another crossing of streets, narrower than many. On his right the ground rose steep in an embankment formed of rough stone. At its foot water ran black and gurgling. He couldn't tell if it was a natural stream or drainage from somewhere above, but at least it did not smell of offal. And above the wall he glimpsed a garden, where clothing hung on stretched lines.

He slipped and stumbled down the side of the ditch, treading in the icy water and the muck beneath the surface. Now he could reach the stony slope of the bank. He scrambled up, rock edges cutting at his bare toes, his fingers clenching on the outcrops, his shoulders and legs working easily to pull and push him up the slope. Whatever his past, it had made him fit. And the bank was hardly taller than he. He hoisted himself over the last of the stones and rolled into the garden, drowning in the scent of crushed thyme.

The garden belonged to a cottage. It might have been plucked, foundation and all, from a human village and set down in the space left when one of its tall brick neighbors died and was carted away. Even he could see it was unlike the buildings around it. Yet it looked as old, and perhaps older, than they.

It leaned like a tired child against the stiff brown stone structure next door. Even in the gray-blue light he could see it had been painted all awry: the walls purple, the trim around each window and door a different bright color, turquoise, scarlet, yellow, leaf green. He peered through the shadows and saw no motion at the curtained windows, or at the door that opened on a low porch carried in the crook of the cottage like a babe in its nurse’s arm.

He pushed himself upright, the fresh herb scent following him on his palms and knees, and tugged the nearest shirt down from its wooden pins. It was white and soft, knitted like stockings, with cropped sleeves and no collar. Someone had marred the clean white with nine printed characters in a human script, but the garment was clean. He yanked his linen shirt over his head and pulled the new one on in its place. Close-fitting, but he could move freely in it.

“You’re very pretty in that, but it’s still not yours.” The voice was sweet but wandering, like strings plucked at random, and came from the shadows at the back of the cottage.

A woman sat on the edge of the low porch, her long skirt tangled in the rioting blossoms of snapdragon and yarrow planted around it. Her knees supported her elbows, and her chin rested in her two cupped hands.

He thought by her hair she was human—but no, the Blood was in every line of her finely carved face. And humans were clumsy and loud; he would have heard a human walk onto the porch. Why would she dye her hair the color of oak leaves dead on the twig in winter? Was it a sign of mourning? Of low rank?

“Then take pleasure in my beauty while I take the shirt, and all’s paid.” He gave her a smile that might have served him well in his lost past.

She laughed like the clash of rattled silver. “That’s so clever! But I’ve got plenty of beauty. Well, I suppose there’s always room for more, but it’s not the same as a half-pound of coffee beans or two bushels of sheep crap for the garden. Did you know sheep crap makes the best fertilizer? Or is bat shit better? But it’s harder to get bat shit, and it’s not as if you can grow broccoli in caves.”

She was a madwoman. If he had any experience with madness, it was gone with his name, but the idea of it sent a thrill of alarm through his bones. “I take my leave of you, then,” he said, haughty and cold in the hope of alarming her in turn. He stepped backward, in the way he’d come.

“Stop.”

There was no spell in it, but the word was as effective as magic, for the force of command it carried.

The woman stood and walked into the yard, lifting her skirt and her feet to clear the flowers without bruising them. “You’ve trompelated my herb garden enough already.” She stepped close, tilted her head, and peered wide-eyed up into his face, as if he were some rare tamed bird. The top of her brown-dyed head came only to the tip of his nose.

Were her stunted height and her madness of one cause?

“So you’re a T-shirt thief?” she mused in her rising and falling voice. “I don’t think there’s anything in the stories about that. Radishes, yes—or was that salad greens? Anyway, the forfeit for that was a baby, and I really don’t need one of those even if you *are* pregnant.”

Once he’d had a purse. For all she knew, he had it still. “You shall have recompense in gold. Only let me—”

“Nope, don’t need that either. I know!” She grasped his arm above the elbow and pulled him off-balance, toward the cottage. Her strength was a surprise, her fingers on his already-bruised flesh a trial.

It seemed she meant to pull him straight through the wall of the cottage, and indeed, the wood might have splintered under the force of their progress. But she stopped short an arm’s length from the clapboards. With her free hand she clutched at a sapling tree, slender as a finger, that sprouted from a bed of turned earth along the foundation.

“This,” she said, giving the sapling a shake. “Get this out of my onion bed. That’ll pay for the shirt, don’t you think?”

Perhaps Bordertown thrived on such symbolic barter. But if she chose to set him a trivial task in exchange for what he wanted, why should he protest? Madness and folly could go hand in hand, after all. He gave her a small, mocking bow. “Madam, I accept this forfeit.”

She patted his arm. “Aww, you’re so sweet. Well, soonest begun, soonest too tired to think about doing anything else, right? Let me know when you’re done.” With a flourish of her long, heavy skirt she tramped back to her porch. He heard the closing of the door moments later.

She was gone, and he could leave. But he had agreed to her terms. If he was not bound in fact, he felt so by his honor, and from that feeling he guessed honor was a thing that meant much to him.

He closed his right hand around the whip-slender trunk and tugged. The earth did not give up the tree. He used both hands, but the tree did not shift. He gripped hard and threw all his strength and weight into the balance. The tree was rooted still.

In a rage he yanked and twisted at the slender trunk, calling it foul names with what little breath the struggle left him. The green wood bent and the bark split, but the roots gave not an inch.

The woman was mad, and likely a witch, but the folly, it seemed, was all on his side. Most foolish of all was his pride, which would not let him walk away from his bad bargain. He knelt in the grass and began to probe the earth with his fingers.

The sun stood high overhead when at last he rose to his feet. His back ached, his knees throbbed from finding pointed stones in the grass, and his hands were stiff and sore and stinging with broken blisters on the palms and each grimy finger. But he lifted the little treelet, mauled and half stripped of bark and free at last of the earth, as he might lift a defeated enemy by the throat.

He carried the thing around the corner of the cottage to the little porch. “It is done!” he shouted, and held up the tree as proof.

The flimsy door swung open, and the witch poked out her head, like some little animal from its burrow. “You still here?”

Whatever he had thought she might say, it was not that. “Your forfeit.” He bit back the “Lady” that had nearly followed after, for why should he

call a brown-haired witch with a paint-stained skirt and a tumbledown cottage “Lady”? Instead he held the sapling higher.

She stepped onto the porch and stared at his hands. “The shovel was right there,” she said, nodding at the side of the house.

There was, indeed, a shovel leaning against the wall, its pointed blade wedged into a hummock of grass.

He was aware of himself all at once—soil wedged deep under his fingernails and in the creases of his hands, dirt and sweat streaking the once-clean shirt, his hair falling tangled in his face, which must also be dirt- and sweat-streaked, and about him the smell of onions from the stray bulbs he’d unearthed with the tree roots. He clenched his teeth on his anger.

“It pleases you, then, to shame me with a lowly task and an ensorcelled tree?”

She tilted her head like a bird listening for prey underground. “Ensor—No, it’s just an elm. They have a really long taproot. See?” She pointed. “And it’s not lowly if it needs doing, is it? It would have been a lot easier with the shovel, though.”

Was it possible to be a witch and simple? By her manner, there was no malice in her. He set down the tree and lifted his filthy hands. “I would leave this earth with its kin. May I come in to wash?”

“Oh, no. I don’t know you, so that would be stupid. You could be an ax murderer.”

“Had I an ax, you would know it,” he said through gritted teeth.

She shook her head sadly. “Nope. Can’t do it. Around here, if you don’t pay attention to the stories, all sorts of things go wrong.”

“The stories?”

“Myths, legends, fairy tales. You know.”

“No. No, I don’t.” Surely they were human tales, nonsense to frighten children. But the cold, empty place he felt in himself at her words told him it was not so. “I … don’t remember them.” In answer to her look, he found himself saying, beyond reason, “I don’t remember even my name.”

She blinked. “Wow, you *are* traveling light.”

He had no notion what she meant. Perhaps she saw his confusion and took pity on him—though the thought of pity from her made his skin sting as if scorched—for she added, “There’s the pump. You can clean up there.”

She waved one blunt-nailed, blue-smudged hand toward the bottom of the garden, at an iron contraption that thrust up out of rank grass and gravel. Then she went back inside.

He learned that part of the iron apparatus was a lever, and when it was raised and lowered many times, water coughed and spat and gushed out of the pipe and onto the ground. The learning took long enough to make him angry, but cold water rushing over his hands and arms and head cooled his temper as it did his flesh.

When he lifted his dripping head at last, he found the witch at his elbow with a rough towel and a pottery bowl. “Lunch.”

“And what shall I do for that? Must I cut your grass with a penknife?” The words had sounded clever in his head; coming from his mouth, they were only childish and surly.

But she beamed. “See? You *do* know the stories!” She thrust the bowl at him. “Free lunch in every box. Well, T-shirt. But that’s better than *on* a T-shirt, isn’t it?”

The bowl held soup, made of rice and pea pods and vegetables he did not know (or remember) in a distressingly orange opaque broth, but it smelled wholesome. He took the wooden spoon from her, tasted the soup, and was neither struck dead nor turned into any creature. He only then realized how desperately hungry he was. The soup was savory and rich, and he spooned it up with inelegant, embarrassing haste.

The witch sat cross-legged on the grass before him and watched him eat. When he was half-finished and had slowed to a more decorous pace, she said, “So, do you have a name to tell people? If they ask?”

She might offer to name him. He’d have none of that. Though he’d forgotten his own, he knew names were power. “Page,” he replied, remembering the guards at the Gate and their book.

“Oh, of course! Because pages serve.” She smiled and nodded toward the uprooted tree cast upon the lawn.

He did *not* serve—not her, not anyone. Unless this upwelling of sour-tasting pride was only envy in pride’s clothes.

“Or it’s a blank page,” she went on, talking to the air. “That’s not good. But not all pages are blank, so that’s better.”

He scraped the last of the soup from the bowl and handed it back to her. “May your kindness be returned,” he said, in lieu of thanks.

“It’s true, the world always needs more soup.” She rose and shook out her skirt, as if grass and dust could make an impression among the many-colored smudges of paint on the cloth. “So, Maybe-Blank Page, where are you going?”

Away from the Border was all the answer he had. “Perhaps I should ask that of you. In this place, do not folk seek advice of witches?”

She stared down at him, while a breeze plucked up a strand of her dirt-brown hair and tangled it in her pale lashes. Then she burst into an unbecoming, hooting laugh, pausing only to wipe both hair and tears from her eyes. “Oh, sweetie! I’m not a witch. I’m a *painter*.”

The laughter stung like a cloud of wasps. “And thus is your poverty accounted for,” he snapped, and flung out an arm to encompass her stained clothes, her sagging, gaudy cottage, the whole of the shabby, human-built warren of a city she lived in. “Were you a witch, you would at least be of use enough to expect a living for your service.”

She fixed him with an examining look, like the stare she’d given him when he’d named her “witch.” But unlike, too. Her seeking eyes were cold and bright as flecks in granite. “Get a job, you say? Okay.” Her lips stretched in a smile that never knew mirth. “As of now, I’m a witch. And my first spell is …”

She planted her feet wide, raised her arms, and spread her fingers over him. Why did he still sit, frozen as a rabbit fearing the dogs? *Flee before she calls down your death!*

“This is my curse on you.” Her voice still wandered the scale, but as if the hands that plucked the notes were strong from work or warfare. She drew herself up straight, took a breath that filled her chest, and declared, “You’ll learn who you are from the next person you meet.”

He crouched before her and felt … no different. Should he sense the rush of sorcery? Or did sorcery touch one like air on skin, merely *there*? He didn’t know.

Her arms fell. “There you go.” She nodded and smiled, cheerful as if there had been no offense between them. “Now I’ve got work to do. An apple a day makes a really slow still life, you know. Scram! Have fun!” She flapped her hands as if herding a flock of hens.

He staggered to his feet and started toward the stone embankment he’d climbed.

“Not through the herb garden, you bozo!” she shouted. “Round the house to the front walk!”

He did not know what a bozo was, but by her tone, it was not much sought after.

He stumbled down the front steps to the street and chose a direction at random. Down, down the hill to where the tumult of trade and traffic made a steady rattle that knocked his thoughts awry. The pavement seemed made of the same poured stone as that which formed the base of the Border Gate; it was gritty and cold and scraped his bare feet. Where the pavement failed, there was broken stone and sometimes mud to hide the sharpest rocks. Before long, no matter how he labored to make his stride even, he was limping.

Wounded things were prey. Well, should anything pounce, he would show it its error. He thought he could manage that.

The witch—the *painter*—had made mock of him. No witness had stood by, but she herself could tell the story, how he’d feared her, and she no witch at all. Her tale could pluck power from his grasp.

But what power did he have in this place? By the bitterness of the thought, he guessed he’d had or coveted power in the True Lands. Here, what did he have but his wits and his hands? His wits, it seemed, were sad stuff. Had he been so great a fool when he’d had a name to answer to, and was that name spoken with scorn in the place he’d left?

Still, some childish voice inside him whispered, *Perhaps she was a witch in truth.*

So he went cautiously into the streets that sunk deep between buildings. It was only wisdom to be wary of meetings in strange places.

A man of the Blood passed him on foot. He was marked by age: a dulling of the skin, a dimming of the light in the eyes, a softening of the face’s planes. His hair was matted into dense pewter serpent coils, and his belly bulged under his long flapping coat. He was scowling, as if he would scorch the world from his path with his frown. The man carried a cloth bag over one shoulder; a wedge-shaped, sleek-furred head popped out the open top suddenly, with small round ears and bright black eyes set in a dark mask.

A ferret. He recalled the creature’s name. Had he seen one before?

A dark-skinned human woman piloted—and powered—a bizarre cart, from a tiny seat behind a narrow front wheel that she steered with a

horizontal bar. Her feet turned another wheel, which moved two more behind her on either side of a cargo box full of some kind of glossy red fruit. On the tail of the box perched a human girl-child, hanging on with one hand and eating one of the fruits with the other. The child's bright gold hair whipped and tangled with the cart's passage. The woman rang a bell at him, to warn him out of her path, but she did not speak.

With a roar that shook his ribs, a pair of two-wheeled vehicles rounded a corner ahead of him, so swiftly that he had to lunge aside or be run down. They glittered with bright paint and metal, and reeked of burning fuel. He was startled to see the riders who straddled them were of the Blood. They passed without a nod or a wave.

He turned into a narrow way where the shadows were already long. By the time he heard the voices, he was too close to turn away.

"So it crapped out." The first voice seemed to grit and crunch like footsteps on gravel. "Magic does that around here *all the time*. Sorry you didn't get the memo—"

"Stop your tongue, thief, unless you mean to use it to make all right with us." A voice from the Realm, surely—all silk and song, and broken glass beneath.

"I sold you a working key. Not my problem, lady."

"Oh, but it is. Hold him."

The sound of a scuffle, a grunt. Three figures, two of them tall, slender, with shining white hair. The third shorter, darker-skinned, and hair cropped and black. One of the Blood-kind held the human's arms; the other waved something that glinted like a sliver of ice.

He had no business with any of them. He was indeed a fool, for only folly could prompt him to step forward and say, "Does one take one's justice at will in this city? Or is that blade named Magistrate, and you an officer of its court?"

His words turned three heads toward him. The one with the narrow leaf-blade dagger was a woman. Her fine pale hair was dull with dust and tied back with a bit of leather lace. She wore a rough cloth coat, stained and too large for her, leather leggings, and glossy tall boots. Her cheeks were hollow, her nose and lips were thin, and her eyes were bright and sharp as her knife. Blue veins showed like the ghost of lace in the milk-colored skin of her temples.

Her companion in the Blood was square-jawed and grim-faced, though his long, thick lashes softened his narrowed stare and his cheeks flushed like a child's, dark on his pearl-white flesh. Dark, too, was the bruising that lay like brushstrokes in the inner corners of his eyes and over his swollen nose. Was he quarrelsome, a brawler? Or merely misadventurous? His fierce mien belied his slender frame, frail-seeming even for their fine-boned kind, though there was often much strength even in the sparest body. He had little stones and bits of wood knotted in his straight cream-white hair, and they clattered together when his captive struggled.

And his captive most certainly struggled. It was a human male, young, perhaps. The man's eyes were dark as his black hair, and his skin was golden-brown. He was sturdy in a way that fey-kind never were: wide of shoulder, broad of chest, his hips barely narrowing before meeting with strong thighs. He wore coarse blue trousers and a knitted shirt like the one from the painter's clothesline, but black; on his back he carried a large pack made of glossy fabric, bulging here and there with its contents.

"Why, see who it is!" the woman said with a mocking edge, looking him up and down as if she meant to buy him. "Hello, my pretty, strutting cockerel. Have you come all the way from the Realm to try to take back your boots?"

The tall, shining boots she wore, made of fine-grained leather, too rich for her stained and shabby garb. The sight of them roused no memory in him.

But the woman's voice did. He'd heard it raised in scorn over the clamor of a crowded room, back beyond the Border, while her comrade tried to stem the tide of a bleeding nose with both hands, and he himself clenched the handle of a broken stoneware mug in his fist.

He had wanted something, or wanted to be rid of something, and had been thwarted. His patience, such as it was, had been tried. He had also known himself at fault—for being there, with the sweet-sharp taste of wine on his tongue?—which had made him angrier still. It seemed he was the author of the square-jawed Bloodling's broken nose. Was that the source of the stain on his own cast-off shirt?

He gathered his wits in haste and asked, "If those boots are mine, how come your feet to be in them?" For she might tell him more: his name, his home, his reason for leaving it.

Her smile was merely a show of teeth. “Why, you took them off yourself. You were not so stupid with drink that you could not manage that. And since you’d cast them off …” She shrugged, her pointed chin lifted and outthrust. “Did you wake sober, in your leafy nest, and wonder if you’d left them under a doxie’s bed?”

He grasped at the fragments of knowledge and assembled only one whole fact: they had stolen from him. Had they fallen upon him, struck him? No, he had no wound. *Did you wake?* she’d asked. They’d stolen his boots while he slept. They were sneak-thieves, cowards, taking like carrion-eaters on a battlefield.

Rage clenched his fists, narrowed his vision. Rage cleaved his tongue to the roof of his mouth. Imagined scenes painted the room behind his eyes: the cocky woman lying bleeding on the wet stone of the alley, the bruised-faced man broken and weeping at his feet. His heart pounded, urgent, ready.

Behind the woman’s insolent words and threatening smile he saw something he knew. He saw it behind her companion’s glower as well, and in the face of the sturdy human male, whose features he ought not to be able to read as he could one of the Blood.

He knew the thing he saw, because he had felt it, tried to hide it behind proud words and a stiffened back in the lamp-lit room beside the Gate. It was a bottomless, night-black fear, of things unknown and out of control. And he shared it with two thieves and a human-born man.

His rage turned bitter on his tongue and drained away. It took its bosom friend, his pride, with it. He felt suddenly weakened to the bone. But he could breathe, and speak. And he remembered how the painter had spoken her curse, on a deep breath and with the force of prophecy.

He lifted his right hand, grateful that it did not quake. “Not for all the world,” he told the woman, who still smiled like a cornered fox. “You’ve more need of them than I. For you will run now, and your comrade, too. You will run as quick as you can, and it will be only the first of many flights. For that, one needs good boots.” He stepped toward her.

The bruised-faced man let go of the human, who sidled close against the wall, out of reach. The woman held her ground for a moment longer. Then her left foot scuffed backward. Her right moved to join it—and the balance that held them all shifted and snapped. The pair turned and fled, out of the byway, out of sight.

He gave himself up to the weakness and sank down on the cold, oily pavement, his knees drawn up to pillow his forehead. This was who he was, then: a sack puffed full of temper and willfulness, pride and posturing. Use those up, and all that remained was a little hard lump of fear, like a last worm-eaten nut. Perhaps he had crossed the Border to escape the truth, and it had followed at his heels, capering and flying banners for all to see—all but him.

He felt warmth beside him, and smelled the human smell, soured with fear but still curiously pleasant. He heard the human man drop down beside him. “Thanks. I think you saved my life.” A trembling puff of air from human nostrils, which might have been meant to be laughter. “Wow, there’s something I never got to say before.”

“She would not have killed you. Her fear was too great.”

“You think?” said the man. “Seems to me when somebody’s scared shitless, the bodies freakin’ *pile* up.”

He raised his head, thinking to glare at the young man who was so quick to dispute. He found himself studying the arch of the black brows, emphatic in a way pale fey ones could not be. They seemed like a drawing of a word, but what word, he could not say. It made him smile. “Perhaps you have the right of it, then. I’ve no knowledge, only seemings and speculation.”

That silenced the man, but only for a handful of time. “My name’s Macys. What’s yours?”

“Page.”

Macys appeared to weigh the word. “Good name,” he said at last.

“Is it? I cannot tell. I chose it under duress, when I could not remember my own.”

“You couldn’t remember your *name*?”

“And cannot yet. I lost it, perhaps, in the fabric of the Border.”

Macys’s brows bowed low at the top of his nose. (Even a frown became a novelty in a human face.) “I don’t think it works like that. I mean, there’s stuff elves can’t talk about—actually *can’t*, it’s some magical censorship thing—about back home. But I never met anyone who couldn’t *remember* it.” The human’s voice was like his eyebrows, emphatic and flexible.

He pressed his fingertips to the orbits of his eyes, rubbing away the weariness. “It would seem I am a singular creature, then, and of singular experience.”

Macys winced and raised one shoulder. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to sound like … Yeah. That’s got to be weird. But it kind of cuts to the chase for you.”

He knew the words’ meanings, but taken together they were so much bibble-babble. He shook his head.

Macys hunched forward, as if to share secrets. “Not a lot of people come to B-town wanting to stay the person they’ve always been. And here you are—you *can’t.* That’s maybe not so bad, right?”

“Oh, I am not so sick as death would make me,” he snapped.

Macys rocked backward to sit on his heels, and his gaze was as cool and shuttered as if he were of the Blood. “That would be my point. It didn’t kill you. Guess you better find a way to live with it.”

He had walked blinkered into this strange new city, clutching his trouble to him, nursing it like a babe at the breast. It had thrived, claiming all his notice. He had fed it with his own strength and freedom of will, and it would take all he had if he went on so.

He felt like a new-landed fish, flopping on the shore, starving for air while enveloped in it. He did not know who he was. So he could be someone else instead: a fool aware of his folly, a fearful man who chose not to be a coward, a proud man who took pride only in what he could do well and rightly. He could dig a tree from a woman’s garden, and protect a man from those who would prey on him.

And his name could be Page.

He had not noticed Macys rising and moving away until he returned to stand at Page’s shoulder. He cleared his throat, and Page looked up.

Macys was offering him a pair of … Page was not sure what they were. They smelled faintly of tar or the fuel burned in the Border guards’ lamps. The flat material was wider on one end than the other, and rounded on both, and a thick strip of moss-green fabric and sueded leather sprouted from it and swept back, like the wings of birds. Then he recognized the shape: shoe soles.

“Flip-flops,” said Macys. “Not like they can replace those boots. But you can’t go around barefoot in the city.”

Page took the shoes—yes, they were some kind of shoes—and held them to the soles of his feet.

“Um. Other way,” said Macys shyly. “The part that sticks up goes between your big toe and—oh, here, I’ll show you.” He fitted the shoes on Page’s abraded feet with his own hands.

Page was torn by the host of things he knew he should say, but he could utter only one. “How do you come to have these?”

“It’s what I do.” Macys swung his head like a pointing finger at his pack, now leaning against the wall beside him. “Peddler. I pick up useful-looking stuff and sell it to people who want it.”

“Then … then I should give you payment.”

Macys frowned again, that enchanting expression. “You saved my life, and I’m giving you a pair of six-dollar flip-flops. Excuse me if I think I’m a little ahead on this deal.”

“Then I thank you. May fortune meet you at every turning.”

“De nada.” Macys squatted before his pack, slid his arms through the straps, and stood. It was a heavy object, but Macys made little of it. “Well. I should, you know. Be going. You okay?”

“Okay?” The word made no more sense on Page’s lips than it had in his ears.

Macys flushed. “Are you all right? Do you need anything?”

“No. No, I will be well. Perhaps … perhaps we shall meet again.”

Macys smiled, and though his teeth showed, there was such brightness in it that it could not be anything but pleasure. “That’d be cool. I mean, I’d like that.” He pointed at Page’s chest. “Maybe I’ll see you there. The ribs are great.”

Page laid his hands over his torso, feeling for the bones beneath.

“OMGWTFBBQ,” Macys said. “On Onion Road in Soho. Can’t miss it.”

The knitted cloth under Page’s fingers reminded him that his shirt was new and strange, and printed. That was what Macys had pointed at. The letters named a place, and the ribs in question were not the sort under Page’s skin. At least, he hoped not. “I shall seek it, then.”

Macys turned, straight-backed, and strode to the end of the short, narrow street. He turned and waved at Page; then he disappeared around the corner.

Page walked carefully (the sandals required a certain knack to travel in, but he mastered at last how to grip with his toes) into the part of the city that lapped around the base of the hill. Bordertown seemed to wear a glamour it had lacked before—or perhaps, a glamour had been lifted. He

saw brilliant-colored cloth at windows and in doorways, wild plants rioting in barren spaces between the old structures, buildings devoured by flowering vines until they seemed made not of stone but of leaves and nodding blooms.

A sound like the rolling of an ocean swelled ahead of him. As he drew closer, it sorted itself into elements: conversation, music, the growl of wheels on paving, shouts, and the creaking, clattering, grunting chorus of weighty objects being moved. Then he rounded a building painted with a mural of a beautiful blue-skinned man, and stopped on the shore of a sea of sound and scent and color.

Bright awnings sheltered stalls down the center of the street. Smoke rose from cooking fires beneath the awnings, and the mingled odors of food made a strange and delightful banquet for his nose. A massive structure framed with heavy pillars and floors but almost without walls rose many stories above the street on one side. In its shaded confines merchants hawked clothing, cooking utensils, lumber, and objects Page was certain he could not have named even before his memory was snatched away. Pennants and merchandise hung from the upper floors as if in galleries or display windows.

Across the way another building seemed devoted to trade. So was the building beyond it—indeed, as far as Page could see along the street, people were buying, selling, or trading. And when his gaze finally climbed high enough, he found he stood under an arch of wrought metal of many kinds, twisted to form the words “TRADER’S HEAVEN.”

Did Macys sell or buy here? It seemed the sort of place one might linger and at last see every person one had ever known.

He passed beneath the arch and into the tide of people.

They were of the Blood, and half-Blooded, and human. They exchanged gossip, japes, and laughter as well as currency across bins of vegetables and baskets of eggs. They wore brilliant silk or armored leather or ragged cotton—sometimes all three—and shouldered good-naturedly through the press of bodies unmindful of riches or rank.

A human woman, cooking cakes on a sheet of heated steel, began a song demanding the listener not speak ill of her baby. At her side a woman of the Blood, scooping dough from a bowl and patting it flat with her long white hands, joined a harmony to her melody, passing words between them like a

tossed ball. The scent of the frying cakes made his stomach ache and his mouth water.

He could beg for food or the coins to buy it—he saw others doing so—but for all his resolve, he found he had yet too much pride for that. So he found a human who kept a sewing shop, who was pink and sweating and scurrying like a distressed quail, and asked him, “Have you simple work I could do, to earn the price of a meal?”

Page swept dust, scraps of paper, trimmings of cloth, bits of thread, and lost pins and buttons from the floor. He sorted through the sweepings for the pins and buttons and put them in a tin dish before he disposed of the rest in a bin behind the shop. And the shopkeeper smiled and gave him three engraved gold beads, a spool of strong thread, and a packet of vivid red spice he called paprika.

Page offered his pay at the market stall that smelled strangest and most exciting. The half-Blood man who accepted it looked a little like Macys, with his fine dark skin and black hair. He took the thread and the spice and returned the beads to Page.

Page was certain, for all his lack of past, that he had never had anything like a “roti,” nor anything as good. The filling built a fire on his tongue, and the wrapping bread cooled it, and when he had eaten the last of it he felt as if he were dancing and laughing, as if the food had become an engine of joy inside his belly.

“Young sir!” an urgent voice called from behind him, and a white hand dropped on his shoulder.

Page sprang up—the wobbling marketplace stool clattered to the pavement—and spun, half-crouched, to face a threat. To be touched without invitation—yet he had seen others touch and be touched here in the market, and none thought ill of it.

The man behind him was of the Blood, as was the one a step behind him. They were dressed richly, soberly, their long jackets plainly tailored in dark, dull shades and fine stuffs.

In their faces and bodies, Page read uncertainty and fear. He’d seen too much fear of late, and was coming to hate it. Was he the cause of it?

“I beg pardon, young sir,” said the man who’d touched him. He was older than Page, perhaps older than the man with the ferret he had seen in the

street. “I cannot—I would address you properly, but the Silencing prohibits me, it would seem. We had not meant to leave you exiled for so long.”

“We have searched this benighted place for hours,” said his long-faced companion, disapproval laid as a guise over his fear. “Were you not to take a residence near the Gate and await word that the quarrel was mended?”

Page recognized neither of them. “Strife was the cause of my journey here?”

The two men shared a look between them that seemed to give them no comfort. “Did you not understand, young sir?” asked the elder.

“Nor care?” added the disapproving man. “Strife is your familiar in all things. Why should it trouble you now?” Then his eyes grew wide, and he pressed his fist against his thin lips. “Your pardon, young sir,” he whispered, bowing his head. “My words were too hot and my wits too cold.”

Did he delight in strife, that boy he’d been beyond the Gate? But Page had mastered his anger at the two who’d stolen from him and taunted him. “My memories were taken from me when I passed out of the Realm. I know you not.”

He watched as horror slid across the men’s features, mixing with fear like two colors of paint.

“Young sir—” the older one began, and his face was that of a man approaching a wild animal.

“This place is changeable and unchancy by nature,” the one who had chided Page spat out. “But to work such a woe as that—Came you through the Gate, as you were directed?”

“Was I so directed? Aye, I passed through, and a fine trick it played me. It bore me no ill will, I’d venture.” Page smiled. They seemed as little used to confusion as he had been at daybreak.

The chider wrung his hands. “Ill fortune matched to folly! Perhaps, had you not broken the journey to drink and wench and brawl—”

“Mirasal,” snapped the older man, his voice sharp with warning.

“Oh, this was a madman’s venture all along!” the one named Mirasal wailed.

“Enough.”

Mirasal closed his lips and frowned at the cracked paving beneath his feet.

“We will take you home,” said the older man to Page, like one used to leading. “The crossing will give back what it stole. And if not, there are those who can heal your mind and return you to yourself. Young sir, your father and your kin wait for your return, now that all is settled.”

Had he a father? And kin? Were they proud? Did they take what they pleased, offer haughty words in return? Were they quick to anger and offense? Had they modeled for the boy he’d been when he passed through the Gate, or was that boy of his making alone?

If he had made that boy, he could unmake him.

“Come, young sir,” the older man bid him firmly. “Let us hope the hours of the Uncertain Lands have passed much as the Realm’s do, this once. You will be home and in your proper place by fall of night.”

“No,” said Page. “I thank you, but no.”

The older man stood with mouth agape, but without words.

“I am home. Though I look like the man you seek, I am not he. I was born in this city, today, in a witch’s garden and a street in shadow. My name is Page.”

They argued, coaxed, demanded, but in the end, they could do nothing but admit to failure and return whence they had come.

* * *

Page could not retrace his steps from the market, aimless as they had been. He had to begin from Elfhaeme Gate. The guards on duty were not the two who had brought him kicking into the world.

At last he found the embankment, and the many-colored house at its top. He followed the street to the front steps, then the flags to the front door. It was painted blue as the afternoon sky. Beside it was a copper bell, green with age, with a bright braided cord tied to its clapper. He pulled the cord and made the bell shout.

She swung the door wide (no fear in her pale, cheerful face) and stood framed in it, head cocked like a listening sparrow. “Oh!” she said at last. “Maybe-Blank Page!”

“I have come to thank you, Lady Witch, for your great service.” He drew the bouquet from behind his back and offered it with a good bow. The

flowers, he thought, were the right ones: no careful palette, but a frenzy of blooms, blue, magenta, red, orange, yellow, pink, white, purple.

She turned her eyes upward, a gesture she must have learned from humans. What did it mean? “My name’s Camphire. Not a witch. Painter. Really, really, really.”

Page tried to contain his laughter, but it slipped out the corners of his mouth and bent them. “No, Lady. I have had proof of your powers. All passed as your curse foretold. I learned who I am from the next person I met.” He stretched his arm, until the flowers were almost in her hands. “And from you. And for that, I shall never fail in gratitude, or in any service you may ask.”

She took the flowers, peered down into their vivid wilderness as into a puzzle she meant to solve. She sniffed at one and smiled wide, showing many teeth, and he knew it was a gesture of delight. “All’s well that doesn’t end with somebody falling off a building, I always say.”

He wondered what events would give her cause to say so with any frequency, but he feared it would be rude to ask. “Should you require a strong arm and a weak wit, send word to Page, and I shall serve happily according to my name.”

The look she cast him across the bright blooms was suddenly clear and piercing. “You *were* a blank page. But now you’re not. Could be a good story you’ve got there.” As quickly as it came, the acuteness in her face was gone; her smile was wide and vague. “Thank you, Page. Have a swell life.”

“I shall endeavor,” he said. She closed the door.

Overhead the stars were appearing. Page wondered if somewhere in this city full of new magic there was a place he might go to dance.

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RUN BACK ACROSS THE BORDER

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The Border’s got no place to hide
Run back across the Border
But your mama’s waiting on the other side
Run back across the Border.

You better run, run, run
I’m giving you an order
You better run, run, run
Run back across the Border.

Soho runs from here to there
Run back across the Border
No room for you in it anywhere
Run back across the Border.

Hear my drum, it makes a din
Run back across the Border
It’s made out of your brother’s skin
Run back across the Border.

Hear my horn, it rings so clear
Run back across the Border
May be the last sound you will ever hear
Run back across the Border.

See your boys all dressed in rags
Run back across the Border
They drink River water till they gag
Run back across the Border.

All your friends are just a joke
Run back across the Border
They drink River water till they choke
Run back across the Border.

My motorcycle runs on gas
Run back across the Border
You can shove your spellbox up your ass
Run back across the Border.

If you do not like my song
Run back across the Border
It just proves you don’t belong
Run back across the Border.

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A Prince of Thirteen Days

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—a true son of Samarkand, and I won't go for less than three dollars, not even to that sweet-talking Mayor Crenshaw.

That's what he says to me, the plaster man with his long embroidered cape and big-knuckled hands. I jump back, almost far enough to fall into the fountain, because no one warned me that the communication charm I found in the bargain bucket at the back of Snappin' Wizards actually *worked.*

I clear my throat. "Mister Statue Man," I say, because I haven't grown up on the Border without learning to be polite around magic. "Do you think you might have sex with me?"

* * *

After so many years in the park, the prince's thoughts run slow and sticky; they burrow into the past like the moles beneath his pedestal burrow into the earth. He remembers the idyllic days with his beloved in the house by the lake; he remembers the mud-and-granite smell of mixing plaster, of the way it would smear her nose and hair when she was deep in her work, and then she would pause and turn and smile—a sudden, beneficent gesture—and say, "Well, what do you think, my prince? A good day's work?"

He's a century away from the World and the pain of all those years, but the soul his beloved gave him still stretches in answer: *Yes.*

"Yes?" repeats the girl who is not his beloved.

The prince turns from the past. The girl is dark, like the illustrations of slaves in his beloved's edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* He has never seen such skin up close before, and he wonders at how it resonates with him, at how it feels much like his own, though he knows himself to be no darker than a duck egg. No one has spoken to him in a very long time. On the Border, people tend to leave well enough alone. He has liked that.

Who are you? he asks, not expecting her to understand. Not even his beloved understood his thoughts.

Somehow, this girl understands.

* * *

The statue said yes, but I don't think he was answering my question, because a moment later the whirl of his thoughts pauses. It feels like he's seeing me for the first time.

Who are you? asks the statue. His voice comes to me truer now, though at first it faded in and out like a secondhand impression ball. His face is as expressionless as ever, but I can *feel* him behind the rigid, noble mask, like he's trapped.

"I'm Peya … uh … daughter of Althea, daughter of Lillian, family name Windbreaker, though I'm pretty sure Grandmama made that up when she came here."

Too many years, he says, and I know his tone from the Mad River, or maybe just the rats who loiter nearby: desolation, like hope, has rotted inside him. He's sadder than I thought he'd be, my plaster man.

"What's your name?" I ask. I'm expecting something different from what we usually get down here in Soho, newbie runaways styling themselves Shadesong or Spartacus or whatever.

But he says, *She called me her prince.*

I say, "Well, at least it's fitting."

How … talk to me … He says this as a rush of something like water drowns his deep and formal voice in my head.

I didn't expect the charm to work at all, so it's no shock to me when he fades out. The city itself seems to speak in his place: In my head, I hear the laughter of a rat about to take his last drink of red, boys screaming, girls laughing, bricks cracking on pavement, bells tolling a hundred thousand funerals.

"Crap!" I say, and drop the charm in the fountain. It was a simple-enough trinket: a plastic azabache eye attached by a leather thong to a pair of windup chattering teeth. I laughed when I found it in the bin at Snappin' Wizards Surplus and Salvage, but then I could have sworn that eye *blinked* at me and Rabbit (my sister—sort of) gave me that look of hers, the one that means *magic.*

Rabbit's never wrong about *magic.*

The teeth chatter for a few seconds in the water, but the whole spell has guttered by the time I get the nerve to reach into the murky green-black depths of one of Fare-You-Well Park's crumbling fountains. Why they still have water is one of Bordertown's mysteries, I guess.

Like my plaster man.

“Why are you here?” I ask, knowing I can’t hear him without a working charm but wondering if he hears me. “Who would have given you away, Prince?”

Maybe the *she* who haunts him, like the *he* who haunts my mama?

On impulse, I reach out and touch his shoulder, though it’s covered in pigeon droppings, green with age. I always assumed the artist had made him naked beneath that proud throw of embroidered cloth, but I see now that he’s wearing a loose tunic beneath it, and there’s a vein, stark beside his collar, where a bit of the stitching has started to come undone.

“I really want it to be you,” I whisper. “I’ll be back.”

* * *

Few know the moment of their own creation, but the prince recalls the morning his beloved named him better than he recalls his last hundred Sundays in Fare-You-Well Park. She told him of her ambitions, how he was surely her prince, her true creation, her best work with her stamp on the sole of his boot. She used quicklime plaster, that most ancient and sturdy of materials, favored by the Romans in buildings still standing. Inspired by a childhood love of the tales in *A Thousand and One Nights*, she had determined to create a prince of the Orient, a man so hale, so noble, with such a glint of intelligence implied in his plaster eyes that all who looked on him would love him as she did.

Her love had a kind of magic; the prince took on a kind of soul, and if it was not the most robust of such things, it wasn’t so weak as the garden gnome’s. But in the end, for the security of his position, she married a man she’d called a scoundrel and a liar: Seymour Crenshaw, mayor of Twin Falls, Pennsylvania. Crenshaw said, “He’s a bit … exotic to have in our living room, dear, don’t you think?” and put the prince in the back hall, behind a velvet drape. The prince did not see her very often after that. He resigned himself to the imperfection of his beloved.

Sometimes she would pull back the velvet drape. Sometimes she would look up at him on his pedestal and push back her hair and sigh. “We were good together, weren’t we, my prince?” she said late one night, her belly swollen past the point where garments could conceal it.

We could be again, he thought, and knew it for a lie.

"I've asked Seymour if he might purchase quicklime and sand from a distributor in Baltimore," she said, and for a moment the *hope!* and the *joy!* was like unto life, and it seemed that his broad hands flexed, that his noble brow softened, that perhaps he even bent his neck toward her.

"Prince?" she said, her voice too high, too soft, too scared. "Lord, but this child has made me mad." She rested her hands on her belly and spoke as though the baby inside could hear her. "How restless you've been this past week. I'll be glad enough when I can see your face as well as feel you."

Her smile was not for him, though it had once been.

"Prince?" she said again, surer this time. "It must be the moon.…"

And she stood, raised herself to her toes, and kissed his perfect plaster lips.

"Seymour says he can't possibly consider it in my condition," she whispered, mouth between his ear and cheekbone. "I'll ask again after the baby is born."

She died a week later.

* * *

"Sit down," says Grandmama. "I have biscuits in the oven."

In some parts of Soho, a half dozen of Grandmama's buttermilk biscuits can fetch at least a pound of coffee. I've seen them raise a ghost on the Day of the Dead. Biscuit day is serious business.

I sit down.

Even if she didn't tell me, I would have known: Grandmama's biscuits smell of crackling lard and fresh-churned butter melting into dough, and a little of the myrrh she burns as she mixes it together with her wooden spoon. Sodium bicarbonate and buttermilk culture need help here on the Border. Sometimes just the incense will do it, and sometimes I've seen Grandmama go into a full-on spiritual "Oh Happy Day" or "Didn't It Rain" just to conjure a rise. She's got a beautiful voice, but my grandmother doesn't sing much otherwise. I'd never tell her, but I always like the taste of those biscuits best.

“The Lord is my shepherd,” she says, like someone else might say, “Don’t fuck up,” and she opens the oven door for exactly one second. She’s smiling when she sits across from me at our kitchen counter (a dark mahogany slab carved with ivy—formerly a door from some posh building from the place Parkside, our neighborhood, used to be before the Border). “It’s a good one,” she says. The tension has left her shoulders, which is the only thing that ever makes her look even a little old.

I’m not so shabby myself (and Rabbit’s too young), but I live with two of the most beautiful women in Bordertown, no lie. Both Mama and Grandmama have skin to match our kitchen counter, with big lips and big hair and cheekbones that could cut pastry. They came sixteen years ago from the World, when Mama was pregnant with me. They ran away from a bad man and a good man and a place they call the South.

I’m glad I live here.

“So what’d you do today, Peya?” Grandmama asks, one bare foot on the stool, the other dangling beneath.

“You know that thing Rabbit said yesterday?” I ask.

“Honey, she’s a little girl, not a prophet.”

“Sometimes she’s right,” I say, looking through the door so I don’t have to catch her raised eyebrows.

“So you went out to find a boy to have sex with?”

“To *fall in love*,” I say to the table, blushing. “That’s what Rabbit said: ‘In thirteen days, you’ll lose your virginity and fall in love.’ ”

“And sometimes that’s a thing you regret,” Grandmama says, with that weight in her voice that means she’s thinking of the World and the South and the misery of her own first love.

My grandfather might have been a bad man, I want to say, *but that doesn’t make you bad for not seeing the darkness inside him right away.*

“And what’s so wrong with just letting things happen, honey? Why force the issue?”

If only Grandmama knew just how much I’m planning to force the issue. “It’s a chance, that’s all. Who doesn’t want to find love? And if Rabbit says it will happen in thirteen days, I have to try and find him. I want it to be someone good.” *Someone I’ve always wanted.*

She gives me a sharp look. “And aren’t you my daughter’s daughter.”

Mama’s been hung up on the same man for sixteen years, and not for any good reason, far as I can tell—never mind that the man is my father. But before I can tell her that I’d never wait so long for a man who doesn’t want me, Grandmama stands to take the biscuits out of the oven. She never uses a timer, but they’re perfect anyway. To an outsider, it might look like Rabbit is the only magic in our family, but I know better.

She slides a biscuit on a plate and hands it to me. It’s an honor to eat Grandmama’s biscuits fresh from the oven. I handle it with due reverence.

“Well?” she says, like always.

“Delicious,” I say, like always.

But Grandmama doesn’t smile. “You find your boy yet, Peya?”

“I think so,” I say. “But he won’t talk to me.”

* * *

After that first unexpected conversation, the girl, Peya, returns. She talks, but she doesn’t hear. When she leaves, the sounds of the park scrape like sandpaper. The people in this Border city walk past him, speaking in voices too quiet or too loud, their sentences in cadences that rise at the end, that ask and ask, *What is happening here?* and *When will it end?* and *What’s going on out in the World?*

Turns out the Way into the Borderlands has become a wall. No one’s come in and no one can get out. People joke about coffee getting scarce, but they mean something else, like always.

The prince falls into the past again.

The funeral of his beloved was held in the graveyard of the tiny local parish. “A terrible shame,” said the chambermaids who polished the silver. “I nearly fainted in the heat.”

The summer of her death turned into the long winter of his mourning. Her clothes were given to charity, her precious plaster casts sold in bulk to an itinerant auctioneer from Milwaukee. The prince stayed behind his curtain; his soul withered like a fruit on a cut vine, but it refused to die. She and her baby boy rotted in the ground less than a mile away, and he could not touch her, could not hear her, would not see her ever again.

Two years later, someone else’s hand pulled back his curtain; someone else’s face peered up at him.

“Handsome devil, ain’t he?” said the man.

“Barbaric,” said the second Mrs. Crenshaw. “His first wife had appalling taste.”

“I take it this ain’t for the senator’s new place, then, ma’am?”

“Throw it away. Please.”

The man took the prince home. “Looks to me you’ll fetch a nice-enough price,” he said.

No less than three dollars, thought the prince.

* * *

I’ve had a crush on Prince ever since Mama first took me busking with her in Fare-You-Well Park. We’d set up near the entrance to the green, Mama playing her beat-up acoustic guitar, sitting cross-legged on a blanket of Dutch-dyed fabric she claimed came straight from Africa. She’d play songs and I’d sing the descant harmony to her throaty melody. We drew crowds: the teenage runaway and her child with the swinging plaits. Never mind that my mother had run away with her mother—the story got the coins in the hat, while Grandmama schemed to find us something better.

But during the breaks, Mama didn’t mind if I explored. Prince was covered in pigeon shit, like most of everything in the park, and the dark canopy of oak leaves above him made it hard to see his face until I got close enough. He wasn’t white. What with elves running around Bordertown like sylvan gods, it’s sometimes hard to remember that there are other kinds of beauty—not everyone has to aspire to their patrician noses and willowy bodies and silvery-pale skin. Which is funny, because my plaster man was the color of sour milk, and yet I knew that his skin was dusky, that his eyes were dark and his lashes thick. His nose was wide like mine, though his lips were smaller. He was different and he was beautiful.

When Rabbit came in from the garden and told me I’d fall in love, Prince was the one who flashed in my mind. I’ve fantasized about him for so many years, wondering what he’d be like if he were a real man who loved me. And suddenly, the idea didn’t seem so crazy: the thing about Bordertown? Sometimes magic works.

There’s new graffiti scrawled on the broken flagstones in front of my plaster man.

“Bordertown LIVES”

“No shit,” I say. I look up at Prince and sigh. “I wish taggers would at least get an artistic sensibility, you know? Maybe draw something?”

But of course he doesn’t answer. Snappin’ Wizards doesn’t open until evening on Mondays. I’m waiting on Rabbit, ’cause if the magic worked the last time when I was with her, I don’t want to take any chances. She shows up twenty minutes late with two chorizo empanadas from Juliana’s and I could kiss her, so I do.

Rabbit grins. “She baked them special.”

“I’m sure she did,” I say, though Juliana never makes fresh empanadas after one in the afternoon. For Rabbit, people do a lot of special things. She’s technically my aunt, though she’s nearly six years younger. Grandmama had an affair with a halfie when I was ten or so. It didn’t end badly, but it ended. Grandmama spent the next few months baking a lot of biscuits and pickling a lot of beets, and eventually we got Rabbit. Everyone’s been pretty happy since.

“You know he’s alive in there,” I say around a mouthful of spicy beef and flaky pastry.

She shrugs. “Sure. He’s sad, too.”

“You can hear him?”

“Nah. Just feel him crying.”

My eye catches on the red scrawl beneath him. Even without real graffiti art, the tagger’s handwriting hints at a certain flair.

“You think you could conjure some paint?” I ask.

Rabbit considers. “Wind feels nice today.” I’ve known Rabbit all her life, so I don’t worry about the non sequitur. She lifts her free hand. Her skin’s just a little lighter than mine, but it shines silver in the sun, a cat’s eye caught in the light. Suddenly, blue paint drips from her fingers. She takes another bite of her empanada. “What do you want to write?” she asks.

“Uh …,” I say, ’cause even now, even for me, Rabbit can take some getting used to. “How about ‘learn to draw, genius’?”

She writes: *¿how about learn to draw genus?*

“Perfect,” I say.

She smiles, licks the paint from her fingers. I take her hand and we walk.

* * *

He sold for two dollars fifty-six cents at the flea market down by the harbor to an old Boston widow who had spent some time in the East in her youth. She declared his “uncanny resemblance to a certain native friend of my husband’s, before the Crimean,” and kept him in her drawing room. The company widows she invited to tea would sometimes admire him and laugh, after a few fingers of brandy, over the size of his hands.

“Just feel him crying.”

New words, a new voice. He sees the girls for the first time, indistinct and blurred, like he imagines dreams must feel. Peya and a new one, younger and stranger.

Crying? *I cannot cry*, thinks the prince. He blinks and they’re gone.

He recalls the basement of a warehouse by a creek that smelled of ammonia and burned sugar. His companions were rats and dust and the occasional garter snake. Years passed there; he did not mark them.

Here, in the *now, now, fuck that, when can I get out of this goddamn city? What’s happened to the Way out of Borderland?* the prince tastes salt on his tongue.

* * *

I buy all three communication charms left in that bucket and then ask Poplar if she has any more in back.

Poplar takes the red and green sucker from her lips and considers. I’ve never been able to figure if Poplar changes her suckers to match her hair, or her hair to match her suckers. “You know they don’t work, right?” she says, a little pityingly. Elves tend to get that way when humans show an interest in magic.

Rabbit’s off playing with a bucket of live newts by the register, so I can’t turn to her for corroboration. Even Truebloods like Poplar tend to give Rabbit a hearing.

“Why you selling ’em, then?”

Poplar shrugs and sticks the sucker back in her mouth. “Trader came by with a basket of trinkets. I liked his look, and …” She trails off, lets the wrapped paper end hang loose. She tilts her head and stares into the

distance, and for a moment she looks very Queen of the Hidden Lands, which is not at all her style.

“He was an elf,” says Rabbit from beside me. I never saw her move, and maybe she didn’t. “But not from around here.”

I think of Grandmama—*she’s a little girl, not a prophet.* But how much of that is denial?

Poplar inclines her head and smiles a millimeter. “You see the trader, lovey?”

“Just his shape. He glows like the Border.”

“Funny thing,” Poplar says. “Seems like we got two Borders now.”

“I heard no one can get out of the city past the Borderlands,” I say.

Poplar nods. “I tried to get out myself—”

“To the Realm?” I ask, surprised. Poplar doesn’t look like the type with elf parents to welcome her back for Beltane, but then you never know.

“To go to the World,” she says, entirely without inflection. “Bounced back. Not like I hit a wall, just like … I forgot how to find it. I forgot my own name for a while, until I fetched up outside of Danceland.”

“You have the rest of that box?” I ask, on impulse.

Poplar takes a sharp bite of the sucker and observes its cracked-moon half while she chews. “What’s left should be in that bucket. He said the postcard had a transformation charm. And the pink wand with the streamers is some sort of conjure spell. I’ll give you three for one.”

Rabbit and I dig around the bucket for another ten minutes, but we only find three: two holographic postcards of an oak tree and one pink wand.

“Seriously?” I say, frowning at them.

“Better put that wand in a bag, Peya,” Rabbit says.

Okay, seriously.

“Got another sucker?” Rabbit asks as Poplar rings us up.

Poplar reaches under the desk and slides one across. Pink and yellow. “Every minute,” she says, and laughs to herself as we leave.

* * *

The Way might be closed forever and the World fallen away, but the prince doubts that anything can get rid of the pigeons. They keep him company at

night and leave at dawn, like always. They remind him of the World and of his own crossing to this in-between city.

He came to Bordertown the way they all do—with a bit of hope, a bit of need, a lot of luck. Unlike most of the runaways who fetch up in Fare-You-Well Park, the prince did not even know there was a Borderland to escape to. He merely longed for death, and yet he had never been alive enough to warrant it.

"Someone loved you, old prince," said the fey trader who came to see him in the auction house. "I can feel her in you still, all these years past." And after he bought the prince, the man asked, "Where do you want to go? About time you had some say in the matter."

Away, thought the prince. *Far away.*

The man considered. "I cannot say you shall like it there, my friend," he said. "The city is strange to even those it allows. But at least it will be different. And no one will bother you but the pigeons."

His beloved had called them rock doves, and some mornings she would feed them alongside the ducks of their pond. So he does not mind their shit or their molted feathers. They coo in the mornings and come home at night, smelling of sunshine and earth and the musk of the red, red, river.

* * *

Mama catches me on my way out the next day. She's smoking frankincense and sage in a hand-rolled cigarette, wearing last night's sequined scarf with her morning kimono, and I think I won't be getting off so easy.

"Mom tells me you've found a boy."

I shrug. "Pretty much."

"Is he safe?" Mama asks.

I know her list of forbidden fruit: river rats, halfies, Truebloods, gang members, anyone in a Soho squat, noobs, natives, anyone who smells even a little of magic. Basically, every interesting person in Bordertown.

"Sure," I say.

"That's not an answer."

"It's not your business."

Mama takes a resigned puff and blows it out toward the garden. "I did birth you," she says, like a sigh.

“Younger than I am now,” I say. “Give me some credit, Ma. I know what I’m about.”

“No, you don’t,” she says, “but I guess that’s what life is for. Just promise me you’ll use a condom, all right? And if he has any sores—”

“I’ll make sure he’s clean,” I say hastily. Nothing worse than hearing your mom talk about VD. “And no way I’m getting pregnant, don’t worry.”

Mama takes a last drag and stubs out the cigarette with a narrow stiletto heel. “You want to leave that one alone, huh?”

I sigh. She’s so young, my mom, and needy like a little kid sometimes. “You and Grandmama are the best role models I could have.”

“Sure, keep talking,” she says, with that laugh that brings in half the crowd during her nights at The Dancing Ferret.

I give in and hug her. “I love you,” I say. I lay my head against her neck and breathe that sage and frankincense and honeysuckle smell that is so much my mother. She wraps her arms around me and rocks me back and forth like she has all my life.

Mama has her adoring fans, but she never brings any home. As far as I know, Mama has been celibate since she had to leave my dad sixteen years ago. I think a part of her still hopes he’ll follow her, find the Way to Borderland. I think he’s married or dead or plain old forgotten all about us, because one thing’s for sure: He isn’t ever coming here. After all, he’s had my whole life to try.

“I hope Rabbit’s right,” she says finally, pulling away. “I hope you do find love. There’s no better feeling. It’s what people live for.”

What about you, Mama? I wonder, but the sun is getting higher, and I want as much time with my plaster man as possible. It’s not so safe around there after dark.

“Rumor has it no one can find the Way to Bordertown,” she says, just as I’m about to leave.

“What’s it matter to us?”

Mama lights another cigarette with a shaking hand and looks away. “It’s just …” She takes a drag from the cigarette. “What do you think is happening out there, on the other side? What in the world would make the Way just close like that?”

I don’t have an answer for her, so I say, “You want to sing for a bit in the park?”

She starts to smile, and for a moment I'm sure she'll agree—Mama lives to sing—but then she closes in on herself again and collapses into the hammock on our front porch.

"I'm … tired, honey. Don't worry about me. You go fall in love."

* * *

The girl Peya can hear him again.

"Will you have sex with me?" she asks for the second time.

He feels surprise, for the first time. *How?*

"Well," she says, scrunching up her nose. "I'm working on it. Magic has gotten weirder than usual lately. Everyone's saying Borderland's closed in on itself: humans never could go to the Realm, and now we can't go to the World, either, so we're trapped here forever. I don't know what they're whining about, personally. I love this city."

I, too, love this city. This comes out unexpectedly.

Peya grins, true and wide, and though it's nothing like the smile of his beloved, the quality of delight reminds him of her regardless.

"I knew we were perfect for each other!" Peya says. "Now all I have to do is free you from that pedestal."

I am a statue.

"Yeah, yeah, but you don't want to stay that way, right? I mean, you think! You have feelings! It can't be fun to have birds shitting on you for a few decades."

If he could have smiled, he would have. *Not so bad*, he says.

Peya frowns. "Don't you want to be human, Prince?"

Be human? In some ways, the idea appeals to him. If he were human, he could finally have a death. But if this Peya succeeded in changing him so utterly, would he still hold a piece of his beloved?

I am as she made me, he thinks. *I can't bear to change.*

"But you can't actually *like* being this way?"

His answer is unhesitating: *I hate it.*

"I don't understand," Peya says.

I love her too much to let go.

"In thirteen days, I'll fall in love," Peya says, like a girl mocking her own shadow.

* * *

There's more graffiti on the flagstones.

"Bordertown LIVES" again, only this time the letters have gotten blocky and more even, like a stencil. Some of "Bordertown" has been painted with tangled brambles.

"Nice," I say. "It's a start."

Rabbit's blue paint is still there, but faded and cracked, like it's been through a dozen rainstorms. She drew it only a few days ago. But that's magic, I guess.

I wander away from my plaster man and sit on the ground beneath the nearby fountain. I'm not sure what to say to him after yesterday. It's enough to make me wonder if I want to fall in love at all. First Mama and Grandmama, and now Prince too?

"Does love make everyone nuts?" I mutter to myself, and pick up the dog-eared copy of my latest book: *The Master and Margarita.* I thought the cover looked interesting, and I knew I was right when Wolfboy (who owns that bookshop Elsewhere) held it for nearly a minute and eyed me like he was making sure I was worthy of the purchase.

North of me, a bunch of kids are chalking a big mural onto the cracked flagstones. It looks like a maze, the kind where you imagine the Minotaur around the corner. I stand up and ask the closest one—a halfie boy who looks about my age, though who knows—if I could borrow a piece of chalk. He tosses a green stick to me without a word. I go back to my fountain and my plaster man and my strange graffiti.

A princess in a tower? I write, because the brambles made me think of the fairy tale. *Who's sleeping?* And then, *Nice start.*

I could just give this up, I think when I return the chalk. Grandmama's right: Rabbit is just a kid, though she can get positively uncanny at times. Even if it was a prophecy, no one said I had to fulfill it. I could finish my book, help Grandmama teach Rabbit long division, wonder about the Border and the Way with the rest of town, and forget entirely about my plaster prince, so hopelessly in love.

I stuff the book in my patchwork messenger bag and pull out another communication charm. I can feel the magic pulsing inside the plastic eye, the unwound teeth. It says, *Speak, speak, listen.*

There are two pigeons roosting on Prince's shoulders. I nod at them, just in case, and set the teeth to chattering.

No one has talked to me so much since she died, he says.

"I think you're beautiful."

Of course. I'm a prince of the Orient.

"Is that where you were made?" I ask. "On the Silk Road? In Samarkand?"

No. Northern Pennsylvania.

I blink. "Is that … in the South?"

I do not believe so. It was difficult to get a grasp on geography.

We're silent for a few minutes. One of the pigeons flies from his shoulder and pecks at the ground near my hand. I don't have any bread on me; I don't know why she bothers.

"I think you're old," I say, fingering the stylish outline of the painted thorns encircling the name of my home. "I think you've been missing her for a long time. And, right, who am I to say that you shouldn't? You remind me of my mama. The way she talks about love … She says it's the best feeling in the world, but she won't let herself have it again. Sixteen years, and my dad's all she thinks of. She was fourteen when she had me. *Her* dad, my grandfather, he was a bad man, you know? He beat my mom and my grandmother, and when he found out Mama was pregnant, he chased down my dad and tried to kill him. They ran away. Mama told Dad we were going to Bordertown, told him to find his way there when it was safe, but he never came. Whenever she sings "Another Star," I swear she hopes she'll see him in the audience. Sixteen years. I thought that was a long time to wait for someone."

Perhaps he'll return.

I snort. "And maybe the elves on Dragon's Tooth Hill will pass out candy on Allhallows Eve. I think their chance is gone, Prince. I think Mama just holds on to it because she doesn't know what else to do."

Prince stays silent. But the chattering teeth are slowing; I can feel the spell winding down.

"I have a deal for you, Prince. I can't promise anything, but I can try to turn you human for a few hours. We could have sex—you know, if you wouldn't mind. And maybe you'll like it? Maybe you'll find a way to let her go?"

She created me.

"She's *gone.*"

The spell is fading and twisting, but I catch one last word, and it's enough for me.

Try.

* * *

Days pass. The Peya girl comes and goes, but none of her attempted magic does more than brush off his cool plaster. He enjoys her company, but he resigns himself to her failure.

But then one night: "Don't tell Peya." It's the other girl, the one with the silver-shining skin and wild hair, the one they call Rabbit.

Why are you here? he asks, but she doesn't hear him.

"It's the last day tomorrow," she says, worry in her voice that belies her age. "No one knows what'll happen. I don't know if it's a good idea for Peya to fall in love with you, Plaster Man, but she wants it, and this is her last chance."

The prince wonders if he will miss Peya.

"The wind's good," says the girl. "Whoever put you here, they knew this was a deep pocket. Holds the magic tight. So I'm gonna try, but don't you dare tell Peya. This has to be hers."

The little girl raises her chin high, keeps her back straight. He thinks she looks like a princess, a queen. Then she opens her mouth. The words aren't English, so he doesn't understand them, but he recognizes their power.

Sometime after she begins—more than a minute, but not much—his fingers prick.

He has never felt his fingers before.

Then his arms, then his feet, then his nose and the back of his neck. His previous sensations have only been the most general: the vertigo of being lifted and carried, the jolt of being set back down. But now he throbs, he aches, he burns and burns.

Is this birth? he thinks, but he cannot move or cry or be comforted as a baby would. He can only feel.

The Rabbit girl keeps speaking; sweat hangs in thick drops from her chin, stains the armpits of her smock. Her deep breaths turn to sharp gasps, but

she scrunches her eyebrows, drops to her knees, and gives him her words.

He doesn't want them. The pain is unbearable. She has decanted his past; years of sadness stream from his eyes, his nose, his ears and mouth. He chokes on it, and he *feels* the sensation deep in an impossible plaster throat. He strains against himself, he contradicts himself, he will crumble to chalk and die and be grateful for it.

With a cry, the girl collapses to the painted flagstones. The words have fallen with her; the unbearable pain subsides to nothing he has not felt before.

He is still a plaster man, but he feels changed, like she has stuffed his chest full of heart and lungs, his body full of quicklime blood.

"I'm sorry," the girl sobs. "I'm so sorry."

It's okay. You don't have to cry.

Eventually she falls asleep, curved like a half moon beneath him.

* * *

We find Rabbit at dawn, asleep beneath my plaster man. He's as clean as a new-made penny. She's drooling on the flagstones.

"Are you all right, honey?" Grandmama asks, picking her up.

Rabbit glances at me and nods. "Sure, Mama," she says. "It'll work out."

Mama and I share a worried glance. "You don't want to ask what she's gotten herself into?" Mama asks. "Smells like magic to me."

Grandmama sucks her teeth. "Oh, hush, child. Can't you see she's exhausted? We can hash out the whys and wherefores later."

We take her home. She sleeps most of the way back, but when Grandmama lays her on the bottom bunk of our bed, she opens her eyes and tugs on my shirt.

"I'm sorry, Peya," she says, and a few tears leak out the sides of her eyes. "I tried. I thought the magic was deep enough, but it didn't go all the way. It just wouldn't move. I tried."

I had wondered what Rabbit was doing beneath my plaster man, but I didn't want to say so in front of Mama and Grandmama. I make sure they're out of earshot and lean down. "What did you do, Rabbit?" I ask.

"Tried to make him for you," she says. "It's the thirteenth day."

I had forgotten that somehow during the frantic search when Rabbit didn't come home. Now it sinks like lead in my stomach. But I force a smile and brush her forehead with my hand. "Don't worry, bunny," I say. "I can wait a bit longer to fall in love."

I steal three biscuits on my way out the door.

Grandmama sees, but she just raises an eyebrow. "Don't suppose you know anything about what Rabbit was doing out there," she says from her perch on the porch swing. Mama is sleeping on the hammock.

"Yeah," I say. You don't lie to Grandmama.

"You care to tell me?" she asks in that way that isn't really a question.

"Tomorrow," I say. "Just let me wait till tomorrow."

"It's the thirteenth day," Mama says, a sleepy voice from deep inside the hammock.

I can hear cicadas buzzing as the morning heats, can smell the bloom of honeysuckle on the bushes alongside the road. Honeysuckle doesn't bloom anywhere in Bordertown but here in Parkside, and I swear we have our own symphony orchestra of cicadas.

"Let the girl fall in love if she can," Mama says.

Grandmama rolls her eyes. "Althea, you need to learn how to fall out of it."

"Leave me alone, Ma. We all know how you feel about Derek. I just believe different, that's all."

You believe in a fairy tale, I think, a little angry, because even if I've never met him, he's still my *dad*, and I believed Mama for years when she told me he'd come back for us.

Grandmama shrugs and turns to me. "Take some of the tea with you, Peya. The fridge is out again, and we can't drink it all."

There's a work of art on the flagstones by the time I get back to Fare-You-Well Park.

"Bordertown LIVES," nearly as tall as I am, a blocky, interconnected graffiti scrawl. And intertwined with the words are a hundred faces: elfin, human, halfie. I recognize a few of them: Dancer, proprietress of Danceland; Poplar; the elfin artist Camphire; even that kid Orient and his elfin friend who died a while back. I realize, as I look at it, that what I had assumed was regular graffiti has been some strange magic all along. Even

in Bordertown, it would be impossible for someone to paint something this intricate, this meaningful in the hour I've been away.

That means magic. No surprise, really. But then I see something small painted in the corner.

A signature.

Cash in Hand, Detroit, Michigan

"You painted this in the World?" I whisper.

The blue message I got Rabbit to scrawl more than a week ago is still there, though so faded I have to squint and pray to make out the words. But in fresher paint, someone has scrawled beneath:

I learned to draw.
I hope I'll see you soon
—Cash

Cash. *A boy's name*, I think, though you can never tell in this town. I wonder how he knows these faces. Has he been here, or is he waiting out in the World, hoping to get in?

There's some chalk in my bag. I put it there a few days ago, but the spell that called for the circle worked about as well as all the other spells I tried to turn the plaster man human. I pull it out, fall to my knees, and write:

Ask for Peya Windbreaker, daughter of Althea, daughter of Lillian. Or just ask where to find the best buttermilk biscuits in Parkside.

I lean against my plaster man's legs, take a bite of Grandmama's raise-the-dead biscuits, and wait.

* * *

Come sunset, the earth begins to move. Peya doesn't feel it, drowsing a little by his booted feet. But then, she's human, and he's a creature of many magics. The movement isn't physical, not quite, but it's a *changing*, and it is felt as deeply by those with the senses to mark it as any earthquake or hurricane would be in the World.

"Prince," she says, levering herself to her knees. "Would you mind if I tried one last time?" She has run out of those chattering teeth that let him

speak to her, but he tries to nod regardless. His muscles seem to tense, but he is as still as ever.

I am a statue, he wants to tell these stubborn girls. *I'll never be anything more.*

Peya pulls out the postcard of a tree, the one that seems to leap off the page and into the world if she holds it in the right light. She tried this once before, but though he felt the magic surge through him like electricity going to ground, his aspect did not change. "What have I got to lose?" she says, mostly to herself.

She shakes out her thick hair and flashes the tree at him. "Prince," she says. "I wish to transform you. From inanimate to animate."

The earth moves; the magic strikes; he steps off the pedestal.

"Oh," says Peya. The postcard—now a simple two-dimensional image of a cat—flutters to the ground.

"It worked?" says the prince, and so he knows that it did. His skin is still the color of a duck egg, but it feels like skin. His clothes conceal a true body beneath. He is not human, and he will never be. But he has always been something more than a statue.

Peya stands on her toes and kisses him.

He has never done this before, but something in him quickens at her touch, and he recalls why she longed to animate him in the first place. "Shall we do it here?" he asks.

"On the Green?" She looks around, sees that everyone is gone. She shrugs. "Why not?"

The spells—both hers and Rabbit's—have cleansed and remade him. There's no more pigeon shit on his shoulders, no more mud on his legs. The grief inside him has drained away. As he lowers Peya to the grass, as he gently removes her clothes and watches in wonder as she removes his, he wishes more than anything to see his beloved. But the grief passes clean through.

He thinks only of Peya when they make love.

* * *

I lie in the grass, my hand entwined with his plaster-pale one. He's warm, which you wouldn't expect from how he looks. I am languid and content

and contemplative.

But I'm not in love.

"There's one last spell," I say, looking up at the sky. There are lights in it, pinks and blues and purples, not quite like fireworks and not quite like stars. I wonder if Rabbit's thirteenth day means something more than just my deflowering. I wonder if something is happening to Bordertown.

"Spell?" Prince says softly.

"Like the teeth I used to talk to you. It's a conjure wand, supposedly. Would you like it?" I ask.

"I could call up anything I like?"

"You could try."

Prince sucks in air and blows it out noisily, like someone still amazed they have a breathing passage. His breath smells like the inside of a limestone cave, of damp and cool stone. "I would like that very much," he says.

I slip my shirt back on as I walk to my bag. The wand looks as silly now as it did when I pulled it out of the bucket, but Prince takes it reverently. He's just as beautiful naked. His clothes look like plaster casts that fell on the grass, but when I touch them, I can feel the embroidery, the fraying hemlines.

Magic is a funny thing.

"Thank you, Peya," he says. "And thank Rabbit, too."

"Prince, what are you—"

"I conjure death," he says.

A woman rises from the earth.

* * *

His beloved had a terrible voice, but she would sing sometimes when they were alone together. Dirty songs that she overheard in the harbor market or old Irish ballads that her mother had taught her. She sings one now, and her voice is still terrible, and her voice breaks his heart.

"*The pipes, the pipes are calling,*" she croaks.

To his surprise, however, a stronger voice joins hers, catching the stumbles, bearing up the song.

"*From glen to glen, and down the mountainside.*"

He doesn’t know why his beloved sings, only that it seems she has come for him. He cries tears of sediment and lime; he has longed for this since that summer behind the velvet drape, since the wails upstairs told him she was dead. “Please, please, please,” he says as she folds him in her arms.

She cries, too. Eventually her voice stops altogether, leaving only Peya’s.

His beloved lifts his living chin, stares deep into his weeping eyes, kisses his soft lips. She feels more solid with every passing second. Peya’s voice fades. He last hears “*’tis I’ll be here in sunshine or in shadow,”* and then it’s only the voice of his beloved in that place where the dead go when they have lived enough to die.

* * *

Plaster dust cakes the grass and slides between my toes. I don’t mind. I’m crying, at least half from happiness. My plaster man has found *her.* His beloved.

The lights in the sky are growing brighter. Even from this deep in the deserted park, I can hear the growing rumble of confusion and alarm that’s gripping the city.

In thirteen days, you’ll lose your virginity and fall in love.

In thirteen days, you’ll kill your prince.

In thirteen days, your home will never be the same.

I tie my skirt more securely around my waist and go hunting for my shoes. I find them upside down on Cash’s mural.

I wonder if it’s a play on words. No longer “LIVES” the verb, but “LIVES” the noun.

“Did you find your way here, Cash?” I ask to the empty air.

The streets are mad by the time I find my way back home. Shouting in the street. Screaming and muffled sobs. I want to know what has happened, and I don’t.

Mama is crying on the porch, rocking back and forth with Rabbit in her arms. Grandmama is talking to someone in the kitchen. He’s eating a plate of biscuits, which means he’s important. I can only see the back of his tight afro, a smear of red paint forgotten behind his right ear.

My stomach feels like the sky, popping with blues and reds that burn and then linger.

“Thirteen years,” Grandmama says, like she’s repeating something.

“Yes, ma’am,” says the boy.

His voice is deep, but I can tell it likes to laugh.

“So you must be one of the first to get through,” she says.

He shrugs. “I’ve tried every year for the last ten,” he says. “Your granddaughter helped me out.”

“Cash?” I hear myself saying. My throat feels too warm, the air too thin.

They turn—even Grandmama didn’t hear me come in. He has paint under his fingernails and a gap between his front teeth.

In thirteen days, Rabbit said, with that look on her face.

“Sit down, honey,” says Grandmama. “There’s news.”

Mama picks herself up, and she and Rabbit take the other two stools and the rest of the biscuits. They tell me what I’ve already half guessed.

Thirteen days here with the Way in and out of Borderland closed meant thirteen years out in the World. Cash was six years old when he first scrawled that childish “Bordertown LIVES” in front of my plaster man.

“When you gave me your name,” he says, “I looked you up. There are message boards on the Internet—I mean, anyway, this thing where people ask for information about friends and loved ones who got stuck on the wrong side of the Border. I found a request posted almost a decade ago from a Derek Thompson in Andalusia, Alabama, asking for any information about his daughter Peya and her mother, Althea. It fit.”

Mama starts crying again. Cash looks down at the table, his Adam’s apple bobbing. I think I know where this is headed, but I can’t ask; I can barely feel my own skin.

He pulls something out of his pocket and pushes it across the table. A photo of a man I’ve never seen but recognize anyway. His arm is around a smiling woman and a smiling little girl. “This is his family,” Cash says softly. “His wife sent me the photo when I tracked her down. Turns out Derek Thompson died last year. A heart attack. The girl in that photo is about twenty now.”

Mama gets up from the table so abruptly that her stool falls with a clatter.

“And why the hell didn’t that damn fool come here when he promised? When the Way here was wide open and all I wanted was him to walk it? He had to go and start some *other* family?” She storms upstairs.

I half stand to follow her, but Grandmama just shakes her head and Rabbit puts her head on my shoulder.

"It's okay, honey. Leave her for now."

Cash swallows again. "I'm so sorry to have to tell you all this."

"No," Grandmama says firmly. "We're glad to have you, and we're grateful for the news. You want some tea? Rabbit, fetch him some tea. I'll see if that arugula isn't ready yet in the garden. You look like you'd fall over if someone pushed you."

Cash and I stare at the table, awkward and suddenly alone.

"What did all that mean?" I ask, daring a glance up at him. " 'Bordertown lives'?"

He blushes, or at least I'm pretty sure he does. "It's an underground thing. After a while, people thought Bordertown had disappeared forever, gone back into Faerie, you know. People who didn't think so would scrawl that on the sides of buildings. I wondered if my stuff was somehow showing up in Bordertown.… That paint was so *weird*, but I wasn't sure until I got your message."

"That mural is amazing, you know," I say. "How did you find all those faces?"

"Message boards. People who'd been here would put up drawings, poems, stories about what they'd seen here. I just collected it."

I shake my head. "And I thought I didn't understand the World before."

"It's all right," he says. "It's nothing important."

I lean into the ivy on the table and look up at him. My heart feels strange, like someone's pumped it full of helium and stabbed it through.

"You wanna go dancing?" I ask, at the same time he says, "Sorry about your dad."

"I never knew him," I say. "Mama thinks he was a good guy, probably was, but he never came to find us. It's … weird. That's all."

"I'd love to dance, Peya," he says, very formally, and for a moment he reminds me of my plaster man.

Rabbit wanders back in with the tea as we're standing to leave.

"Grandmama says to give you this," she says, and hands me a condom. Cash's eyes get a little round, but to his credit he doesn't say anything when I stuff it into the deep pocket in my skirt.

"Thanks, bunny," I say.

But Rabbit looks at me a little sadly. “Did he say goodbye?” she asks.

I nod. “And he thanked you. It all worked, in the end.”

Her grin could light the sky. “I liked Prince. I’m glad.”

“I liked him, too.”

Cash looks slantwise at me when we step into the street. “What was that about?”

I take a deep breath: honeysuckle and dirt and our neighbors’ twenty-four-hour stew. Home.

“Oh, just thirteen years,” I say.

He may know the World, but I know this city. I take his hand; we go dancing.

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THE SAGES OF ELSEWHERE

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It’s strange putting claws to keyboard again. It wasn’t that I planned to stop writing. It just happened. After I told the story of how a curse turned me into Bordertown’s resident teen wolf, Sparks and I had true love and our very own bookstore. I thought we were in Happily Ever After.

But the Sequel had already begun at our Now Under New (Mis)Management Party. Mickey was happy about giving Elsewhere to us so she could teach at the University Without Floors, the Wild Hunt was playing in the middle of Mock Avenue, all my friends in B-town were dancing in the street, and Sparks looked great with rainbow-colored hair. I’d taken a break to make sure everything was okay in the store when Milo Chevrolet came up beside me.

I nodded and gave him a big grin, but my eyes stayed on Sparks. She was dancing like so many girls who think they’re ugly, like no one could possibly be watching her so she might as well dance as if she were all alone, as if she were dancing with the universe. I was thinking I could watch her all my life when Milo said, “Wolfboy.”

I signed, “Yeah?”

He held up a book. Milo with a book is so common that if anyone makes a statue of him, he’ll be carrying a book or standing on a pile of ’em. It was easy to forget he’s one of B-town’s major magicians. Except for the ears, which said one of his parents was an elf, he looked like a human kid who needed to get out in the sun more. He said, “Would you buy this?”

He’s a friend, so I didn’t even look. I signed, “Sure,” and started to walk over to dance with Sparks.

Milo said, “It’s valuable.”

“How valuable?”

“Uh, valuable enough to let me have one book of my choice each week?”

“Magic dude, if you want to take a book each week, take it. Friends look out for friends, right?”

He blushed, which made me realize the most amazing thing about most of my friends is they don’t know how amazing they are. Then he said, “Okay, it’s a deal.” And he pushed the book into my furry hands.

It was your quintessential Old Book, bound in dark leather with faint lettering you had to study closely to read. The pages were filled with tiny

letters from an alphabet I didn't know. I signed, "Elfin?"

Milo said, "Late middle period. Just before Faerie left the World."

"Title?"

"The Secrets of Seven Sages."

Before I could ask him more questions, Mickey and Goldy dragged him into the dance. So I put the book up on the shelf over the front window labeled "Collectible! Maybe even Readable!" I didn't exactly forget about it after that, but it wasn't a priority. I figure books find their owners eventually.

* * *

The next months were my kind of perfect. I was running a bookstore with Sparks in Soho, the Bordertown neighborhood that's got everything I love: music, poetry slams, art shows, movies (and sometimes live shows) at the Magic Lantern, and cheap places to eat that serve every cuisine from the World and a few that may be telling the truth when they say they serve Faerie food.

Elsewhere itself was definitely funky, meaning the shelves didn't match, and the floor creaked, and I really couldn't guess what color the ceiling originally was, and it had that used-book shop smell of old paper and leather, but to me, it was beautiful. The apartment upstairs was too cold in the winter, too warm in the summer, too small all the time, and exactly as funky as the store, even with the decorations we'd scavenged and made and been given. I loved it as much as the store. As long as Sparks was with me, I had all I wanted from life.

That changed one cool, sunny afternoon when Sparks and I went walking up Dragon's Tooth Hill. Most of the homes amused us. Whether human mansions or elfin palaces, they were enormous and ornate, the kinds of places people buy to impress themselves.

Then we passed a house that was small compared to most homes on the Hill. It had a faded red door and ivy on its bricks and a turret that would be perfect for a library on one floor and an art room on another. It was run-down and nowhere near the poshest parts of the Hill, but the view from the turret had to be amazing. Sparks squeezed my hand and said, "When I was a foster kid, I dreamed of having a house of my own like that one."

That’s when I made a private vow. Someday, someone would buy *The Secrets of Seven Sages.* Then I would buy the house with the red door and hand Sparks the keys.

* * *

Cut to a few days ago, when we went to see a musical double feature at the Lantern. On the way back, it was drizzling, which inspired Sparks to re-create the title number from *Singin’ in the Rain*, which made us both laugh until she slipped and broke her foot.

The next morning, I put out a Help Wanted sign. A few people applied, but I hired Copperjean, an elf with dyed shaggy hair like coils of copper. She said she’d just come from Faerie. She knew books like a book lover, and I remembered arriving alone in B-town, needing all the help I could get, so Sparks and I welcomed her to Elsewhere.

* * *

Though Copperjean had that upper-class accent of elves from Faerie and Dragon’s Tooth Hill, she worked hard, and she treated our customers, whether human, elf, or halfie, as if she was quietly pleased she could help them find books they would love. Just as Mickey had given Elsewhere to Sparks and me, I knew I would be passing it on to someone someday. By her second morning of work, I began to wonder if that someone would be Copperjean.

That afternoon, I was shelving books and Copperjean was at the counter, when I heard, “Foolery, sir, does walk about the orb like the sun, it shines everywhere.”

The fur on my ears tingled. The words were pitched in the range where male and female voices overlap, and I didn’t recognize the speaker. But I smelled a familiar elfin scent.

I turned quickly. Tricksy Nixi stood framed in Elsewhere’s front doors. He owned Fair Folk Books, where the sign in the window claimed he was Nix Farseer, Gentleman of the Realm, Proprietor. He wore what might be the latest from Elfland, or Hollywood for all I knew: a frock coat, a high-collared shirt, trousers, and boots in shades of green. With his milk-white

skin and pointed ears, he looked like a Dickens character from a Tim Burton film.

In the Bordertown accent he saved for people he knew he couldn't impress, Nixi said, "It's a pleasure to see you, Wolfboy."

I was grateful I couldn't talk. It was easy to nod and get back to shelving. If I'd been able to speak, I would've said, *Why? What did I forget to lock or hide?*

Nixi headed to the stacks labeled "Spirituality, Sorcery, and Charlatanism." I kept an eye cocked, but he didn't linger. He scanned the spines, chose six, and brought them to the counter.

Copperjean sat by the register, reading the sixth volume of *Yotsuba&!* She set the book aside and said, "Yes, sir?"

A runaway straight out of Elfland was in no way ready to deal with one of B-town's finest scamsters. I tapped her shoulder, then my chest, to say I'd take this one. She nodded and went back to reading.

As I flipped through Nixi's choices, I tried to figure out what he was really after. They were the usual books would-be magicians buy, things written by humans before Faerie returned. He ran a thin finger across a Carlos Castaneda jacket and said, "Judging by the dust, you have no market for tomes such as these. What say I take the lot off your hands for a baker's dozen of four-leaf clovers, a pound of Kona beans, and a pristine copy of the plays of Aphra Behn?"

He drew what he was offering from his shoulder bag. The clovers were not wilted, the smell of the coffee made me salivate, and the Behn was a university collection that wasn't rare in the World, but it was rare in B-town, and Nixi was right about its quality.

I pointed at the coffee and raised two fingers. Nixi laughed and said, "One and a quarter. You know that's a fair price."

It was. I suspected he was offering it because he would gouge the noobs at his shop. I wanted to say no on principle, but the books he chose would probably have ended up in the free bin we euphemistically called the Elsewhere Public Library. I nodded.

He added a quarter bag of coffee to his offer on the counter, saying, "You're a cool man of business, Wolfboy." Which meant I should've held out for at least a pound and a half.

I gave him a big smile, showing all my fangs. Maybe the grin was friendly. Maybe it meant I was one second from biting his head off. Nixi's smug expression faltered as he tried to decide which.

Then I slid the books to him and gave him a little wave. He grabbed them up, said, "Always good doing business with you," and headed for the door. Just a little fast. Which I credited to him being a bit shaken by my grin.

I was feeling guilty about my juvenile streak when someone shouted in an androgynous elfin accent, "He that is robbed, not wanting what is stol'n, let him not know't, and he's not robbed at all!"

Copperjean and I looked at the door. Nixi broke into a run as the same voice screamed, "The moon's an arrant thief, and her pale fire she snatches from the sun!"

I couldn't see the screamer, but the smell of Nixi's fear filled my snout as I surrendered to the thrill of the chase. The Mock Avenue crowd of humans, elves, and halfies parted before me. Someone called, "Go, Wolf, go!"

I heard another scream: "Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing. 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands; but he that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him and makes me poor indeed!"

I caught Nixi on the street a few paces from Elsewhere's big front window. The voice that was a scream whispered contentedly, "People usually are the happiest at home."

I jerked Nixi's pack off his shoulder. As I pulled out books, he yelled, "Those are mine! I paid your price!" In the sunlight, it was clear the Castaneda jacket was a bit large for the book it was on.

I tore off the jacket. The book under it was *The Secrets of Seven Sages.*

Nixi said, "Wolfboy! Please, assure me you didn't put a worthless old book into a good dust jacket—"

"False as dicers' oaths," said the book.

Nixi and I stared at it. Many kinds of strange are normal in Bordertown, but talking books aren't among them.

The book began to purr in my hand, so quietly I doubt Nixi heard it. Only the book lover in me kept me from dropping it.

When I looked at Nixi, not grinning or growling at all, he sighed. "So. The book requires fair trade in fact, not semblance. Very well. Take half my books in exchange. Your choice."

I growled slightly.

“Then take every item from my shop,” he said quickly. “Take the shop as well. That’s all I have of value.” He glanced at the book, but it didn’t speak. Since he was discussing its future, I decided he was telling the truth.

Fair Folk Books was a quarter the size of Elsewhere on a side street that didn’t get much traffic. That’s why he advertised in *The Tough Guide to Bordertown* and plastered Soho with fliers announcing “Fair Folk Books for the True Bordertown Experience! A Proud Fey Business Where Friends of Elves Are Welcome!” The last line began appearing right after Bordertown was reconnected to the World, when Nixi saw he could triple his profit by selling that “True Bordertown Experience” to humans crushing on Orlando Bloom.

Nixi’s whole shop would not come close to buying the house with the red door.

Nixi said, “I’ll be honest”—he glanced at the book again—“I know a collector who’ll never deal with humans. She’ll pay ten thousand aurei from the reign of Septimus Severus. Pure gold coins, Wolfboy. Worth even more in the World for their historical value.”

When I hesitated, he said, “I’ll take only twenty percent for a finder’s fee. Deal?”

I did the math: Eight thousand might buy the house, but the full ten would cover it for sure and some improvements as well. I gave Nixi a look that I hoped said I would have accepted his terms if he’d offered them up front, but now I would wait until I found a buyer who’d deal with humans or the Queen of Faerie kissed my furry bum.

My teeth must have been showing. Nixi said, “Please. For the sake of my children—”

“Believe me, I do not believe thee, man,” said the book.

I laughed, and Nixi grimaced. I stuffed the five books he bought honestly into his bag, handed it to him, and pointed for him to go.

Among the people watching us were two elves, both wearing the red leather jackets of the Bloods. I recognized one. She had bought *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon* in paperback recently. Passing them, Nixi said loudly, “Well. It’s obvious where our kind isn’t wanted.”

His fingers opened as his arm swept down, as if he was throwing something at the sidewalk in front of Elsewhere.

The book whispered, in a worried, warning voice, “Double, double toil and trouble.”

And my fur tingled.

I didn’t have a clue what kind of spell Nixi had cast, but I didn’t doubt it was trouble.

Then I saw how it could double: Three humans in the Pack’s black leather were also in the crowd. Mock Avenue is supposed to be neutral territory for Bloods and Packers—emphasis on “supposed to be.”

While Nixi scurried away, a Packer with a Thor’s hammer tat on her forehead shouted, “Don’t let the Gate hit you on the ass!” I didn’t recognize her, but the big guy with her, Jed or Ted, was a regular at Elsewhere. He liked military history and gardening books.

As the Packers laughed, a human girl in a green “Respect the Realm” T-shirt said, “Don’t dis the fair folk! There’s too much hate—”

Hammer Tat told her, “Stay out of this, elfy-welfy.”

Jed or Ted added, “Read the old tales, kid. Last time around, elves hunted us, seduced us, tricked us—”

The green-shirt girl said, “I *have* read them! The *sidhe* wanted to live in peace, but we harrowed them back under the Hill!” She looked hopefully at the Bloods. “Isn’t that right?”

Watching the Packers, the *Pillow Book* buyer smiled and said softly, “Truth doesn’t matter. Their minds are fixed.”

Her partner reached into his jacket pocket. “Should anyone doubt we can defend what is ours by right—”

Hammer Tat put her hand in her back jeans pocket. “Elves ran before, and you’ll run again.”

The other watchers scattered. Someone would call the Silver Suits, but by the time they arrived, the fight would be over. Even if there were bodies on the ground, no one who was smart would’ve seen anything.

I stepped forward, raising one hand in a peace sign and grinning. I hoped they would laugh and move on. But I could hear heartbeats racing and smell anger growing.

The male elf sneered at me. “Your people always want peace when the folk have the advantage. Step aside or fall with your fellows.”

Jed or Ted told me, “A pointy-eared freak cursed you, Wolfboy. Join us for some payback.”

“They’re not pointy-eared freaks!” the green-shirt girl shouted. “Humans once drove them away, but they’re giving us a second chance! Don’t you see? It’s time to heal the hate!”

The *Pillow Book* buyer said, “I’m quite comfortable with hate, so long as its companion is fear.”

The green-shirt girl screamed, “We’re not all like them!” Her wave included me with the Packers. Tears of frustration coursed down her cheeks.

“True that,” said Hammer Tat as she drew out a hunting slingshot and pulled the cord tight.

The *Pillow Book* buyer whipped her arm from her jacket. A Faerie dueling sword snapped out from its handle with a soft *snikt.*

I was extremely aware that I was standing in no-man’s-land with no good place to go.

Then I heard, “A plague o’ both your houses!”

The cord of Hammer Tat’s slingshot broke, and the blade of the elf’s sword fell from its handle.

Everyone froze, or maybe time just seemed to slow way, way down. If you thought we all looked stupid a moment earlier, we looked stupider then.

Jed or Ted offered the obvious explanation: “Man, magic in B-town has extra weird sauce today.”

I nodded emphatically as I slipped *The Secrets of Seven Sages* into the side pocket of my cargo pants. Then I picked up the blade of the dueling sword and handed it to the *Pillow Book* buyer. Taking it, she told the Packers, “So it seems.”

Hammer Tat shrugged. “The Pack agreed this is common ground. If you want to meet, you know where to find us.”

The Bloods nodded, the Packers walked on, and both Bloods strolled away. The green-shirt girl was shaking and sniffling, struggling to hide her tears. Some people laugh at elfy-welfies, but I remembered coming to Bordertown, hating what I was expected to be and longing for a better world. I gave her a smile and a thumbs-up.

She just frowned at me and walked away, so I shrugged and forgot about her. I had more important things to worry about.

I pulled out a notepad and wrote, “Book? Is Nixi’s trouble spell used up now?”

Fortunately, I didn’t have to worry about how to show a note to a book. It whispered, “What’s done is done.”

I wrote, “What’s that mean?”

It whispered, “What’s done can’t be undone.”

I wrote, “You weren’t programmed to answer questions, I take it.”

It whispered, “We know what we are, but know not what we may be.”

I wrote, “You couldn’t just say no?” I waited until I was sure the book wasn’t going to answer. Either its magical batteries had run down, or it didn’t have a quote in its database to cover what it wanted me to know.

Copperjean looked up from *Yotsuba&!* as I walked in. I showed her *The Secrets of Seven Sages.* For a second, she was perfectly still. Which, for an elf, means nothing at all. Then, tugging a strand of her burnished hair, she said, “Shall I call the Silver Suits?”

I shook my head. Even if I convinced a judge that a book quoting Shakespeare proved Nixi was pulling a fast one, the worst he’d get was a fine. Which he would pay off by scamming someone new.

I went to the chalkboard behind the counter and wrote, “How did a cheap dust jacket get on a rare book?”

Copperjean said, “Someone must’ve swapped it when no one was watching,” and went back to her manga.

I glanced at the shelf over the front window. Another dark, old book was where *The Secrets of Seven Sages* had been. I put *The Secrets of Seven Sages* back in my pocket. Maybe it wriggled as it settled in place. It might’ve purred.

I told myself it was just a magical book worth a lot of money, got the stepladder from the rear of the store, and took down the book that had been substituted for *The Secrets of Seven Sages.* It was a volume of *The D’Artagnan Romances*, which I returned to the shelf labeled “Slashing Wit.”

For the rest of the afternoon, I wanted to talk this over with Sparks and Milo, but I didn’t dare leave Elsewhere. I wished I wasn’t suspecting what I was suspecting. I had been so grateful we’d found someone who knew books. I hadn’t thought to wonder why an elf fresh from the Realm would know the books of the World.

When the sun got low, Copperjean left while I put a sign in the window: “Closed means closed,” and, in smaller print, “Beware of wolf.”

Then I ran upstairs, told Sparks I would be back in an hour or two, and tailed Copperjean. You may think it'd be hard for a werewolf to tail someone without being noticed, but people don't check who's behind them unless they expect to be followed, and my wolf nose is good for more than looking sharp. I stayed a block back and let her scent lead me.

Straight to Fair Folk Books.

Color me unsurprised.

When I spotted the crowd in front of Nixi's store, I noticed only their races: about two-thirds were human and the rest were elf and halfie. A sign in the window said "Together, Elves and Friends of Elves Will Heal Bordertown. Meeting Here Every Night at Sundown!" Under the sign was a table of shirts and pamphlets next to a big donation box labeled "End the Hate! Give Until It Feels Good!" The box was nearly full of coins and bills from the World. Not cheap ones either.

That made me give the crowd a closer look. Most of the humans and all of the elves and halfies wore clothes made by fashion designers who specialized in ripping off street styles. This crowd was a mix of noobs from the World and rich kids from Dragon's Tooth Hill.

When I pushed my way inside, I saw Nixi and Copperjean behind the counter near a bulletin board, talking quietly like lovers or longtime friends. The only thing about Copperjean that had changed was what I knew, but that was enough. Now she just looked like an elf from the Hill who had dyed her hair and donned old clothes to go slumming in Soho.

When Nixi and Copperjean looked up, they stank of guilt. I so wished I could say, *Speak of the devil.*

Nixi said, "You found us out. No hard feelings?"

I pulled out a card, wrote, "Help needed at Elsewhere. Ask for Wolfboy," stuck it on their bulletin board, and walked out.

As I left, Nixi called, "It's only business, Wolfboy!"

Questions needed answers, so I headed straight to First and First. The old car lot was filled with vintage autos that Milo collected, but I didn't pause to admire them. When I entered the former showroom, he looked up from a desk covered with computers and chemistry tubes. "Wolfboy! Try this!" He held out what looked like a piece of chocolate.

I signed, "What is it?"

“The 1812 Overture.” He pointed at his desk and said proudly, “I made a scanner that turns music into candy!”

Having music involving cannons in my stomach didn’t seem like a good idea. I signed, “Sorry. Dogs and chocolate, you know.” Before he could offer me anything else, I pulled out *The Secrets of Seven Sages*. “What’s the backstory on this?”

He squinted at it, then waggled his finger in the air. I think he’d seen too many movies about mad scientists. “Ah, yes. Toni the Bookman sold it to me a couple of years ago. She didn’t say where she found it.”

I’d heard stories about Toni the Bookman exploring the Never-never and returning with books everyone thought had been lost forever. She’s one of my heroes. I signed, “Didn’t she disappear about two years ago?”

Milo stroked his goatee, and I wondered whether that was supposed to be an evil genius or a mad scientist gesture. It worked for both, but it looked a little silly when Milo did it. “I never saw her after that. I figured she hadn’t found anything I’d be interested in.” Milo must’ve thought the stroking was silly, too, because he quickly steepled his fingers.

I signed, “Who wrote it?”

Milo shrugged. “No one knows. It’s a collection of spells. They say the Seven Sages assembled it, but no one knows for sure.”

“Seven Sages?”

“Seven elfin wizards. This would’ve been centuries ago, if it’s true.”

“Why the doubt?”

“Because the Seven disappeared.”

“Like in a puff of smoke?”

“Like without a trace. Gone, and no one knows when, where, or why.”

“Did you know the book talks?”

Milo smiled in his shyly pleased way. “It’s got the standard protection spells: warns you if it’s being stolen, won’t let anyone take it if it hasn’t been bought honestly, et cetera.”

“All in Elizabethan English.”

Milo shrugged. “Elves like Shakespeare.”

“There’s a bit of disappearing in its history.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Toni might show up tomorrow with her latest find. And for famous magicians, disappearing can be a way

to retire in peace." He frowned. "Or maybe some secret enemy got to them."

"Like who?"

"Wolfdude, if I knew, it wouldn't be a secret."

"Oh. So who would want the book?"

Milo laughed.

I signed, "What's so funny?"

"I traded it to you because I didn't want it. I offered it to Ms. Wu first, but she touched it and said it wasn't part of her path and gave it right back."

"Somebody wants it. Nixi tried to scam me out of it, then tried to buy it honestly when that didn't pan out. Speaking of, he put a curse on Elsewhere."

Milo's pale eyes opened wide. When I nodded, he closed his eyes, mumbled something that made my ears hurt, frowned, and repeated it more quietly, which made my ears hurt worse.

When he looked at me, he said, "The bad news is I can't remove the spell. It doesn't feel like the work of a local mage. Nixi must've gotten it off someone from Faerie."

"What's the good news?"

"Well, the not-so-bad news, anyway. The spell is mild, the psychic equivalent of making a day warm and muggy so people will be more irritable."

"So customers won't want to hang around the store?"

Milo nodded sadly. "I'll find a way to break it, but that might take a while." He gave one of his shy, pleased grins. "I could cast a similar spell on Nixi's shop." Then he frowned. "No. You don't want to escalate a magic war. Not when we don't know who or how good the mage is." Milo drummed his slender fingers on the desk, then grinned so wide he should've been drawn with a lightbulb coming on over his head. "Teliamonde!"

I shook my head to ask, "Who?"

"A recent magician from Faerie. She asked if I wanted to sell any of my library. She didn't mention *The Secrets of Seven Sages*, but I did say I'd traded everything I no longer wanted to you. After she agrees to a fair price, say, twelve thousand aurei, tell her you also want something to break a discord spell."

"*Twelve* thousand?" As Milo nodded, I thought, *Dear powers that may or may not be, please damn Nixi to a bookman's hell.* I wrote, "Know where Teliamonde lives?"

Milo closed his eyes, then said, "Three Persimmon Lane on the Hill."

I grabbed him, gave him a sloppy wolf kiss on the cheek, and signed, "You'll be the guest of honor at our housewarming!"

Then, as Milo blushed and backed away so I couldn't kiss him again, I ran out because sometimes a wolf is so happy he just has to run.

It seemed too late to visit Teliamonde—surprising magicians isn't a survival trait—and Sparks would be wondering where I was, so I raced back to Elsewhere and charged upstairs. Our apartment was tiny, the furniture was old, the view was of the buildings across the street, but Sparks had made chile rellenos, black beans and rice, and fresh corn tortillas. That smell made any place a palace.

No, Sparks did. She'd dyed her hair purple this month, and she wore a yellow and green poncho, blue tights, a brown mukluk beaded with violet and white flowers on one foot, and a white cast decorated with red magic marker on the other. She smelled, as always, better than anything.

I signed, "Hey, *mi reina*," and her smile was all the reward any knight-errant could want. While we ate, I told her about Nixi, Copperjean, and *The Secrets of Seven Sages*, leaving out the parts about the curse so she wouldn't worry, and the value of the book so she would be surprised when I gave her the key to the house with the red door.

Which meant most of my story was about the book breaking up the fight between the Packers and the Bloods. Sparks patted its cover. "Bestest book ever."

It definitely purred then.

Sparks said, "We can't sell it."

I signed, "It's a book. That's what we do."

"But it protected you!"

"It protected itself. I was just holding it."

Sparks looked at the book. "Book? What should we do?"

The book said, "To thine own self be true."

Sparks's mouth fell open. Then she laughed. "See! We gotta keep it."

"We're not magicians. Things should go to people who'll use them."

“Yes, but …” She let the sentence die. “Every time it rains, I’d swear the ceiling leaks more. Could we get enough for a new roof?”

I kept my face straight. “Maybe.” Then I signed, “Until I make the sale, we can’t hire anyone we don’t know.”

“So we ask people for recommendations.” Sparks smiled. “Nixi might’ve done us a favor. It’s a good excuse to get in touch with friends.”

I nodded. I never thought my dog face was that expressive, but Sparks said, “What?”

I swallowed, then signed, “I was remembering who we can’t ask. Leda, Tick-Tick, Strider, Leander—everyone who died or went back to Faerie.”

Sparks squinted at me. “Is that why you hired Copperjean? Because you miss our elf friends?”

I signed, “No way! She was just the first person who knew anything about books.…” Then I stared at nothing.

“What?”

“A human kid knew his shit. I’d decided to go with him, but I felt sorry for Copperjean because she was new to town, so …” I stared at my hands until Sparks leaned down to put her head in my line of sight. I signed, “Yeah. I miss them.”

She snuggled up next to me, pulled my arms around her, and said, “Me too.”

And pretty soon I just thought I was the luckiest.

The next morning, I went downstairs to put the Help Wanted sign in the window and saw a sheet of green paper stuck on the front door. I stepped outside and jerked the flier free. The large print read:

> ELVES and FRIENDS OF ELVES!
> HEAL THE HATE!
> BOYCOTT ELSEWHERE BOOKS!

The small print said we had fired our elfin staff and we refused to do business with stores owned by elves. I began laughing when I got to the part about Elsewhere carrying kids’ books that literally belittled elves, and fantasy novels that made elves into “noble elf” wish-fulfillment figures.

I was still laughing when one of our elf customers walked by. I smiled at her and shrugged. She looked away and walked faster.

Then I noticed that green fliers adorned walls and light poles as far as I could see.

That's when I knew we had a problem.

Thinking, *Powers that may or may not be, any hell for Nixi will be fine*, I scribbled, "Everyone is welcome to apply" to the bottom of the Help Wanted sign, then told Sparks we would open a little late.

Ripping down fliers in Soho was like chopping hydra heads. Every block had at least one. I told myself most people ignore fliers, but as I yanked them down, I got looks that made me feel more like a freak than ever before. One kid told me, "I knew there was a reason I never shopped at your place."

When I got home, Sparks asked, "How did it go?"

I signed, "I love you."

"That bad?"

"They plastered B-town with their account from a parallel universe."

She smiled, and I decided to leave it at that. Why make her worry? It would blow over, right?

I opened the store after lunch with a new poster in the window: "Inventory sale! Help us achieve outventory!" A couple of customers wandered in, an elf and a human. I was stamping "Elsewhere Public Library" onto books for the freebie bin when a crowd gathered outside. Nixi, Copperjean, and some kids in green T-shirts had signs: "Boycott Elsewhere!" "Elves and Friends of Elves United!" "Why Won't Elsewhere Hire Elves?"

I stepped out front with a slate: "Elves have always been welcome at Elsewhere. They always will be."

Copperjean pointed an elegant finger at the Help Wanted notice. "May I have my job back?"

I shook my head.

She said, "So, the folk are good enough to pay for your wares, but you still won't hire us?"

Before I could try to answer, someone began chanting, "Hey, ho! Hey, ho! All the haters have to go!"

As the rest joined in, I went inside. The elf customer asked if she could use the back door. The human followed her. Neither bought anything.

Over the next two hours a few people came in, some boldly through the front, earning my undying love, some through the back, still earning my love. They all said Bordertown was just having a crazy day, and it would pass. I didn't have the heart to tell them I've read a bit of history. Sometimes the crazy just grows and grows, even when the reason for it goes away.

When the mob outside got angrier, I looked to see one of my favorite people pushing his way through. Orient's dark hair was tousled like he just got out of bed, and he was grinning in that way he'd hate to have anyone call goofy, but—sorry if you read this, guy—it's goofy. "Someone asked where the biggest idiot in town was," he said. "My spider-sense led me right here."

I jerked a thumb at the crowd and signed, "No one would doubt your power just now."

He switched to an earnest look that wasn't goofy at all. "Lobo, I'm not working on anything. I can stick around until you hire someone—"

"Know any elves who need a job?"

"Not offhand."

"This is all about a book. If I go find a buyer for it, Nixi won't have any reason to keep the pressure on us. Can you watch the place for an hour or two?"

Orient's grin grew wider. "And lend you my charger to speed you on your way."

So I rode off on his midnight-blue Harley, enjoying the cry of its spellbox and the wind in my fur, knowing the solution to all our problems was near.

Three Persimmon Lane was a purple, yellow, and green three-story Victorian mansion big enough to be a hotel or sanatorium. I didn't remember seeing it before, which could just mean I hadn't noticed it, or it could mean Teliamonde had used magic to build it overnight.

An old elf in a dark coat and breeches, white stockings, and buckled shoes opened the door. I held up a note: "Hello. I'm Ron Vasquez of Elsewhere Books. I hear Teliamonde is interested in *The Secrets of Seven Sages.*"

The elf said, "One moment," and closed the door. I patted *The Secrets of Seven Sages* in my coat pocket. Maybe it vibrated against my leg. I wondered why anyone would make a magic book that seemed like it was

alive, then remembered Milo. Sometimes people just do things because they think they're fun. And they forget that one person's fun is another's ick.

The elf returned. "I've been informed that you are, quite literally, a cursed human. Be so good as to go to the back door."

I flipped to a new page of my notebook and wrote, "Here's more informing: no." I started back down the walk. With each step, I wondered if I'd made the wrong call. My choice was half-pride and half-business: If you want the best price, don't look like you need a sale, and bigots suck.

As I swung my leg over Orient's bike, I heard a melodious feminine voice calling, "Mr. Vasquez!"

A tall elf stood on the porch. Her hair was indigo. Her silver eyes had a hint of sea green. She wore black cowboy boots and a belted knee-length blue dress printed with yellow javelinas. She smelled like cinnamon and apples. My fur tingled, which meant she was using glamour to make me think she was kind and attractive, but anyone who has been in business long in B-town learns to ignore glamour when money is at stake.

She came toward me, saying, "You must excuse my servant! He's new to this land and has not learned all its customs. Please, you've brought this book, yes? It would be rude to send you away."

The book whispered, so quietly I could barely hear it, "False face must hide what the false heart doth know."

A question came to mind that sellers hate: What would Teliamonde do with *The Secrets of Seven Sages*? I thought, *Not my responsibility.* But if it wasn't mine, whose was it?

Teliamonde interpreted my hesitation as polite respect. She said, "I'm prepared to pay fifteen thousand aurei for it."

I thought, *Nixi, you lying bastard.* And then, *It's a book. Be a bookseller and sell it.*

But I could swear the book was shivering slightly against my leg.

After a moment, Teliamonde said, "You do know that the Highborn do not dicker?"

Everyone dickers, but nothing I knew about *The Secrets of Seven Sages* suggested I would get a better price. If I tried to buy time by asking for more, she would only get suspicious.

I nodded, then wrote, being very careful not to lie in case she had a spell to detect that, "Your price is fair, but I can't deliver it to you now. The book

isn’t at Elsewhere.”

Her frown made me wonder if she could sense it near. Then she said, “When will you bring it?”

I wrote, “Perhaps in a day or three. I need to convince the person who has it to sell it to you.”

Driving back to Elsewhere, I chose a route that took me by the house with the red door. I wasn’t feeling melodramatic enough to stop in front of it, but I slowed as I passed it.

The crowd in front of Elsewhere was up to forty or fifty people. Inside, Sparks was behind the counter with her foot up on a stool. She said, “Home is the hawker.”

I signed, “Without a sale to show. Need to do some more research on the book. Where’s Orient?”

“He had some things to do. I told him to go.”

“He left you alone?”

“After I hit him with my crutch. Twice. Nixi won’t let anything violent happen. It’d make him look bad.”

I signed, “Unless that’s the only way to get what he wants.”

After I carried her upstairs, I was going through our last box of unsorted books when I heard shouts of “Blood traitor!” and “You know he’s a traitor! He’s a cop!”

The elf who entered wore a burgundy business suit with black Beatle boots and a black T-shirt. His hair had grown in the last year or so. I wrote, “Afternoon, Detective Linn. What can I do for you?”

He said, “What’s the most costly volume in your establishment that an honest servant of Bordertown might afford?”

“What do you like?”

“Cowboy books.”

I almost laughed, but I was so damn grateful for him coming in that I didn’t want to risk offending him. Why shouldn’t an elf like cowboy books? I showed him a first edition of *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads.* He paid me in doubloons. I handed him Kelton’s *The Day the Cowboys Quit* and wrote, “Take this, too. I could use the shelf space.”

Elves are funny about presents, but he nodded. Then he looked out at the protesters and said, “Give them what they wish. They’ll gloat, but they’ll go.”

I wrote, “Are you volunteering to work here?”

“Would that I could. However, I have a niece who would do well to learn something of the lives of others.”

“Did Orient send you?”

Linn nodded.

I wrote, “Tell your niece she has a job. The pay’s lousy, but if she likes books, the benefits can’t be beat. Can she be here tomorrow at noon?”

He nodded again.

Elves hate to be thanked. I said, “When you see Orient, tell him I’m grateful. As in, very.”

“That’ll be my pleasure,” Linn said. Then he walked blithely out of the store and through the mob.

I wrote on my slate, went outside, and showed them: “We hired an elf. She starts tomorrow.”

Everyone looked at Nixi. He did an eyebrow raise that he had to love in the mirror. “Who is she?”

I wrote, “Meet her tomorrow.”

Copperjean shouted, “We’ll be back!”

Nixi quickly said, “Indeed. We will.” It wasn’t a great line, but it reminded his followers who was first among equals here.

That evening, I made pizza with asparagus, and we talked over our options with Milo. He had no idea why Teliamonde wanted the book, but he promised to spend the night poking through his library. I couldn’t figure out a way to avoid eating a candy made from Duke Ellington’s “Take the ‘A’ Train,” which I have to admit was pretty good.

After Milo left, I put the book back on the shelf over the front window and signed, “Sweet dreams, book.”

It said, “We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep.”

I signed, “Yeah, I hear that. Round well, you.”

Around three in the morning, I woke with the certainty something was wrong. Make that, more wrong.

Sparks said, “Did you hear something break?”

Which was when my dog nose shouted, “Smoke!”

Pulling on a robe, I ran to the window. Two bikers in red leather sped away on Mock Avenue. This was not a good time to tell Sparks she’d been

right when she said we should have an escape ladder. But even if we had one, could she have managed it with a broken foot?

I heard a scream: “Though little fire grows great with little wind, yet extreme gusts will blow out fire and all!”

A ball of flame burst from the front of Elsewhere. Sparks gasped. I’m betting I did, too.

I carried her in her penguin pajamas to a side window and glanced down. Nothing looked soft below. I set her on down and leaped. I was right—nothing was soft—but I rolled as I landed and came up fine. I signed, “Jump!”

She leaped, I caught her, and I carried her to the far side of Mock Avenue. As I did, she said in wonder, “Ron? The fire’s out.”

Elsewhere was perfectly dark. I sniffed. The night carried no more than a whiff of charred wood. The glow of the corner light revealed the only signs that there had been a fire: A long scorch mark streaked the street before Elsewhere’s shattered front window.

I signed, “Fuck. I never thought Nixi would go this far.”

Sparks said, “And risk damaging the book? It had to be kids who heard we hate elves.”

I shook my head. “Bloods. I saw their jackets. You’re spending the night with Orient.”

“Thanks. He’s cute, but I’ll stick with you.”

I laughed. It wasn’t funny, but combine any joke with not being dead, and laughing is easy.

As I carried her into the store, Sparks looked up and whispered, “Book? Thanks for saving my wolf and me.”

The book answered, “A hundred thousand welcomes: I could weep, and I could laugh; I am light and heavy: Welcome.”

Sparks squeezed my hand, saying, “I think we’ll be safe here.”

After I carried her upstairs and kissed her goodnight, I went down to the basement to get plywood, paint, and cleaning supplies. Broken eggs and graffiti decorated the front of the store. As I paused between scrubbing the wall and boarding up the front window, a question came that made me play statue: When Nixi thought about the book, did he also picture a house on Dragon’s Tooth Hill?

The sun was rising when I finished painting over the graffiti. I went back up. Sparks was asleep. I watched her snore in our bed with the chipped headboard and the quilt that she'd made.

Her eyes opened. She said, "Lobito? Why aren't you in bed?"

I signed, "I was thinking about that house you like."

"Which one?"

"With the red door."

She frowned.

I signed, "And the turret." The frown deepened, so I added, "Up on Dragon's Tooth Hill. Near Knockabout Park."

She smiled. "Oh, yeah! It's great."

"You said you dreamed of having a house like that."

She nodded. Then added, "Or a houseboat. A red houseboat. But the best would be a gypsy caravan, with two horses and a goat. We could explore the Nevernever and come back whenever we felt like it. Why? You don't like it here? I mean, before today?"

"I love it here."

"Good."

I told her what I'd been thinking about. I expected her to say I was an idiot and I should go to sleep. Instead, she said she wanted to paint the sign.

I carried her down. She painted big swooping letters on the plywood: "Welcome to the Elsewhere Public Library. Got a book? Leave a book. Need a book? Take a book. Donations welcome, but no obligations! All books are free!"

As she underlined "free," something thumped inside Elsewhere.

We looked at each other, then went in. The store was dark thanks to the plywood, but a shaft of morning light fell through the front door. *The Secrets of Seven Sages* lay on the floor.

I heard, "I can no other answer make, but, thanks, and thanks."

The book's pages fluttered as if a wind flipped through them. The dark cover crumbled, and the pages unfolded, opening outward again and again as seven signatures became seven sheets that folded into origami creatures: a crane, a dragon, a wasp, a Pegasus, an eagle, a griffin, and a butterfly. As they flew around us, the book's voice—or seven voices together—said, "Untie the spell."

My fur felt as if I'd stepped into an electrical storm, and then something changed. Everything around me looked and felt and smelled the same, but I felt as if a cool breeze had rolled in after a hot day.

The voices said together, "The elements be kind to thee, and make thy spirits all of comfort: fare thee well." Then the seven paper creatures whipped past us and rose into the sky, racing toward the Border and Faerie.

After a minute or ten, Sparks said, "Did you expect that?"

I shook my head and pointed at her.

She shook her head. Then she took my hand, and I carried her up to our bed.

We slept late. I made waffles with pecans and wild rice, enough to share with Orient and Milo when they checked in on us. I was washing the dishes when Linn's niece, Dew, arrived. She had a strong streak of the haughty Trueblood thing, but she liked Twain and wanted to read more books by humans, so I knew there was hope for her.

I was outside scrubbing the scorch mark when Nixi came running up. He said, "I heard about the fire! Did the book survive? And how is Sparks, of course! I'm glad you're fine! You know I never meant for anything like that to happen, don't you?"

I pulled out my notepad. "Sparks and I are fine. Thanks for asking. I admit I suspected you at first, because you are such a slime weasel"—I drew a single line through "slime weasel" and continued—"businessman, but, yes, I know you didn't expect things to go this far."

"And the book?"

I shrugged.

"What happened?"

"Gone."

"Truly?"

"I'm not you, Nixi."

"But how?"

"It flew away."

"Very fun—" He glanced at me. "Really?"

I nodded. "Tell Teliamonde she's going back to Faerie with her fifteen thousand."

His lips pursed, but then he smiled. "Ah. Thank you for saving me from a grave and expensive embarrassment."

“It was the least I could do.”

“Truth. How did you undo the discord spell?”

I considered answers, then thought, *Nixi is what he is. It makes as much sense to get mad at him as it does to get mad at a skunk.* I wrote, “Try something like that again, with anyone in Bordertown, and you’ll find out.”

He swallowed. Then, studying Sparks’s sign, he said, “Why a library?”

“Who doesn’t like a library?”

“Will you make as much from donations?”

I shrugged. “Not the point, Nixi.”

He laughed. “Well, good luck, eh?”

I glanced at the upper window. The sunlight glistened on purple hair. I pictured Sparks sitting in the black wicker chair with her leg on the red stool with the pillow she had covered with a toucan print. I shrugged again. How could I convince him that I had all the luck I needed?

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SOULJA GRRRL: A LONG LINE RAP

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I am a single Soulja Grrrl, I've got gold in my hair,
A rose is at my boobies, and my feet are always bare.
And no one else can tell me that I can't go here or there.
'Cause a single Soulja Grrrl goes anywhere.

One night I traveled by myself, went right up to the Hall,
Where a fancy-looking fey guy put my back against the wall.
A full six-packed and really stacked, his hair high-hacked and all,
And after that I waited on his call, on his call.

Well, that Jack he doesn't call me out till nearly Halloween,
Says he's running from the grip and grasp of some old dam real keen.
She's got sharp claws and sharper jaws and always wears fey green:
A juggernaut, a cougar, and a diva-drama queen.

So I meet him at the crossroads and I pull him from his horse.
I wrap myself around him, and she changes him, of course.
First he hisses 'stead of kisses, then he growls, then he's a force,
And the queen gets even meaner, which just makes all matters worse.

Then I put the Jack behind me, and I tell her to her face
That she's old and getting older, and a soulja's won this race.
And she threatens that she's gonna pull my eyes out of my face.
So I give the gal the finger and I hit her with some Mace.

Then the Jack and I are running; then we're flying with the crowd,
And I'm flitting, floating higher than a piece of fluff-filled cloud.
And the fey are dancing madly, as they bless my name out loud.
I'm the Soulja Grrrl, the heroine; I'm bloody but unbowed.

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CROSSINGS

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This story begins with Analise's screams, with a silver knife and blood dripping into a silver bowl—

No.

It begins with the promise Analise and I made, four years ago now, a promise between two best friends about our future—

That's not right, either.

Papá and Mamá would say it began sixteen years ago, with a desert crossing beneath a blazing sun, a baby—me, Miranda—in their arms. My first border crossing, though I don't remember it.

Where does any story begin?

Let's say this one began here, with me and Analise—two Soho newbies whose clothes dripped water, gasping and laughing from the crazy moment when the dry desert washes we'd followed from home flash flooded with rusty Mad River water.

We weren't stupid. We'd known enough to keep our heads above the surface, to make sure we didn't swallow a single drop as we half ran, half swam for shore. Like all newbies—like *you*—we arrived here with a dream and what we thought was a plan.

We *were* stupid. That first border crossing nearly killed my parents and me.

Why did I expect this one to be any different?

* * *

Analise was the brave one. You need to understand that. We'd barely caught our breath when she walked up to an elf with hair dyed the chalky green of a paloverde tree and asked her, straight out, "Where do we find the vampires?"

The elf girl laughed, but she didn't walk away, so I whispered to Analise, "And the werewolves. Don't forget the werewolves."

The elf heard, and she looked down at me with the sort of perfect disdain the World reserves for cheerleaders in bad teen movies. "What wolf would don your crude human form, given a choice?" My face grew hot, though it was freezing here compared to home, especially with our clothes still wet.

The elf went on, “Yet vampires—I have heard talk of such, and not only in the deranged babble of wharf rats. Vampires are the ones with the unnatural interest in human blood, yes? You come here seeking such?”

“We do.” Analise really was a cheerleader, not that you could tell from her black T-shirt and leggings and the smudged black eye shadow that made her skin seem elfin pale.

“Truly?” The green vines tattooed around the elf’s wrists swayed in the breeze. “I thought only Hill-bred humans took an interest in Lankin and his bloodletting.”

“You thought wrong,” Analise informed her, though she had no more idea who Lankin was than I did. She didn’t tell the elf that the bloodletting was entirely secondary, that it was true love we were after, because that was nobody’s business but our own.

“Well, if you choose to tangle with our latest visitor from Aldon House, I’m sure that’s no concern of mine. What is your human phrase? Ah, yes: It is your funeral.” The elf’s scornful silver eyes made me feel small and grubby in my wet jeans and fleece and faded University of Arizona T-shirt, my dripping school backpack slung over my shoulders. “Ye Olde Unicorn Trolley will take you there if you desire it dearly enough,” she said. “Likely let *you* ride for free.”

I didn’t know what she meant by that, and she turned away before I could ask—no. I need to tell this story true. I simply lacked the courage to ask. Unlike Analise I wasn’t brave, not even a little bit.

Analise didn’t mind my being a coward. She didn’t mind any of the ways we were different, like how she liked vampires and I liked werewolves, or how she thought dark chocolate was the best thing in the whole world but I thought no chocolate could compete with a raze-your-taste-buds chili-pepper burn. We were best friends anyway, and had been since the fourth grade, back when we realized we loved the exact same horse book. If you’re from the World, you know the one, about that wild stallion no one thinks can be tamed except for the one girl who believes in him. In fifth grade Analise and I loved the same dog book, the one where the dog doesn’t die for once. Sixth grade was our unicorn year; we loved the book where everyone’s sure there’s only one unicorn left in the world, except of course they’re all wrong.

Seventh grade was different. Analise fell in love with vampire books, especially the one where the vampire turns the girl into a vampire, too, because he loves her that much. I fell in love with werewolf books, most of all the one where the werewolf turns human and leaves his pack for the girl *he* loves. But even those stories aren't all that different—they're both about falling into true love and staying there, forever and ever.

True love sounded pretty good in the seventh grade, with both our parents fighting so much that year. Analise's parents got divorced in the end—it was months before she believed me when I said it wasn't her fault—but my parents were mostly fighting about money, not about whether they were in love. It was getting harder for Papá and Mamá to find work without *la migra* asking questions about whether we belonged in Arizona. Later, when the fighting eased and I talked to them, I understood what it really meant to have been born in Mexico before crossing the desert, and not in Tucson like my little brothers.

But before then, Analise and I came up with our plan: one day she would marry a vampire, and I would marry a werewolf, and *we* would live happily ever after, no matter what happened to our parents or anyone else. I'm guessing you know as well as I do how hard happy endings are to come by in the World, but we figured with magic, everything would be different. Not perfect—I mean, probably the vampire and the werewolf would hate each other at first, because they always did, but eventually they'd come to a grudging mutual respect. They'd have no choice, because Analise and I had also made a promise: that we would always be friends, and the vampire and the werewolf would just have to accept that.

Of course, not everyone believed in magic by then, with the Way to the Borderlands gone for so many years, but Analise and I believed: Bordertown was real, and so were all those undocumented elves and halfies you heard about stranded out in the World, their magic and their home so far out of reach they might as well have crossed a desert of their own. Analise and I read books about elves and faeries sometimes, though none of those ever became our favorites. If elves were real, the rest of it could be real, too. There were many kinds of magic, and one day, Analise and I decided, we would find ours.

* * *

When the green-haired elf wouldn't answer any more of Analise's vampire questions, we made our way through Soho, looking for someone who would. The streets around us echoed with people shouting, motorcycles revving, singers belting out their songs. On one corner, a pale-skinned boy with feathered Luke Skywalker hair sang a long, slow ballad about a human stolen away by the queen of the Realm. The boy was decked out in so much leather it looked like the eighties had stolen *him* away. Across the street, a girl with brown skin and flyaway elf-white hair rapped about a woman who stood up to that same elfin queen, winning her boyfriend back and telling the queen off quite thoroughly in the process.

The rapper wore bright scarves in clashing colors, Day-Glo pink and forest green and bloodred and more shades of purple than I knew existed. Tiny silver acorns sewn along her fringes jangled as she sang. She and Leather Boy glared at each other between verses, raising their voices louder and louder, while passersby dropped trinkets into the boy's blue baseball cap and the girl's purple felted cowboy hat.

Smells wafted through the air around us: roasting meat, spicy curries, melted cheese—I followed that last to a boarded-up storefront that looked more like a car dealership than a restaurant. The scent of chilies and melted *queso* wafting out was real enough, though, and it reminded me how far we'd walked and how little we'd eaten along the way. "Lunch," I announced as I saw the restaurant's name: Taco Hell. I knew that place—it was right out of *The Tough Guide to Bordertown.*

Analise set her hands on her hips and tried to look severe. "Miranda, how can you even *think* about food at a time like this?" As she spoke her stomach grumbled, and we both burst into giggles. "All right," she said. We headed inside arm in arm, not caring if we looked like total dorks. We found a free table in a corner and stashed our damp backpacks beneath it. My drying jeans felt clammy against the wooden chair; things dried faster back home. From what must have been the kitchen I heard shouting and clanking. I picked out a little bit of Spanish, a little bit of what might have been O'odham, and a lot of something I didn't know.

A kid barely old enough to be in middle school came to take our orders. His black hair was streaked blue and pulled back; his denim jacket seemed larger than he was. "Water, tea, or beer?" the kid asked.

“Beer!” we agreed, and laughed some more. The *Tough Guide* hadn’t told us there was no drinking age in Bordertown.

“And to eat?” The boy sounded like he was trying hard to seem properly bored.

“Two Meltdown Burritos,” I said, because that was the only thing I remembered from the *Guide.*

The boy nodded and slouched away, returning to place two bottles on our table. Analise and I grinned as we raised them.

“To true love,” she said.

“To—” I hesitated. “To belonging somewhere.”

Analise reached out and squeezed my hand. She knew my werewolf dreams weren’t the only reason I’d asked her to come here with me, after I found *The Tough Guide to Bordertown* in the library, nestled between her favorite book and mine the day after the hearing.

“To Bordertown,” we said, and clinked our bottles together.

* * *

The beer was cold and about as good as beer ever was—that is, not very. I drank it anyway. I wasn’t about to miss my first drink in Bordertown just because I didn’t like the taste, and besides, my throat was parched. We’d run out of water long before the Mad River flooded the washes, even the small salty bottle of holy water I’d taken with me from church.

A couple walked in and plopped down at the table next to us—the singers from outside. They didn’t look like they hated each other now, not with the way their fingers were entwined. True love, or just hooking up? It should have been easier to tell in Bordertown than in the World—no. I wanted it to be easier, that was all.

“A pound of coffee beans and a copy of the *Stick Figure* steampunk special.” Scarf Girl set a drawstring bag triumphantly down on the table; she was wearing her hat now. “I *owned* this round.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Leather Boy put his half-full cap beside the bag. “I’m still ahead of you thanks to scoring that locket made by Lillet’s great-niece last summer.”

“It was a fake! You know it was!”

He pulled a comb from his back pocket and ran it through his hair, *just* like in the eighties. “A fake that bought us three months’ groceries.” The *Guide* had told me about this, how Bordertown worked by trading things, not just money.

Our waiter slid two burritos onto our table, and Analise and I both turned to eating them. Melted cheese slid down my throat, along with the burn of —*cayenne*? Seriously? Might as well just sprinkle on some black pepper and be done with it if you’re going to ruin them anyway.

At least the cheese was good. I reached into my wet pack and pulled out my sketchbook. Water had swollen the pages, blurring my colored-pencil sketches of wolves and vampires—okay, mostly of wolves, though I’d tried a few vampires for Analise’s sake. It didn’t matter; they were all ruined, and I’d have to start over. Maybe this time I’d figure out how to make werewolf fur look as soft as I hoped it would feel, when I held a real wolf in my arms at last. Analise helped smooth the pages as our waiter brought two more beers for Scarf Girl and Leather Boy.

Analise caught Leather Boy’s eye. “So,” she asked, “know where we might find a guy named Lankin?”

The boy choked on his drink. “You’re *looking* for Lankin?”

The girl drew a fuchsia scarf closer around her, as if she were cold. “You’re new, aren’t you? You don’t want to mess with that shit. Trust me.”

Analise kept her gaze on them both, looking as determined as the time she’d decided to fight the school when they wanted to ban black clothes, claiming it was a new gang color. She’d told me once that people always tried to warn you away from the vampire, not only in her favorite book but in others, too. That was just part of the story.

The boy tilted his chair and took a deep swallow of beer. “Not like it’s hard to find old Corwyn’s nephew. Just follow Ho Street east to the old city wall, where all those old mansions used to be.”

The girl slammed her bottle down. “You *asshole*.”

The boy’s chair thumped back to the floor. “What? If I didn’t tell her, someone else would. It’s not as if Lankin’s location is some deep, dark secret, whatever the Silver Suits say.”

The girl grabbed her bag and her beer and got to her feet. “You”—she pointed at her companion—“can sleep outside tonight.” She stormed to the door, stopped, and looked back—at me, not Analise. “If you made it to

Bordertown at all, you're smarter than this. Find a job, get a squat, get a life. It's not as hard as it seems at first. My name's Janet. I run with a gang called the Bards—if you need a friend, they'll know where to find me." Silver acorns jangled as she slammed the door shut behind her.

"Hey, thanks," Analise told the boy.

"Don't thank me, newbie. Not for this." He turned back to his drink, more intently than before.

I thought about what Janet had said. All my life I'd heard about how smart I was, but smart didn't mean shit to Homeland Security. My 4.0 average and that art award I won last year were worth less than which side of the border I was born on. The *other* border. You'd think that invisible line through creosote and cholla—between the U.S. and Mexico—wouldn't matter so much now, with Bordertown's return reminding us that all our human countries are part of the same magicless World. But while the Worldside elves and halfies still had the amnesty the U.S. gave them when the Way back to their Border disappeared, there was no amnesty for me, never mind that I'd been living in the U.S. longer than most of them had, so long I couldn't remember living anywhere else.

At the hearing, after the judge refused to let us stay, Papá and Mamá had agreed to voluntary departure instead, though as far as I was concerned, there was nothing voluntary about it. My parents said at least he'd given us a little time, to get things in order and sell what we could. My little brothers, who were born in America and were U.S. citizens, could come back one day if they wanted. But though I'd grown up right beside them, I couldn't return, not for at least a couple decades, and even then only if one of them filed for me.

If I had to leave everything behind, without finishing high school or getting an art degree or doing anything else I'd planned on, I wanted at least to decide on the place. I wanted it to be somewhere with magic. *I* wanted to do the choosing this time, instead of always being dragged across borders that other people chose for me.

The cayenne tasted stale at the back of my throat. I wondered whether Papá and Mamá and the boys were gone yet. I wondered whether I'd see them again, and whether they'd ever forgive me.

* * *

“How’re the burritos?” The kid waiter was back at our table.

I shrugged, trying to be polite. “They’re okay. Could use stronger peppers, though.”

The boy’s eyebrows rose toward his blue-streaked hair. “I do believe you’re the first person to say that. I’ll tell Mingus—oughta scare him good, knowing someone asked for more melt in her Meltdown. He’ll think he’s slipping.” The boy flashed us a smile. “You two new?”

“No,” Analise said.

“Yes,” I said at the same time.

“First drink’s free if you’re new,” the boy told us. “Make me an offer on the food.”

Analise reached into her backpack and pulled out a twenty. The boy rolled his eyes. “New,” he declared. “The green stuff might be worth something in the World, but it won’t pay Mingus’s bills.”

I’d told Analise that Soho didn’t run on money, but neither of us had really believed it. Still, I’d come prepared. I pulled a ziplock bag full of brownies from my pack—the water hadn’t gotten through the plastic—and offered a couple to the kid.

The boy frowned. “Those made with real chocolate? Or that fake carob crap?” He pinched a small corner from one of the brownies and tasted it. His eyes went wide.

Analise laughed. She loved the effect my habanero brownies had on people. I’d started making them after we became friends, because they had a little of something each of us liked: hot habanero peppers for me, bitter dark chocolate for her.

Our waiter not only accepted the brownies as payment; he told us our next meal was on the house. Back outside, Analise and I exchanged high fives.

“Your brownies *rock*,” Analise said.

“They do, don’t they?” I scanned the street for the trolley, but I saw no sign of unicorns, only of something halfway between an old-fashioned stagecoach and a squashed Sun Tran bus. Bells made of silver and bone and who-knew-what-else clanked from black posts as the thing lurched along, heading in the wrong direction. Looked like we were going to have to walk.

I didn’t really mind. Walking had gotten us this far, after all, at least once I’d figured out the washes were the closest thing Tucson has to a yellow brick road—especially that one wash with “Bordertown LIVES” spray-painted under a bridge. I was here now, my clothes were mostly dry, my backpack was filled with brownies, and I was with my best friend. It was enough to make me feel just a little bit invincible, you know?

In Analise’s and my books, no one’s invincible, not even the immortal vampires, but before I could remember that, my best friend jabbed me in the ribs, hard, and I saw a werewolf heading down the street, straight toward us.

He wasn’t in full wolf form—he walked on two legs, not four—but his fingers all ended in claws, and his arms and face and especially his very wolflike ears were covered with reddish fur. He was real; that was the main thing. The first real magic I’d seen outside the river.

In the stories, of course, not all werewolves were safe, any more than all vampires were. We’d come prepared for that, too. For the vampires we’d brought holy water (until we got so thirsty in the washes) and still wore silver crosses—Analise had the one I’d gotten for my confirmation, while I had the one I’d worn as a baby, during my first border crossing, though I’d put it on a longer chain. Werewolves were harder, because no one in Tucson actually sells silver bullets, at least not to sixteen-year-olds who aren’t willing to present proper ID. Analise had stolen her mom’s silver-plated letter opener instead. It was the best we could do.

This werewolf didn’t look very dangerous, though. He mostly looked interested in the slice of mushroom pizza he was digging into with his gleaming fangs. Weren’t werewolves supposed to be carnivores? I realized I was staring and turned away. He had better things to do than talk to me, I was sure.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Sometimes Analise knew me a little too well. She turned me around and pushed me back toward that werewolf. I tripped over the uneven pavement and bumped right into him. His pizza fell cheese-side down on the pavement.

“Sorry!” I said, even as the werewolf stepped back, holding up his hands in apology, like he didn’t know his lost pizza was entirely my fault. Or maybe when you were a wolf it was better to apologize anyway, so that people knew you weren’t going to eat them. Definitely not a dangerous wolf, then.

I looked up into his golden eyes. “Umm, hi.” My hand strayed toward his fur, and I pulled it back before I could pet him without thinking.

The wolf nodded politely, walked past me, and kept walking.

“Wait!” I ran after him. “You’re—” I had trouble getting words out, but I couldn’t blow this chance. “You’re a—”

The wolf sighed and turned back to me. He looked less polite than before—not I’m-a-werewolf-about-to-go-on-a-killing-rampage impolite, but more like seriously-now-not-*again* impolite, which made no sense since we’d only just met. He pulled a small square of paper out of his pocket.

I read it.

Sorry. Not a shape-shifter. Welcome to Bordertown.

Was he in denial? That happened sometimes in stories. Pretty hard to deny all that fur, though. “So, umm, want to—do something?” My voice squeaked. “Like—a movie?” Stupid, stupid, *stupid*. I knew there were no movies in Bordertown, unless you counted the Magic Lantern, which the *Guide* didn’t.

He handed me another square of paper. *Also, I have a girlfriend.*

My face burned. I wasn’t sure how I kept speaking. “Well, do you—have a brother? Maybe?”

The werewolf rolled his eyes, and I didn’t need a square of paper to read *that.* I looked down before he could hand me another piece of paper anyway, one telling me just how much of a loser I was. When I looked up again, the wolf was a full block away, walking fast.

“I am an idiot,” I announced to Analise.

“We should stalk him,” my best friend said helpfully. “I can do the talking this time, if you want.”

I would sooner have died than face him again. “Let’s find your vampire.”

Just because I’d blown it with the wolf didn’t mean Analise shouldn’t still have her chance at true love, right? That’s what I told myself then.

Now I tell myself that even Analise would agree werewolves are better than vampires after all.

* * *

We followed Ho Street east past the bars and music clubs and through blocks of derelict buildings turned to squats. Eventually, the crumbling

apartment buildings gave way to the ruins of old stone mansions, which meant we must be getting close. Beyond them, the old city wall was crumbling as well, the sun growing low behind it.

Analise rubbed at her calves. “Why would a vampire live *here*?”

My legs ached, too, by then, and I felt the cobblestones through the thin soles of my sneakers. I scanned the cracked masonry and broken glass around us.

Wait—over there. Something flickered against the old city wall, like the bright spots left behind after you look at the sun. The air wavered, and a grand old mansion came into focus, peaked towers and wraparound balcony and all.

“Magic,” I whispered as the sky settled into the deep blue-green it takes on before full dark.

“That’s it,” Analise whispered back, her voice sounding as awed as the time she’d learned the author of her vampire book had written a sequel. “It has to be.”

Because I’m telling this true, I’ll admit it: I felt a twinge of jealousy, imagining the long flowing dresses and grand balls that went with such a mansion. Werewolves weren’t much into parties and pretty clothes; they were too busy hunting down game and getting leaves tangled in their fur.

We walked up the path to the mansion together, crosses hidden beneath our shirts, holding hands like little kids. The stones beneath us glittered in the failing light as we climbed the stairs. The faintest of winds rippled over us, raising goose bumps beneath my fleece and T-shirt, and the door blew open, as if it were light as paper. *This is too easy.* I pushed the thought aside, afraid of letting my jealousy get in the way of Analise’s happiness. Just because I’d messed up with the werewolf, did I want the vampire to be hard, too?

Analise released my hand at last and strode through that doorway, head held high, as if she were born to this. Not like me—what had I ever been born to, except for dangerous journeys to places that could never really be home in the end? I hurried after my best friend, past the statues of giant hounds on either side of the door and into a huge marble hall. A chandelier filled with lit candles hung from the ceiling, and more glitter sparkled in the air around us. Several tall elves stood guard along the walls, so still I couldn’t tell if they were real or only more statues.

I didn’t belong in a place like this. Analise grabbed my hand again, and I wondered if she felt it, too, even though she mostly did belong in the place she’d grown up, and maybe would have stayed there if not for me.

I pulled away first, afraid of holding her back. “Go on. You’re better at this than I am.”

Analise lifted her head and walked up to one of the elves. “I’m looking for Lankin.” Her voice didn’t squeak, not even a little.

The elf didn’t move, but from the center of the room a soft velvet voice said, “And so you have found him.”

I flinched; I hadn’t heard him enter the room. But there he stood beneath the chandelier, an elf in a black velvet jacket, tight leather pants, and a frilled silk shirt. Silver hair fell loose over his shoulders. He looked exactly like the vampire in a story *should* look, complete with the faintest glimpse of fang showing over his lower lip. I hadn’t known elves could be vampires the way humans could.

Analise caught her breath. Even I wondered—just for a second or two—what it would be like to run my hands through that hair. Then I caught his silver eyes regarding me with the same amused curiosity a cat regards a rolled-up ball of paper, and I stepped back. I’d stick to werewolves after all.

Analise’s eyes were bright. “You’re a vampire, aren’t you?”

“Indeed.” He held out his hand. “Will you come?”

Analise walked the distance between them. “I will.” She took his hand—the cross beneath her shirt didn’t seem to trouble him—and together they strode across the room.

“Wait!” My voice echoed after them. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. We were supposed to—what? Wander off together with Analise’s future vampire lover? How did I expect this story to go?

Lankin turned gracefully around, his fingers wrapped around Analise’s. Analise gazed up at him, as if there were nothing else in all the universe, as if she’d gotten glitter dust in her eyes. True love was supposed to be like that, wasn’t it?

“You barely know each other,” I sputtered. “Maybe you should—go to a movie first.”

Lankin laughed, the sound at once musical and harsh. “A movie. How very … human.”

“Go find your wolf, Miranda.” Analise’s voice sounded far away. Together she and Lankin glided from the room, disappearing through another door at its far end, one that slowly swung shut behind them.

How could she leave me here alone? *Magic*, I thought. Maybe it was only vampire magic making Analise forget her best friend. I shivered beneath the flickering chandelier. What if that wasn’t true? What if Analise understood, better than I did, how this story was supposed to end?

“You may leave now,” one of the elves said. He wasn’t a statue after all.

I ignored him, walked up to the door, and turned the glass knob. Its bright surface reflected my dark hair and dark eyes back up at me, but the door didn’t budge.

“You are not permitted to pass that way,” a second elf said, his voice identical to the first. “Not unless you’re prepared to offer the master your blood.”

I didn’t want to offer up my blood. Just then, I didn’t want the warmth of a wolf’s fur, either, or not only that. I wanted my best friend back. Tears stung at the corners of my eyes, and the room blurred the way my sketches had. I blinked hard, and the room disappeared entirely, leaving me alone on a deserted city street, one hand on the ruined wall where a door had been.

The guard elves had disappeared with the rest of the mansion—none of it was real. Maybe that meant Lankin wasn’t real, either. Maybe any second Analise would come back, laughing at how she’d fallen for some stupid illusion, and together we’d go back down Ho Street, find a place to crash, and continue searching for true love in the morning.

From beyond the wall, Analise screamed, a wild, animal sound. *That* was real. Fear shivered down my spine. I heard a muffled sob, then silence. I tried to move, but my feet were frozen to the ground, and not by magic. My hands trembled, my chest pounded, and I wasn’t sure I had the courage to take a single step.

But I did. It sounds like a small thing, when I say it like that, but that’s only because there was no magic for this, no instant when everything changed. First I stood alone on the street, too frightened to move. Then somehow I was making my way through the broken city wall. I searched the rough stones, found a gap among them, and—I crawled through. Not right away, but eventually. I just did, okay? I can’t explain any better than that.

There were ruins on the other side of the wall, cracked stones surrounding a circle of bare dirt. At its center Analise lay on a gray slab, her shirt torn, her arms tied to her sides and her ankles bound. Lankin knelt beside her, next to a guttering oil lamp, but it wasn't vampire fangs that pierced her shoulder—it was the small silver knife he held. Analise's blood flowed slowly down a narrow channel in the stone and dripped from there into a silver bowl on the floor. Her eyes met mine, begging me to do something. She must have forgotten I was a coward.

That meant I had no choice but to forget it, too—no, that isn't right. My hands still shook, my stomach heaved—I didn't forget at all. I was afraid, but I didn't let that stop me from walking toward them.

Lankin laid the knife gently on Analise's chest, where her tied arms couldn't reach, then stood and turned to face me. His silk shirt and velvet jacket seemed out of place among the broken rocks. "May I help you, human?"

"Let her go." My whisper barely squeaked out into the air.

Lankin laughed, and as if in response, the space around us shimmered. A bedroom with black silk draperies came into focus. Candles were set on the floor all around us, and a canopy bed stood where the stone slab had been. Its hangings were drawn aside so that I could still see Analise, lying in a satin nightgown on crimson sheets. The blood was gone now, and the ropes as well. My best friend smiled, and I knew Lankin's magic had taken hold of her once more. I remembered how the *Tough Guide* said magic was unreliable in Bordertown. No one could make an illusion work here all the time.

Lankin shrugged, an eloquent gesture. "She came to me of her own will, looking, as all humans are looking, for a story—in her case about love and vampires and thirsting for blood, all of which have grown quite trendy in your Bordertown. I gave her what she asked for, nothing more."

"But your story isn't true." Even his being a vampire was an illusion; real vampires didn't need knives to draw blood.

"All stories are lies, outside the One True Realm." The tips of his unreal fangs glinted in the candlelight. "No human wants a story that tells the truth."

"Analise and I do." We'd come here looking for true love, not illusions and lies.

“Do you believe so?” He smiled, and I wished I’d brought a stake instead of my useless silver cross. You didn’t have to be a vampire to die of a stake through the heart. “How much are you willing to risk for that, human girl?”

Candles flickered around us. I’d risk everything for Analise, just like she would risk everything for me. I didn’t say that, though. I feared if I offered Lankin everything, everything was what he would take. I lifted my chin to meet the elf’s silver eyes, pretending I was like Analise after all. “What are you asking for?”

Lankin smoothed his velvet cuffs. “A true story, nothing more. I will tell your friend my story, and then you will tell her yours, and she will choose between them.”

“That’s all?”

The wall hangings rustled at some breeze I couldn’t feel. “That is not all. If she chooses your story, I will let her go. If she chooses mine, I will take your blood as well. That is fair, is it not?”

A shudder ran through me. Vampires needed blood to keep them alive. “What do *you* need blood for?”

“Accept this offer, or leave this place. Consider yourself fortunate. I offer you a choice.” Lankin knelt and stroked Analise’s cheek. She shivered, with pleasure or fear, I couldn’t tell.

I wouldn’t leave her. “I accept.”

“Very well.” Lankin brushed his lips against Analise’s, and when he drew away her lips seemed a deeper shade of red. “Long ago and far away, there lived a girl who dreamed of escaping her dreary human life, of finding a place where true love was real, where her lover could see beyond the surfaces humans are limited to, through to all the thoughts and longings that lay hidden beneath her skin.” His voice grew soft as wind over silk. “The girl knew she would pay any price for this thing, and when the chance came, she seized it, wasting no time on hesitation or regret, human failings she had little use for. And so she lived happily ever after, beautiful and young, loved and in love for all her days. You like that story, do you not?”

“Yes.” Analise’s dreamy smile reminded me of when she was rereading her vampire book. But even in her vampire book there was hesitation—the vampire waited to turn the girl, after all. And my werewolf book had regrets—the boy missed being a wolf sometimes, though never enough to try to change back. I had hesitations and regrets, too, when I ran away and left my

parents nothing but a note, beneath another batch of brownies, saying I loved them.

"Go on." Lankin stepped back. "Tell her your pitiful human story."

Stories weren't pitiful for their hesitations and regrets. That was part of what made them true. Even true love wasn't perfect—but Analise wouldn't want to hear that now. How could I possibly compete with Lankin's story? It would be like trying to compete with Analise's vampire book. Until we'd come here, Analise hadn't cared about anything more than that book.

No—that was the least true thing of all. There *was* something Analise cared about more than vampires, just like there was something I cared about more than werewolves. We'd known it the day we came up with our plan. I knew it still, but what about Analise?

"Hey, Lise." I drew a deep breath as I moved to her side. "Want to hear a story?"

"Is it the one about the werewolf?" Analise giggled. "That one's not as good as the vampire one, you know."

"No. This is a different story." I squeezed her hand, feeling what I couldn't see, the ropes that bound her. "Not so long ago and not so far away, there were two best friends, and they were both afraid. One was afraid that if not for her, her parents would never have fought and would still be in love. The other one knew that wasn't true, and she kept saying so until the first friend believed her. Today that first friend isn't scared of *anything*."

Analise furrowed her brow, and I couldn't tell if she remembered or not. "What happened to the second friend?"

Who could blame Analise if she didn't want to remember this story? "The second friend was afraid, too, because everywhere she went, someone told her she didn't belong." My throat tightened around the words. "She wondered deep down if maybe they were right, if something was wrong with her after all. It was the first friend who told her that wasn't true."

Analise nodded slowly. "And so the second friend also found her courage, right?"

The candles dimmed, leaving us in a shrinking circle of light. "No. The second one never became brave. But her friend's words were still a comfort to her, because she knew what they really meant: that they would always be friends, forever and ever."

“Forever and ever …” Analise’s eyes searched my face, looking for—I don’t know what she was looking for, and it’s too late to ask now. But her gaze focused on me, and her eyes filled with tears. “Miranda?” she said.

“Yeah, Lise.”

“Miranda, you are the bravest person I know.”

I meant to explain she was wrong about that, too, only then the illusion around us melted away, and I saw my best friend, shirt torn, blood trickling from her shoulder and staining her lips, the little bowl beside her half full. The silver knife lay on her chest where Lankin had left it. I used it to cut her bonds, one by one, and the elf didn’t try to stop me.

Fear crept back into Analise’s eyes as I drew her to her feet. It’d been years since I’d seen her afraid. “Where are we?”

“Together,” I said. “Just like always.”

“You have made an enemy this day.” Lankin’s silken voice remained soft. “Not only of me, but of all my house. We will meet again, human child.”

His words sounded exactly like what someone in a story would say. Did that make them less true, or more? I urged Analise across the room. She stumbled, whispering my name. “Miranda. Oh god, Miranda.”

I led her through the shattered stones, back to the cobbled Soho streets and into the Bordertown night.

* * *

We’d gone only a few blocks down Ho Street before Analise tripped, fell, and wouldn’t get up. I sat beside her, using Lankin’s knife to cut strips from my fleece to bind her shoulder, terrified all the while he’d find us there. Somehow I got Analise sitting up. She was dizzy from losing all that blood, but I still had my backpack, and I fed her brownies until her dizziness eased.

Analise screamed for a while after that, and then she cried, and then she fell silent and wouldn’t say anything at all. That was when the strange half-bus half-coach came clanking by again, heading west this time. I helped Analise inside and onto a red cushioned bench. I was out of brownies, but the driver didn’t ask for payment. I heard the steady *clop-clop* of hooves outside, at odds with the uneven way the vehicle jerked along.

Only after we got off by Taco Hell did I remember there wasn't any horse to make the clomping sound.

* * *

It's been six weeks since Analise and I met Lankin, and in all that time Analise hasn't spoken again. Ms. Wu, the healer who looked at her, said it wasn't just fear keeping her silent. She said it was good that I'd taken Lankin's knife, but that I should have taken Analise's blood, too. "All the Lankins use blood for their magic," Ms. Wu explained. The last one had preferred infants, but this one liked girls. The healer didn't know what Lankin had done with Analise's blood, but it had broken something inside her, and only he could tell us how to fix it. No one's seen him or his mansion again, though, not even the Silver Suits who went to investigate, when my report matched some of those coming down from the Hill.

I found a squat and got Analise and me settled there, then wrote to Papá and Mamá and found a trader to deliver my letter. My parents hadn't left yet, and Papá tried to come to Bordertown himself to talk to me. The washes only led him out into the desert, though, so he and Mamá wrote back instead, saying I should come home and leave with them. They said we'd get by somehow, and that at least we'd all be together. Writing back to tell them why I couldn't was hard, too, almost as hard as writing to Analise's mom. I hope they get my letter. I hope they understand. I miss them, I do, but I *can't* leave.

I run with Janet's Bards now, telling this story to whoever will listen, but especially to other newbies like you. I don't know what you came to Bordertown looking for, but I hope that you find it. I hope that it's real, and that it works out how you planned. I hope that you'll let me hear your story, too, but that's up to you. I understand, better than anyone, that some stories are harder to tell than others.

Every time I tell mine, though, it becomes easier to believe what Analise said, that I'm brave after all. That's a sort of magic, too.

Analise mostly stays inside now, especially since the weather's gotten so cold. She stares at the walls of our squat, day and night. Sometimes I think she only sees peeling paint and dripping water, but other times her gaze goes soft, and I wonder if she sees another, grander room. Once in a while

she manages to sleep, and when she does, she wakes screaming. I hold her until her sobbing and shaking ease—until she looks up at me, sees me, and silently mouths my name. I know what she's asking for then.

So I give it to her. "Long ago," I say, my storyteller's voice steady and sure, "there were two best friends who had a plan for their future: one of them would marry a vampire, and one would marry a werewolf, and they would all live happily ever after. But even if that didn't work out—even if the werewolf had a girlfriend, even if the vampire's stories were all horrid illusions—they knew one thing most of all."

Analise always smiles at this part, so I do my best to smile, too. Of course I won't leave her alone here. "Most of all, they knew they would always be friends." Sometimes Analise's lips move silently with mine. "Forever and ever and ever."

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Fair Trade

WRITTEN BY
Sara Ryan

DRAWN BY
Dylan Meconis

BZZZT.
BZZT.
"Your Honor,
I'm positive I'll be able to move in with my mom –
ksk
ksk
– she just couldn't make it this morning, Your Honor.
VISITING AREA
her work wouldn't let her take the time off,
but I have this letter?"
2
3
4
"I'm sorry, Miss Howe, a letter won't work in these circumstances.
She needs to report in person within three days or I'll have to declare you a ward of the court."

Hey, Dad.
Wow, that jumpsuit is really orange. Looks –
Abby.
I wasn't sure you'd come.
What do you mean?
I love this place!
A little insider trading and we could be roommates!
You can even show me how it's done! It'll be a bonding –
Abby.
Sorry, Dad.
I know you didn't do it.
But I did.
Well, okay,
as long as you're in a confessional mood,
let's talk about Mom.
I don't think –
Please, Dad.
If she's dead,
or hates me, just say so.
Otherwise, I need an address.
...

I can't give you an address.
8
9
Visiting hours end in *five minutes*!
I tried, more than once, to go back –
– I couldn't find it.
You FORGOT where she LIVES?!
I didn't say that.
I said I couldn't *find* it.
So, what, my mother lives in *Brigadoon*?
No.
Bordertown.

Then Dad told me I shouldn't look for her.
ROWAN INVESTMENT GROUP
In that formal way I hate,
THE TOUGH GUIDE TO BORDERTOWN
like he's stating a neutral fact.
"However, I cannot prevent you."
FREEWAY ENTRANCE
I wanted to say,
"Right, Dad.
From jail you pretty much can't prevent me from doing anything."
But that felt like kicking him when he was down,
so I just nodded.
100% FAIR & FREE
FAIR trade
Colombia

EXOTIC
DICE · BOX
And found my way to Bordertown.
BAR SPECIAL ALIERA

?
?
?
?
...
!
Hey, another new kid!
I'm looking for my mom.
Is she amber with a foamy head?
God, I hope not.
Can't help, then.

Here.
First one's free.
Even if I find her,
it's too late.
I've missed the hearing.
She clearly never cared about me.
So why am I wasting my time?
Living with court-appointed strangers till Dad finds his Get Out Of Jail With A Shit-Ton Of Money card is not my favorite option, either.
Fuck.

YOU look like you need another drink.
Do YOU look like you're going to buy me one?
No!
We're going where we can drink for free.
To what do I owe this honor, Mister – ?
Hatch, as in "Down the."
Free food and beverage finder extraordinaire.
You're cute. I'm bored. It's Next Thursday.
I'm Abby.
But I don't know if I'll be here next Thursday.
Next Thursday is now, Abs.
It's when the galleries stay open late.
So let's go!
The booze always runs out after the first hour.
EXIT

HOUSE of FOOF!
This is amazing!
Ehhh, the snacks were better last month.
C'mon, there's one more.

welcome.
I was too sad to paint,
so I went in a more...
...conceptual direction.

May I serve you?
The Mad River special?
No thanks.
Conceptual?
It's trite, I know,
but I meant to evoke suicide.
Why are you sad?
I'm not sad NOW.
You guys look alike, you know that?
Why were you sad?
!
Splip!
Is she going to –
Anything's possible.
GASP
!!!
It's just more efficient than a cup,
you know?
Please, get comfortable.

I was hurt in the World. Badly.
It's how most of us arrive; that was fine.
But for some stupid, girly reason, I thought I could have love here.
And I thought to myself,
"well,"
"the men who hurt you? Were MEN."
Let me guess.
You found out girls can hurt you, too.
No! I decided to date a Trueblood.
And it was good, we had our baby. I was doing my art — but I guess I was like a pet, and he got tired of taking care of me, or maybe I was an experiment.
He couldn't handle having a mixed-blood child!
That was, like,
EVIDENCE –
That's better. Anyway. Do you know what happens when you take a halfling into that Screwed and Homely Realm?
They DIE.
He took her away, like he was drowning a kitten, and now they're both gone, and – and –
...and I'm cold.
He didn't go to the Realm, he –
...Mom?

I was hoping for a naked girl tonight, but –
Could she wear your jacket?
Okay. What now? Are there hospitals?
The Diggers have a place.
Help me get her there?
Why'd you call her *Mom*?
The usual reason.
But she's not old enough to –
– oh. *Wait.*
You were on the wrong side when the Way was closed.
There's a *right* side?

Okay, I think she's out.
Thanks for staying, Hatch.
And – everything.
You're cute. Did I mention that?
Thanks. But FYI:
Dad? Elf in jail.
Mom? Crazy drunk.
What am I supposed to *do*?
Look around, Abs.
Psht.
disinherited,
delusional,
diseased,
...okay, I think that one's just *dizzy*.
You seem okay.
Ha. *All* of us here have something tearing out our hearts.
Ow.
Stick around,
maybe I'll tell you what's tearing out mine.

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NIGHT SONG FOR A HALFIE

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Translator’s note: This night song is clearly modeled after some of the human lullabies that threaten rather than console howling children. We know it to be sung by an elfin mother because of the chorus, which is made up of elfin nonsense words common in other songs. How the singer and her partner hooked up we cannot know from the words, but her reference to jewels may be one of two things: either she is a fairy princess wooed by a human who ran off with the family’s fortune, or the jewels are a false glamour and must be sold before dawn comes to turn them back into pebbles or acorns or a handful of sand.

—Durocher, L., *Songs of the Borderlands* New York: Random & Rowling

Hushabye baby, my sweetling, my dear,
I’ll sing you a song in your half-elfin ear.
I’ll rock you and knock you and give you a tear.
Kris-nah-no-hany-ne-moreg.

Hushabye moaner, I’ll give you a sweet.
If you cannot be still, we’ll be out on the street.
I’ll sell you for pennies to change into meat.
Kris-nah-no-hany-ne-moreg.

Hushabye wailer, there’s no more to eat.
This squat has no power, no stove, and no heat.
If I could, I would give you a Bordertown treat.
Kris-nah-no-hany-ne-moreg.

Hushabye groaner, your dada and I
Have business to do in the soon by-and-by.
I need all my magicks, so please do not cry.
Kris-nah-no-hany-ne-moreg.

Hushabye howler, be still or be gone.
Your dada has taken my jewels to the pawn.
But he will be back here before it is dawn.
Kris-nah-no-hany-ne-moreg.

Hushabye monster, if I get no sleep
I'll drop you into a lake peaty and deep.
And this is one promise I surely will keep.
Kris-nah-no-hany-ne-moreg.

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OUR STARS, OUR SELVES

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Allie Land cursed at her phone as she stood in the gathering dark at the end of a cul-de-sac lined by feral houses. She had only a knapsack stuffed with clothes (and under the clothes some other things), an acoustic guitar in a case that got heavier every block, a phone that was failing her, and a growing ball of worry in her gut.

Her phone was kick-ass, bought with her last crappy retail job paycheck instead of paying her rent, and it was supposed to make her life easier, but instead it had gotten her lost—in a place where getting lost was a Bad Idea. She was *supposed* to be outside The Dancing Ferret, which was the traditional first stop for new arrivals to Bordertown, but instead she was alone on a dead-end street looking at houses so covered in vines and ivy that they might have been the ruins of some ancient jungle city founded by sentient gorillas. There were no streetlights here, just one old wooden utility pole with rotting-into-whiteness pumpkins impaled on every step-spike. The sight was at once sinister and sort of pretty.

Allie slid her thumb across the map on her phone's screen, trying to find out where she'd gone wrong, though with the built-in GPS, getting lost should have been impossible. The BorderMap Project was an application developed from the frequently contradictory guides to Bordertown that circulated through independent bookstores, 'zine shops, and cafés in the World, with cartography based on an aggregate approximation of the most plausible accounts from those who'd returned from the Border and talked about it coherently. When Allie first heard rumors that the Way to the Border was open again after more than a dozen years, she'd downloaded the map pack (the developers had suddenly started charging for it, natch, but it was only a couple of bucks) and hit the road. She was sorry to leave the rest of her band: moody guitarist Steve; dreamy-eyed bass player Rodge; and her percussionist Pete, a grizzled guy with a ponytail who'd been around during the birth of the New York antifolk scene in the eighties, a good seven or eight years before Allie was even born. Their loss. None of them were willing to take this kind of risk, so they'd never be stars anyway.

Now that she was finally here, the map was about as much good as a 20-watt amp at Madison Square Garden. The quiet guy in the prismatically painted pickup who'd given her a ride through the dusty scrubland just

outside the city had looked at her strangely when she asked to be let off a few streets away from here, but she'd just waved the phone at him and told him she had it covered. She'd heard technology could be hinky at the Border, but she'd figured the phone would just stop *working*, not that it would work *wrong*.

Though maybe the geography of the city had changed in the years since those maps were made. There was magic here, right? She had to get used to the idea.

But for right now, she needed to get away from the increasingly dark, no doubt increasingly cold, and definitely increasingly creepy Land of Feral Houses.

"You look lost." The voice, right in her ear, was as smooth as river stones, and Allie stiffened. *Borderland is dangerous*—she'd heard that plenty of times, but had she listened? Had she, hell.

Allie threw her elbow back hard and pivoted on her heel at the same time, wishing she'd signed up for a self-defense class at some point—all she knew about fighting was seeing her mom and dad beat on each other before the one died and the other went to jail, and they weren't exactly fancy moves she could imitate.

Turned out she wasn't a natural, either. Her elbow whiffed through nothing, and she wound up doing an ungainly pirouette instead. On the bright side, there wasn't a leering crackhead—or, wait, the junkies here did water from some magical river, right? That must be nice, way cheaper—standing behind her with a knife. Instead there was a—

"Holy shit, you're an elf," she said.

The man—the *elf*—wasn't even close to her. He was leaning against a sagging tree a good ten feet away, next to what had once been a driveway and was now more or less a wildflower garden with some chunks of asphalt among the stems. "And *you* are new here. We don't … care for that term. Elves are a human idea. We are simply Truebloods."

Pointy ears, silvery hair—long and feathered, no less. *If it looks like an elf, I say it's an elf. There's a really popular TV show about vampires called* True Blood. *You might want to rethink your branding*.

Allie knew better than to assume she could read an elf's expression—she wasn't totally stupid; she'd read some books before she came here and knew they weren't human, despite how sorta human they looked—but if

she'd had to guess, she would have said annoyance. But that was swiftly replaced by a look of wise serenity that just had to be 89 percent bullshit.

"You speak of matters in the False Lands beyond the City of Illusions—what you would call the World. That World matters not to my kind. You are on the Border now." Allie could hear the capital letters dripping off what seemed like every other word. "Though it might be wise to fear vampires. I have never encountered one here, but among these fallen houses, who knows what dark things dwell?"

"Eh, I'm so over vampire stories. These days they either wear tight pants and try to integrate with humanity, or they star in tween abstinence porn and sparkle in the sunlight. I bet you wish you sparkled, don't you?" Allie thought about toning down the bitchy, but this guy—elf, whatever—had seen her spin around and fling her elbow at nothing like a moron, and that was embarrassing, and when she got embarrassed, she got a little mean.

"Why do you speak of stories, when you are here, where stories are *lived*? In a place suffused with possibility? You must leave the World and its fripperies behind."

Fripperies? "Oh. Then I guess you don't care about the World's opinion regarding your jacket?"

He smiled, running his thumbs down the red faux leather. "You like it?" The jacket had a high collar with a black stripe around it and was festooned with countless zippers running at random angles.

Allie let a beat go by, then said, "You know Michael Jackson's dead, right? And his *Thriller*-era look died with him. At least you aren't wearing a sequined glove." He *was* wearing a faded black T-shirt and artfully shredded acid-washed jeans, looking pretty much like a refugee from the kind of eighties music videos that had found new life on YouTube.

Now the elf just looked confused, like he was a toddler and she was a childproof cap. "What? I don't …" He rallied, smiling and showing perfectly straight white teeth. "Perhaps you'd like to come with me to my home. We can drink spiced wine, and I will build a fire and tell you tales of war and romance from beyond the Wall."

"That's a big 'no thanks.' I didn't come all this way to get date-raped by an elf."

He frowned. "I told you. I am a Trueblood, and a knight of the Realm. I am captivated by your beauty. Allow me to compose an ode to your

cheekbones—”

“Sorry, I’m not interested. But if you’ve got a hot elf— Sorry, not intentionally being a dick, just forgot. If you’ve got a hot *Trueblood* sister, feel free to hook me up.”

He brushed a chunk of that glam-rock hair out of his face and pouted. He was pretty enough to be a girl, maybe, but he couldn’t have passed for one. He had what Allie—who really hated all that woo-woo new age vibrations and auras shit—could only think to call a “very masculine energy.”

“A sister? Do you mean—”

“Yep, I mean nice to meet you, I’m Allie Land, lesbian future rock star for hire. But since you’re done hitting on me, maybe you can point me to The Dancing Ferret? I hear they give away free beers there.”

He approached her, and Allie started thinking about her options if he got nasty. Fight, flight, scream in fright? But he stopped a few feet away, head cocked, and said in this low, syrupy voice, “Surely you’d reconsider your orientation. For me?”

“You’re not the first guy who thought he could bring me over to the other team, but I got all my second thoughts out of my system before I was done with junior high. Sorry, no. Now, about those directions …?”

He slumped, and some of the glamour—or, who knows, maybe literally Glamour—seemed to go out of him. “You don’t feel any … particular interest in me?”

“Uh, I mean, I’ve never met a Trueblood before, so that’s interesting, but if you mean like romantic interest, you’re just not equipped. It’s dark, it’s cold, it’s getting boring, and I’m about to start walking, so if you won’t help me, take care.”

“You’re one of the newcomers,” he said thoughtfully. “Perhaps new arrivals have some kind of … but, no, that doesn’t make sense, I don’t …” He shook himself, his zippers jingling, and said, “It’s dangerous to wander here if you don’t know the safe paths.”

“Is that a threat or an offer to escort me where I need to go?” She kept her voice level and reached for her key ring. Not a great weapon, but she was pretty sure sticking a house key in his eye would make an impression.

He drew himself up. “I would not *threaten* you. I am Alaunus. A knight and a lover.”

“Cool. Lead the way, Alopecia.”

“*Alaunus.* Or rather, Alaunus is what you may *call* me. My true name is difficult for human tongues to pronounce.”

“That’s enough about tongues, Al. Hey, Allie and Al, how about that. Now, less talk, more walk.”

“You might benefit from being more courteous.”

Allie said, “I guess we’ll never know.”

He shook his head. “Come, Allie Land. I will show you the way.” He beckoned, and they walked along the sliver of sidewalk that hadn’t been reclaimed by the savage flora of the encroaching lawns. Allie followed, glancing at the screen of her smartphone and the map, which now said, “Here Be Dragons” in Comic Sans font. She turned the phone off.

“The Way was closed for nearly a fortnight,” Alaunus said. “It’s gratifying to see new arrivals. This town thrives on novelty.”

“No shit, only two weeks? It’s been more like thirteen *years* on our side.”

He nodded. “So I heard. Time in the twilight lands can be strange. Humans tell stories of men who sleep on a hill and wake to find years gone by, do they not?”

“So the whole city pulled a Rip Van Winkle? I wish I’d known. I would’ve brought more stuff to barter—flash drives full of Internet porn, comeback albums by geezer bands, anti-retrovirals, the last few Stephen King novels, the rest of the Harry Potter books, designer drugs.” She had, in fact, brought some of the latter, as well as some prescription drugs. From the stories, B-town was all about sex, drugs, and rock and roll, and while she wasn’t interested in selling sex, she figured she could make a good living off the last two. Sure, they had free river water for drugs here, but it was supposed to be nasty, addictive stuff, and the shorter, more manageable highs and lows and altered states she had to offer would surely find buyers.

Eventually she would run out of drugs to barter, but music was forever, unless the drugs got hold of you, and they’d never gotten hold of her. Seeing her mom’s and dad’s excesses had cured her of any urges in that direction, except for a little weed.

“I suppose there would be a demand for those things,” Alaunus said. “Though I myself need only moonlight, and love, and wine, and poetry, and you.”

He was doing her a favor now, so Allie let that bit slide. He led her to a ramshackle-looking motorbike with rusty wind chimes dangling from the

handlebars. “Climb on,” he said, mounting the bike. “And be sure to hold on to me *very* tightly.” Allie rolled her eyes but got on.

They drove away from the feral houses, the bike’s engine humming rather than roaring. After winding through various streets and passing a block of sagging warehouses filled with broken windows and flickering firelight, they turned a corner and—*poof!*—there were lights, and competing blares of music, and sidewalk touts in exotic leathers and feather boas, and street carts full of sweet-savory-spicy flavors, and neon signs, and graffiti in sparkly paint, and a street jammed with lurching, listing, laughing drunks of various ages and degrees of elfishness and humanity. “Carnival Street,” Alaunus said. “The Dancing Ferret is just there. You said you were a musician? I know most of the important players here. You’ll be interested in the clubs and—”

“True words, Trueblood. Thanks for the ride. I can take it from here.”

He put one of his oddly delicate hands on her shoulder. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather find a quiet place to—”

“You’re persistent—I’ll give you that—but it’s never going to become an adorable little running joke between us, so stop hitting on me, all right?”

“You must at least give me a kiss. On the lips. A chaste one, if you insist, but I ask this much as payment for being your guide.”

Well, hell, it wasn’t like she’d never kissed a guy before, and she’d never kissed an *elf* before, so why not? She went up on tiptoe and planted one on his lips, held it for a moment, and pulled back before he had the chance to wrap her up in some dramatic, cheesy embrace.

He looked at her expectantly. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“The kiss … How was the kiss?”

“The total, and I’d guess eternal, lack of facial hair is a definite point in your favor, Al, but the fact remains: You’re a guy, and guys do not light my fire, curl my toes, or float my boat, so I don’t know what to tell you.” She shrugged. “Thanks again, and you should keep an eye open for my band: It’s called Allison Wonderland, and you’ll be hearing about us.” At the moment, “us” was a stretch, but in a place like this, it shouldn’t be hard to find some people to replace her bandmates. What had Louis XIV said? *L’État, c’est moi?* “I am the State”? Well, *she* was Allison Wonderland.

“I don’t understand.” Alaunus searched her face. “I *kissed* you. How can you still resist?”

“You’re not that cute, Al. Viva la resistance, is what I say.” Better break this off before it got even more uncomfortable. “See you around.” She waited until a big crowd of raucous people in black and silver came close, then swooped around in front of them and slipped into the throng.

She dodged around people and made her way toward The Dancing Ferret, hoping Al didn’t try to follow her. Surely he was just hoping to score with a newcomer. He’d get over it.

* * *

“You still give a free beer to the noobs?” Allie said, and the owner, Farrel Din—who demonstrated that even Truebloods could get pudgy—lifted one eyebrow.

“Noobs? I suppose we do. Welcome to Bordertown.” He slid a mug of foaming, oddly sedimentary-looking amber liquid toward her.

“So if you were an awesome musician looking to make a big splash on the scene in a hurry, where would you start?”

“That’s an excellent question.” He smiled affably and walked away, and after a moment Allie realized he wasn’t coming back. Oh, well. So much for the direct approach. She drained her beer, which was weird-tasting and probably elfin, but it was no weirder than some of the things she’d tried at that one brewpub-with-bands where they tried to re-create, like, nine-thousand-year-old Chinese or Babylonian beers based on incomplete recipes. Though she supposed maybe elfin beers were even older.

The Ferret was okay, but soon Allie hit the street, knowing she should find a place to lay her head but wanting to get a better feel for the scene here first. She went toward the next nearest club, one with a new-looking sign over the door reading “The Grand Conjunction.” There, she bribed the burly bouncer with a couple tablets of Adderall when he tried telling her the place was too full. She shouldered her way into a crowded, dimly lit space that had a handful of tables and a few booths along the wall, a stage about the size of an ironing board, and the familiar smell of sweat, guitar amps, and spilled beer. She checked out the band—cute lead singer, raw but

rockin’ good sound—and moved in closer to the stage as best she could while hauling her guitar and bag.

Allie stopped when she saw Alaunus in a booth. He was snuggled up with a couple of scantily clad human girls on either side and was surrounded by human guys who didn’t look remotely jealous of the attention he was getting but who kept pushing drinks toward him and laughing uproariously at whatever he was saying. Alaunus caught sight of Allie and said something to one of the guys. He was six foot seven if he was an inch and was wearing a brown leather jacket that looked like it had lost a fight with a crocodile. The guy pushed his way through the crowd, took the bag and guitar from her like he was plucking petals from a flower, and jerked his head toward the table. Allie hesitated—she’d blown Alaunus off, and he was a weirdo, but there wasn’t anywhere else to sit in here, and maybe she’d been too hard on him. All those people cozying up to him surely saw *something* in the guy. She followed the nonjolly giant, and the girls in their shiny tops glared at her but moved aside to let her sit next to Alaunus. Figured he’d be surrounded by human girls. Elf chicks probably had a natural immunity to all the bullcrap he produced.

“Of all the bars in all the Border,” he said, leaning in to speak in her ear.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, thinking, *What kind of elf quotes* Casablanca*?* “What’s the band called?”

“Children of Paradise. They weren’t very good when they started out—all enthusiasm, no execution—but the lead singer had his heart broken, and the experience helped him creatively.” He leaned in even closer. “Would you like to meet them? They’re the hottest band in town, this week. If I asked, they’d let you sit in for a set, I’m sure. It couldn’t hurt your aspirations.”

“You’d do that?” she said, rethinking her whole attitude regarding the elf. Even his Michael Jackson jacket was starting to look retro-cute. Maybe he wasn’t such a bad—

“Of course. I’d be happy to do a favor like that for … someone I felt sufficiently intimate with.” He moved from whispering in her ear to nuzzling her neck, his lips latching on to her throat with lampreylike force.

She elbowed Alaunus in the ribs. His lips made a wet popping sound when they unsuctioned from her neck. Gross. The table was bolted to the floor, so she couldn’t flip it over, which was too bad. She settled for

standing up in the booth, stepping onto the tabletop—knocking over plastic cups of booze and unlabeled bottles of homebrew beer—and then jumping down to the floor. She flipped Alaunus the bird with both hands and said, “Go suck a shotgun, asshole.” His girls gaped at her, and the big guy laid a hand on her shoulder. Alaunus looked at her with narrowed eyes but shook his head minutely. The big guy took his hand away, threw her bag and guitar case at her feet—she winced as the latter landed—and pointed toward the door. She picked up her things and used the guitar case as a club to clear a path, fighting off the adrenaline shakes.

That scumbag. Expecting her to screw him for a favor? Sure, she wanted to be a star, more than anything, always and forever, but she wasn’t willing to give up her dignity for a lousy outside *chance* at stardom.

On the street, she paused, wondering what to do next. Being pissed off wouldn’t put a roof over her head. Maybe she should try to find one of the hostels she’d read about, or someplace else to crash. Carrying all her worldly goods on her back was getting tiresome, and she didn’t want to run into Alaunus again.

She set off walking, and on the next block glanced down an alley and saw a handpainted banner that read “New in town? Free orientation!” with a few people wearing backpacks talking to outrageously dressed Bordertown residents. Seemed as good a place to start as any. She took a step toward the alley, but a hand grasped her shoulder. She was afraid it was Alaunus or his thug again, but when she turned, she saw it was a tall, pale woman, probably in her forties (though even thirty was way older than most of the crowd around here), dressed in black velvet over dark jeans. “You don’t want to go in there,” she said.

“Why not?”

The woman stepped off to one side, away from the alley mouth, and Allie followed. The woman glanced around, then said, “They’re promising people a warm bed, taking them around the corner, knocking them over the head, and stealing everything. It’s a halfie gang, though not one of the worst ones, not Rune Lords or anything. I don’t think they’d kill you on purpose, but accidents happen, and I’d hate to see you lose that guitar.”

Allie blinked. Muggers right off the main drag? Wouldn’t the cops … Right. This was B-town, not Brooklyn. There might be cops, or the local equivalent, in some neighborhoods, but not down here.

Now primed for suspicion, Allie said, “Why tell me, and not the people they’ve already lured in?”

“The stars guide me. They led me to you. And if I interfered with the gang more obviously, I’d be the one they hit on the head. I command a certain amount of respect in some circles, but the halfie street gang circle isn’t one of them. I’m Psyche. Are you looking for a place to stay?”

“Are you going to try to sleep with me?”

Psyche laughed. “You’re too young for me, and the wrong gender, so I’d say you’re safe.” She held out her hand, which was so thin it might have floated away without its ballast of silver rings, and Allie shook it.

“I’m Allie. The stars led you to me, huh? What, are you an astrologer?”

“Not by choice. I used to be an astronomer. But the sky here”—she glanced up—“it’s not like the sky anywhere else, on either side of the Wall. Come, it’s a bit of a trip to my home, and you must be tired.”

Allie followed her along the street, dodging jeering and indifferent groups of kids, many younger than Allie. “So many runaways,” Psyche said. “Are you a runaway, Allie?”

“Nah. Emancipated minor. Mom died in a car wreck when I was thirteen, and by the time Dad went to jail, I already had a job working in a music store, way more responsible than he ever was, so the court made me an official grown-up. I moved to New York, started playing music, picking up some gigs, working crap jobs, things like that.”

“No school?”

“Dropped out.”

“That’s a shame. Education is so important.…”

“It’s not like I don’t *read*, lady. And besides, I’m going to be a rock star. One job you don’t even need a high school diploma for.”

“That’s your dream? To be a famous musician?”

“Being a famous musician’s part of it, yeah, pretty much a necessary prerequisite, but there’s so much more to being a rock star—the whole lifestyle, doing anything you want, living life as hard and on the edge as you can. The key is to keep the destructive stuff to a minimum, stay off the hard drugs so you can keep the party going longer. My old drummer called it ‘sustainable hedonism.’ Getting the most pleasure for the longest time.”

“Why come to Bordertown? Music is popular here, but the audience is limited.”

“Ah, but if I get huge here and then go out into the World, I’ll have that whole B-town mystique added to my repertoire, maybe get an elf playing in my band, you know? Especially with Borderland appearing again after so long, the public will be hungry for that kind of stuff.” Allie followed Psyche up the street to another alley, where a beat-to-hell-looking motorcycle stood—complete with a sidecar. Psyche climbed onto the bike and gestured at the sidecar.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Allie said.

“You’d rather ride bitch? You can, but I bolted on the sidecar knowing I’d have a passenger. There’s room for your guitar if you wrap your arms around it.” Psyche put on a black helmet and a pair of aviator goggles. Then she passed over a helmet with a big daisy painted on top. Allie swallowed her mortification and put it on. At least nobody knew who she was, so she didn’t have to worry about any of her friends seeing her. She got into the sidecar, strapped herself in as much as possible, got her stuff arranged, and held on to her guitar as the motorcycle lurched and growled and nosed its way out of the alley and along a bizarrely circuitous route that seemed to involve a lot of doubling back.

“We’re driving in circles!” she yelled, and Psyche yelled back, “We’re avoiding gang territory!” and then they both gave up because yelling over the sound of the engine was too difficult. And even when the engine quit and a funny box strapped by the seat started humming and emitting blue light, the sound of the rushing wind—yeah, the bike kept going, engine or not, must be magic—was still too loud for easy conversation.

The bike wove through neighborhood after neighborhood as they crossed the city from south to north, and then, Allie noted with alarm, they seemed to be leaving the city altogether. She wondered if she’d misjudged Psyche, if she was going to become a ritual sacrifice or something. They bumped up a rutted road that climbed a hill, and then she saw a little house on a ridge, looking over the city lights below. It was dark—there wasn’t much of a moon—but the motorcycle’s headlight beam revealed enough of the house to give Allie a sense of ramshackle disrepair barely held in check.

“Okay,” Psyche said, climbing off the bike. “Let’s go in.”

“You don’t live in the city?” Captain Obvious kind of question, but Allie wondered why.

“The Nevernever is better for my work. It’s useful living this close to the Wall.”

Allie didn’t know what Psyche was talking about, but confusion was probably a geographical hazard on the Border. “Thanks for taking me in.”

“Of course. I don’t believe *everything* happens for a reason—but our meeting did. Come along. And welcome to Stargazer House.”

* * *

The inside of the house was just as ramshackle as the outside, with shelves on every available bit of wall, sometimes in the form of planks simply nailed to the paneling, all crammed with books and sheaves of paper. A drafting table covered in oversized sheets of paper dominated the center of the room, and a lamp with a multijointed neck clipped to the side of the table provided the room’s only illumination—its electrical cord was wired into one of those weird spellboxes, and the light was weak and yellowish but probably better than candles for writing under. Copper charms and crystals and feathers dangled from the lamp’s neck in such profusion that you probably couldn’t even adjust it without making a huge clanking, rattling noise. The only other objects of note were a futon in couch form, covered in a dark blue blanket dotted with yellow crescent moons and stars; a dark wooden table, with the legs carved in a similar night-sky motif; a wood stove, currently unlit; and a black iron spiral staircase that must lead to an attic room or something. Little model solar systems hung down from the ceiling, lightweight planets swaying from mysterious breezes or maybe just the vibrations of their footsteps. There was a tiny galley kitchen, a short hallway to what must be a bedroom, and a door that Allie devoutly hoped led to a bathroom. Psyche confirmed it and told Allie to feel free to freshen up.

The bathroom was cramped, and there didn’t seem to be any hot water—if that was life in Bordertown, Allie would have to make some mental adjustments—but she was able to pee and wash her face and rinse the yuck out of her mouth. Her stomach complained—she hadn’t eaten since a gas station sandwich in the morning—and she hoped Psyche’s hospitality would extend to dinnertime. She didn’t think Psyche would trade food for pills; she seemed more like the natural-high-or-nothing type.

When Allie came out, Psyche was nowhere to be found, so she strolled over to the bookshelves. Thick and serious-looking science books—some of which even had *titles* Allie couldn't make sense of—mingled with more comprehensible popular science books by Neil deGrasse Tyson and Michio Kaku, along with astrology books and new age–looking stuff with titles like *Unlocking Your Star Power and Overcoming Astrological Adversity and Cosmic Compatibility.*

"Allie?" Psyche's voice came from above. "I'm up here. Sorry, I have to do a little work, but you can join me if you like."

Allie spiraled up the staircase, lifting a trapdoor at the top and climbing up, expecting to find an office, a bedroom with a desk in it, something like that.

Instead she found herself on the roof: an open-air platform with a big telescope mounted in the center and a couple of deck chairs, and Psyche lying flat on her back on a yoga mat, staring up at the sky. "Look with me," she said.

Allie hadn't looked at the stars in … hmm. She'd gone camping upstate the year before, but she'd gone with this girl she liked at the time, and they hadn't seen much besides the inside of the tent after nightfall. And in Brooklyn it never got really dark, certainly not so dark you could see the stars like this. She lay down on her back beside Psyche and looked up. With the trapdoor closed, the blackness was nearly total, which was weird, since Bordertown *was* right down the hill and should have been filling the sky with light pollution, but maybe this unnatural blackness was a Nevernever thing.

The stars were almost overpowering in their density, their profusion, their clarity: The sky was less a sheet of black scattered with stars and more a sheet of light webbed by darkness. The scope was unimaginable, and Allie—who had no greater ambition than to be a truly huge star of a different sort—felt an uncharacteristic sense of smallness, and humbleness, and proportion, and a sense of the unfillable vastness of the universe. "Wow," she said.

"Do you see it?" Psyche said.

Allie scanned the sky, expecting a shooting star or something, but there was nothing new. "See what?"

"Do you know much about stars? Constellations?"

“No, I don’t.”

“Ah,” Psyche said. “Then you wouldn’t notice. This sky … is not our sky. Not our constellations. No Sagittarius, no Capricorn, no Orion’s Belt, no Big Dipper. No North Star. No *moon.* Down in the city, there’s a moon, but here? Not tonight. Sometimes, yes—but it’s not *our* moon.”

Allie shivered, though it wasn’t all that cold. “So you’re saying this is, what, the sky over Elfland? Or whatever they call it, the Realm?”

“I’ve had Truebloods up here to look, and they say it’s not their sky, either, though it’s hard to be sure, since passing through the Wall does strange things to your memory, apparently. But I think it’s an entirely different sky. Perhaps a mingling of ours and theirs. Perhaps something else, a sky just for the Borderlands. Whatever it is, wherever these stars are from, they have powers.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was an astronomy teacher back in the World. Fresh out of school, working at a community college. After my first semester, I stopped being surprised when students dropped the class after realizing I wasn’t teaching *astrology*, showing them how to do horoscopes. Astrology! It’s so absurd. The idea that the orientation of the stars in the heavens can somehow affect your personality, or the shape of your life, it’s so ridiculous. Aren’t stars amazing enough without applying that kind of softheaded thinking to them? So I started doing a lecture, asking people when they were born … and telling them what their *real* signs of the zodiac were.”

Allie, who was a Sagittarius—which giant rock star Jim Morrison himself had said was “the most philosophical of all the signs,” though he’d followed that up by saying he didn’t believe in any of that bullshit—said, “What do you mean, real signs?”

“The sun signs of the zodiac—Capricorn, Taurus, and so on—are based on ancient observations of the sky, from thousands of years ago. But the stars *move*, or rather, the precession of the equinox makes them appear to move, relative to the Earth. Someone born on, say, January fifth this year isn’t being born under the same configuration of stars as a person born on January fifth two millennia ago. The sun isn’t in the constellation Capricorn on January fifth these days, so even if being a Capricorn *meant* something, it wouldn’t apply anymore. I explained all that to my classes, and people burst into tears sometimes, because their whole fundamental concept of

who they were got overthrown. Girls broke up with their boyfriends because they believed their star signs were no longer compatible. I was horrified. I'd meant to teach them to *think*, to understand why astrology was pseudoscience, but so many of them completely missed the point." She sighed. "And now here I am. I've become what I hated—an astrologer."

"No shit?" Allie said.

"Oh, yes. A very successful one. Rich mortals and Truebloods alike come to me so I can do their charts. I make a very comfortable living. There's not much call for astronomy anymore, but everyone wants insight into the future or their own character. And the worst thing is … it works."

Now Allie sat up. "But you said yourself, it's dumb to think stars can affect your life."

Psyche continued gazing skyward, and Allie wasn't sure, but she thought tears were leaking from the corners of the stargazer's eyes. Her voice was unchanged, though: "But a lot of people *believe* in astrology, and on the Border, belief is a potent force. This is a hard place to be a scientist. And under this strange sky, when I examine the movement and interrelationship of these strange stars, I do see patterns, and my predictions and insights do come true. I even predicted the closing of the Way, though not early enough to do much good, and the Trueblood politician I told refused to believe me … though he sent me a note of apology later, and he's had a basket of fresh fruit delivered every week since the Borderlands reopened. He's a client for life now."

"Huh. So you want to do my chart? See how long it'll take me to get famous?"

"You can't afford me yet." Allie thought she detected a smile in Psyche's voice. "Once you become a rock star, of course, you'll be welcome to my services."

"So, what, your stars told you to come save me from a halfie gang?"

"Not exactly. They told me to find you and show you … that." She pointed, and Allie looked. Now there *was* something new in the sky: a bright star, straight above, sapphire-tinted, bigger than the rest, surrounded by a ring of black sky, as if it had crowded the other stars out of its way. "That's your star, Allie Land."

"What's that mean?"

“It means you get a wish. The star will appear to you every night, until you wish on it, and then it’s gone forever. So choose your wish carefully.”

“Are you messing with me?”

“Why don’t you go downstairs and find yourself something to eat? I need to do a chart for a Trueblood lord, and it will take me most of the night. You can sleep on the futon—just go to bed whenever you’re tired.”

“Hold up. You can’t just drop this thing on my head about me having a *wish* and not expect some follow-up questions!”

“Haven’t you ever read a fairy tale, Allie? If you haven’t, there are a few books on my shelves. They’ll tell you everything you need to know about wishes, and how careful you should be with them. Now, please, I need to work.”

Feeling well and truly dismissed, Allie went downstairs and scrounged around until she found oily peanut butter and some homemade bread she could slice, and made herself a couple of sandwiches. She sat on the futon reading stories about how profoundly ill-thought-out wishes screwed up people’s lives.

But assuming this was all for real, her wish was simple, and obvious, and she’d make it the first chance she got:

She’d wish to be the biggest and best rock star in the past and future history of the world.

* * *

Allie woke up in a beautiful white bedroom where all the furniture seemed to glow, as if carved from frozen moonlight. A window stood open, gauzy curtains fluttering, and Allie stepped out of bed and looked out the window. There was nothing out there but darkness and a vast and shining sea lapping at the base of the tower she was in. She caught sight of herself in the vanity mirror—an oval of shimmering reflective glass—and saw a sparkling, beautiful, flawless, plastic version of herself, dressed in the sort of beribboned lacy nightgown old ladies who read romance novels probably dreamed about.

Dreamed. Of course. “Whoo. Glad this isn’t real. What’s the deal, subconscious?”

“I’m glad to see at least *this* still works.” Alaunus stepped from the shadows, dressed in gorgeous silver-white costume drama clothes, and bowed low. “I have come to you in your dream, Allie, to show you how I might make your dreams come true.”

“See, this is usually the part of my dream where Katee Sackhoff comes in wearing nothing but a tank top and starts taking my pants off. Except I’m usually not dressed like an extra in an eight-year-old girl’s unicorn princess fantasy. Why am I dreaming about *you*?”

Alaunus sat on the edge of the bed. “Really? You feel no attraction for me, no adoration, no sense that you are blessed to be in my presence? No, to be crude, sexual excitement?”

“Wait, is this a magic thing?” Allie crossed her arms over her chest and noticed with annoyance that her boobs were bigger here. “You, the real you, is like on *purpose* inserting himself into my dream? Which is the only inserting you’ll be doing, let’s make that clear.”

Alaunus put his head in his hands. “I don’t understand this. I am a lovetalker, a gancanagh! Adored by men, irresistible to women … except for you.”

“What do you do with all those women you attract?”

“I love them.”

“*All* of them? How’s that working out?” *And why are you bothering me?*

Alaunus cleared his throat. “Eventually, of course, I tire of them and move on.”

“That’s pretty shitty of you. What happens to the women after that?”

“Traditionally, they pine away unto death. But that effect seems to be diminished on the Border, which is a blessing, really, though they are probably unhappy for a while, I suppose.” He stood up. “But you, Allie Land, I want *you*, and I don’t understand why you don’t—”

Allie took off one of her shoes—who the hell went to sleep in *high heels*?—and threw it at his head, but he vanished before it struck him, and the dream vanished with him.

* * *

In her next dream, which was one of her usual ones, she was onstage in a vast stadium, before a crowd so large it seemed to encompass all of

humanity. Everyone was focused on Allie, standing in the spotlight at the head of Allison Wonderland—the current band lineup was a bit shadowy—and holding a guitar, about to open her mouth and launch into the first song of the set of her life.

Even in the dream, she thought, *I'm just one little wish away from making all this come true.*

* * *

Allie woke to an annoying and weirdly familiar voice saying, "But it doesn't *work*!" in the vicinity of the front door. She was half sprawled on the futon, her mouth tasted like something furry had died of a wasting disease under her tongue, and she desperately wanted coffee.

She got up, stretched, and went to the front door, where Psyche was talking in a low and reasonable tone. "I'm not a fairy godmother. I didn't grant the wish. I just showed you your star. I don't know why it isn't working on this girl—perhaps something in the wording of your wish provided a loophole."

"Morning, Psyche. Who's at the door?"

Psyche turned, and there was Alaunus outside, looking rather more bedraggled than he had in her dream, though he did have on a stupid old-fashioned ruffly shirt. His face froze. "This is a conspiracy. You're in this together."

"Alaunus … *this* is the girl you're talking about?" Psyche looked from me to Alaunus, her eyes wide. "You'd better come in. We'll have some breakfast and … talk about this."

Alaunus entered stiffly, and Allie narrowed her eyes. "Stay out of my dreams, jerk. Learn to take no for an answer, or I'll find out whether *elves* are vulnerable to getting kicked in the balls."

To her shock, Alaunus began sobbing. He sat on the futon, his arms wrapped around himself, and cried. Allie sat on a cushion on the other side of the low table, watching him with interest as Psyche brought over a pot of tea and some of that fresh fruit the elf politician had sent her. She sat beside Alaunus and patted him on the back a bit awkwardly. Psyche was nice enough, but motherly she wasn't.

Allie sipped some tea, which was too hot to taste much of anything, and peeled a banana. “So this guy got a wish, too? How many of those things do you give out, anyway?”

Psyche shook her head. “I don’t give them out. I saw my own star, soon after I got to Bordertown, and I made a wish on a whim, never expecting it to come true. I said, ‘I wish I could stay here, and have a good life, and keep studying the stars.’ And it came true. In a way.” She shrugged. “Last year, the stars directed me to Alaunus, and I showed him his star. Yesterday, they directed me to you.”

Alaunus lifted his head and stared at Allie. “She has a star, too? Could that be why my powers failed to work on her?”

“It makes sense,” Psyche said. “Your … charm … never worked on me, either. Allie, if I may ask, what’s your birthday?”

“September twenty-third. Why? You going to do my chart after all?”

“No. But you were born on the autumnal equinox. I was born on an equinox, and so was Alaunus—a day when night and day are in perfect balance, the same length, and we were each born at precisely the moment when day becomes night. A borderline time, a threshold time, a twilight time. What time were you born?”

“I don’t know exactly. Evening, I think.”

Psyche nodded. “Then you likely fit the pattern, too. Something about being born at that precise moment on that day—even in different years—brought us to the attention of … whatever’s up there, looking down on us. I’d hazard a guess that Alaunus’s wish-given powers don’t work on others like him, other children of the equinox. It’s a working hypothesis, at least.”

Allie frowned. “So, wait, how do you know he was born on the equinox? Do they have the same seasons over in elfy-welfy land?”

“Ah, no, Alaunus was mortal when he was born,” Psyche said. “His wish …”

Alaunus covered his face with his hands, and Allie laughed—she couldn’t help it. “Wait, you weren’t always an elf? You were a guy who *wished* to be an elf? How very Otherkin of you. And you gave me all that crap about how your kind are called *Truebloods.* Ha. Un-Trueblood more like it.”

“You’re so *mean* to me!” he said, uncovering his face. “No one is ever mean to me anymore!”

“Somebody oughta be.” Allie was pissed, and she was just getting warmed up. “If what you told me in that dream last night is true, you’re a walking, talking date-rape drug. The living embodiment of GHB in a bad Michael Jackson jacket, taking advantage of people. And now you’re *crying* about it? Boo-hoo, everyone loves you. I saw you in that club, girls hanging off you, guys buying you drinks—getting the total rock-star treatment, except you don’t have to actually *do* anything or have any talent. So what are you whining about?”

“Because I’m still so alone.” His voice was sufficiently miserable that Allie let her next line of attack die. “When I stood beneath my star, I was just a filthy human street kid, beneath notice, beneath contempt, ignored when I wasn’t being beaten—and I wished that *everyone would love me.* I transformed into this. An elf. A lovetalker—or something close enough. At first, it was a dream come true. Everyone loved having me in their company, and they were all willing to … do things for me.”

Alaunus picked at a bit of silver thread sticking out of the sleeve of his Ren faire–looking shirt, and Allie thought he was trying to avoid her gaze. “But something was wrong. The other el—the Truebloods—they’re very good to me. They adore me, they tell me their secrets, they show me their magics, but the truth is”—he slumped, shrinking down into himself—“I got to the point where I couldn’t stand the company of elves. I understand their language well enough—I guess that comes with this body—but I never get their jokes, if they *are* jokes, and they always talk about books, artists, musicians, people I’ve never heard of, and they just assume this shared knowledge, this weird, like, cultural heritage. I don’t have that, and being among them made me feel lonelier than ever. Sometimes the Truebloods I spent time with would make some gesture or say some phrase and look at me expectantly, and when I didn’t do whatever I was supposed to—make the secret sign, give them the special handshake, complete the famous line of poetry they were quoting—they’d just look at me, a little confused, and say my memory must have been affected by my passage through the Wall. So I stopped spending time with elves, started spending time with mortals, most of whom are half in love with elves *anyway*, but that doesn’t work too well, either. Humans never stop thinking of me as alien. They’ll pause in midconversation to explain things they think I won’t understand—what *Sesame Street* is, who President Nixon was, what the Apollo moon landings

were—and *that's* frustrating, so I snap at them and say I'm not an idiot, and they don't even get annoyed with me, just apologetic, angry at *themselves* for making me mad."

Now he looked up at Allie, and his eyes were wide and bright and almost blazing, and he said, "But at least they *liked* me. Their company was tolerable because of … well, the free drinks, and the free rent, and all the sex. Whereas you … you don't like me at all. You mock me, laugh at me, dismiss me, no matter how hard I try. I wished to be loved, but I think I should have wished to be *worthy* of love." He bowed his head. "I don't want to be … this … anymore."

"Eat a pear," Allie said. "It'll make you feel better."

While he mournfully munched, Allie mused for a bit. "So what do you want to do? Can you get another wish? Wish yourself back to normal?"

Psyche shook her head. "Another star has not appeared for him. I don't understand why they come, but I have no reason to think he'll get another wish."

And I'm not about to waste my wish turning him into a human again, she thought. *He got himself into this.* "The way I see it," Allie said, "is you've got a magical problem. So maybe you should look for a magical solution."

"Where? I can charm myself into the offices of the most powerful elves in Bordertown—they accept me as one of their own and find me endlessly fascinating—but magic here is so strange and unreliable, what good would it do? What if any attempted solution made things *worse*?" He took a ferocious bite from his pear.

"Okay. So go through the Wall."

Alaunus stared at her, mouth open, bits of partially chewed pear showing. *How can anybody find that charming?* Allie thought. "You're an elf, right? Or everybody thinks you are. You can do that whole elfy thing. Sure, you don't know their knock-knock jokes or their legislative process, but you can charm your way past the Border guards. And magic is supposed to work better on the other side of the Wall. Go find the king or queen or whatever they've got over there and ask for help—hell, tell them you're trapped in a Trueblood's body and you want *out.* I'm sure they'll get right on that. What've you got to lose?"

"They could *kill* me," he said. "They could, I don't know, turn me into a *salamander.* Turn me inside out. They could do anything!"

“Yeah, maybe … but before you get salamandered, you’d get to see what lies beyond the Border, wouldn’t you? How many guys born mortal get to do *that*?”

“I …” Alaunus looked at Psyche. “Can it work?”

“Let me examine your chart.” Psyche pulled a sheaf of pages down from one of her bookshelves. She sat on a stool at the drafting table and began poring over the sheets.

“Have you thought about your wish—” Alaunus began.

“Shhh!” Psyche said. “Quiet, please. Give me a moment.”

So Allie and Alaunus drank tea and eyeballed each other warily, and Allie tried to refrain from humming and tapping her foot. Finally Psyche said, “It’s impossible to predict what might happen if you try to cross the Border, as the magics preventing any penetration of the Realm beyond are too powerful, but it is definitely an auspicious day for a journey, Alaunus. I can say that. You will make it through Elfhaeme Gate unscathed, and the trajectory from there is promising.”

“I’ll do it.” He put down his teacup and stood, trying to go for the assured-confidence look, but with some trembly freak-out leaking from around the edges. “It will do me good to move on. And it will be an adventure.”

“You’re doing the right thing, Al,” Allie said. “This is the first non-dick move you’ve made, really. Come see my band play if you ever make it back this way. We should be *huge* by then.”

Alaunus nodded gravely and extended his hand. Allie shook it with a solemnity equal to his own, and Alaunus said, “I wish you the best,” apparently totally oblivious to the irony of that particular wording.

After he was gone, Allie flung herself down on the futon, exhausted by the whole exchange. “You ever think maybe you shouldn’t tell people about their wishes? Seems like they can make trouble.”

Psyche nodded. “Yes. But the stars compel me. I get my livelihood from them, and I’m unwilling to risk offending them. I’m sure they have their reasons. Would you like to come back to town with me? I can drop you off downtown while I go to my meetings.”

“Sure thing, and thanks. But you wear the stupid daisy helmet this time.”

* * *

Allie spent the day exploring Bordertown, visiting places she'd read about on the wildly inaccurate Bordertown Travel Wiki online: Getting some caffeine at Café Cubana, complete with totally like, whoa, over-the-top drag queen hosts and reportedly magical teapots that sometimes talked, though she didn't hear them say anything. Stopping in at The Dancing Ferret to see if she could pass herself off as new again and get another free beer failed, and she was warned not to try anything like it again or she'd be banned. She did barter a tablet of diazepam for the best burger she'd ever had in her life. Pausing outside the Mock Avenue Church, though she couldn't see the gargoyle. Hanging out on the promenade and looking at (but not touching) the strange red Mad River and the boats there, and wondering if anybody would dare eat fish caught from addictive liquid. Browsing at Elsewhere Library and *really* wishing she'd thought to bring the last Harry Potter books after all, since she could've probably done a sweet trade. Watching skater kids at Tumbledown Park. Checking out music venues and places she might sit in with some other bands as a way of meeting people, though they were mostly closed during the day. Trying to get a feel for the place, avoiding the neighborhoods and streets Psyche had warned her against and, most of all, trying to decide what, exactly, she'd say when she stood under her wishing star tonight.

The decision had seemed easy until she saw what getting his heart's desire had done to Al.

* * *

Psyche picked her up and took her to dinner at a weird place called Bolivar's with a prix fixe menu, something Allie had never encountered before. The food was kinda weird—would've been even without what Psyche told her were Faerie ingredients—but good, and the rednut pastries were especially awesome. Psyche told her more about the city, about where she might find work if she wanted a job and stuff like that, carefully avoiding the issue of wishes. After dinner, they rode back up the hill to Stargazer House. Psyche went wordlessly to the roof, and Allie followed. While Psyche stared at the heavens and made occasional handwritten notes by starlight, Allie just waited for her star to appear.

When it finally did, that vibrant blue surrounded by a halo of darkness—probably a metaphor in that, or at least a line Allie could put into a song—Psyche put down her pen. “Well?” she said. “What’s your wish?”

“Is there a time limit on this thing?” Allie said.

“Ah … no. As far as I can tell, the star will appear nightly until you make a wish. Why? Do you need more time to think?”

“Nah.” Allie lay back, hands laced behind her head, looking at her star, which she thought would become a familiar friend in time. “See, I was thinking. If I wished to become the biggest rock star in the world, I’d never know if I *earned* it. I wasn’t even willing to sleep with Alaunus to get a shot at being a star, because it seemed like cheating. It wasn’t the right way to do it, and I don’t really think *wishing* my way to the top is any better than *sleeping* my way there. I’d always wonder, what if my band really sucks? What if people love me not because Allison Wonderland is the greatest band of all time, but because of some stupid magical compulsion? I never thought about it much before, but maybe the path you take is as important as the place you’re going.”

“So you’ll wish for … something else? For more talent?”

“No, that’s no good, either, because I’d never know if I *could* have made it on my own. It’s still cheating. My awesome rock-star life would be just as bad as Alaunus’s. Hollow.”

“Then … what will you do with the wish?”

“I was thinking: One thing real rock stars are is *fearless.* They do whatever they need to do, and screw the consequences. And what could make me more fearless—totally rock-star fearless!—than knowing I’ve got a wish held back in reserve, a way to save myself if shit gets too real? With something like that up my sleeve, I wouldn’t be afraid to try *anything.* And being willing to try anything is totally rock and roll.”

Psyche laughed. “When you put it that way, I can see your point.”

“Sure you can,” Allie said. “My point is the pointiest. While we’re on the subject of rock and roll, do you know any unattached, totally kickass drummers?”

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“Let’s have the halfie girl do our portrait,” said the woman in the garish, sparkled gown. Her male companion, who looked like he belonged in a middle-school production of *Robin Hood*, clutched the pouch at his waist as if I were the one who was a robber.

I shrugged off my irritation at the term “halfie” and motioned the couple over to my pitch. Even in Bordertown, you can’t live on dreams and wishes, so since I have a knack for likenesses, I spent my nights at the corner of Ho and Carnival, sketching tourists. It earned me coins from places I’d never been, patterned trade beads, and silver studs—enough to buy almost what I needed, never as much as I wanted.

These two were noobs with money—gauche nouveau merchants, fresh from the World, probably with a renovated house on Dragon Tooth Hill—looking for an “authentic” Soho experience. Cameras don’t work right in Bordertown, so they can’t take snapshots; the next best souvenir was a quickie street sketch done by a colorful character. I smelled sale, and why should I explain to them that I wasn’t half elf, if it was to my advantage?

They had different names for it in the World, but that thing about my looks has followed me since I was born. In Bordertown, though, because I am tall and my eyes are silvery gray, some people make the wrong assumption about my parentage. My mother was white, not an elf. Whatever, I still hate the term “halfie.” What is that—half a person? You could tell the old-time townies from the noobs, though: They didn’t question me about my looks, about why my ash-blond hair curls so tight, why my lips are full and my nose broad but my skin so very pale. They didn’t look at me cockeyed with the thought “What are you?” clear in their eyes. The sad thing was, most of the time they didn’t notice me at all. I was merely another runaway kid.

These two stared, but I guess I still did my share of staring, too, like when Wolfboy passed on the street. I’d been in Bordertown for only three months myself. I posed the couple with The Dancing Ferret in the background so I could capture the club’s spell-powered neon sign behind them, progressive views of the namesake creature flashing in sequence. I sat on a milk crate and used my watercolor pencils to sketch the couple, then smudged the lines and painted washes with a brush and water. I lightened

the woman's hair and added the hint of a slant to her eyes to make her look a little elfin.

I sympathized with them, really. I mean, who doesn't yearn for magic? I had, back in the World, back when I had a mother and a father who were always disappointed in me and a pretty younger sister who got all the boys, back when I wondered if Bordertown might or might not exist. I was the plump one who was taller than the boys, who made poor grades, who was more interested in doodling in her sketchpad than cramming for a math test. I was the one who couldn't answer when anyone my age talked to me at school. My sister laughed at me and said we were Beauty and the Beast. I loved her, and hated her, and longed for that day when magic would turn me beautiful and *she* would be the beast in my shadow.

I wasn't plump now—hunger had made sure of that. Hunger and stupidity. But the elves I had longed to meet turned away from me as if I were beneath them.

The woman giggled when I showed my picture to them, so I knew she liked it. "You must have inherited some magic," she gushed.

A passing elf in tattered finery and feathered magenta hair stopped and glared at her and then at me.

The noob man pulled a silver bangle from his pouch and dropped it into the kerchief I held out. I stuffed the bangle into my jeans pocket, before the elf could tell him he'd overpaid. Who did he think he was, the vendor police? I handed the woman the picture, and the couple swept off, he smiling proudly, she flapping the paper in the air to dry their lying portrait.

"Go back to your mother and father and stop pretending to have the True Blood," the tattered elf growled at me.

Was that why elves were always so snitty to me? They thought I was trying to pass? "Dude, I didn't claim to be half elf, did I?" I wanted to say, *Who died and made you King of Bordertown?* But what if he cursed me? Anyway, maybe he *was* some kind of prince; although I was dubious about those elfin claims to royalty—what about all the Russians who had fled to Western Europe after the Revolution, saying they were related to the czar and weren't?

The elf's eyes widened. Had he read my mind? They couldn't do that, could they? He spat words in Elvish.

I fluttered my eyelashes and took a chance. “You think I’m cute, don’t you?” I concentrated hard to make him believe me.

He snorted and walked off. That sort of suggestion worked on humans sometimes, but I could never persuade elves of anything.

An alley kid with mucky face paint and a missing front tooth screeched laughter at me. Her gaggle of spike-haired minions joined in. I narrowed my eyes and hissed at them. I couldn’t help it. I don’t know exactly what I look like when I do that, but it must be nasty, because they scattered. I might not sass an elf, but I knew where I stood with humans.

Every other person who walked by was a singer, an artist, a poet, or a dancer. The Bordertown air pretty much shimmered with creativity. That pisses me off sometimes, and other times it makes me feel like anything could be possible. The alley kid in the face paint caught my eye again. She sat alone now, slumped on a doorstep. Her eyes gazed on far-off places and things that I would never know. I picked up my pencil and began to sketch her.

The evening was shirtsleeve warm, but I always felt cold, so I wore a shabby denim jacket over my T and the black fingerless gloves decorated with pink skulls on the back that a customer had given me. They matched my high-top sneakers with skulls on the sides. I hoped the weather would hold. People joked about changeable weather in the World, but here that was no joke—balmy in the morning and an unexpected wizard blizzard in the afternoon. What I loved, though, was when the wind came from the north or northwest, bringing a sweet smell from over the Border—wildflowers and brandy, or maybe the fruits of Goblin Market.

Right then, that north wind must have sprung up, because a delicious scent enveloped me.

“That’s really good,” a soft voice said from behind me, as if the wind spoke. I turned my head to discover the most beautiful elf I have ever seen, examining my half-finished drawing of the alley kid. It was the first time an elf had actually said anything nice to me. I couldn’t answer. He nodded, then strode off with a carryout box of burritos in his hands while I mentally kicked myself. I swear every girl on that street watched him walk away. It was a fine view.

“Who’s *that*?” a girl with green dreads and a touch of elf asked the boy at the taqueria wagon next to my pitch. She fiddled absently with her eyebrow

piercing.

“Sky something,” the boy answered. “He’s playing at The Ferret tonight.”

Now I know where I’ll *be after work*, I thought.

When I returned the milk crate to Crazy Eddie’s Street Vendor Supplies, I pocketed my deposit to trade for the cover at The Dancing Ferret, then crossed the street. *I hope his band doesn’t do Trueblood rap,* I thought. Hip-hop elf rants don’t do it for me.

It still amazed me that I could walk on into a Bordertown club. There are people in the World who don’t believe in elves. They see the fine clothes and impossibly beautiful gold and silver jewelry and say Bordertown is a promotional gimmick. The government likes things that way, I bet—that means they don’t have to answer questions about what they plan to do about the Realm. I expect it relieved them when the Way to Bordertown closed, which is funny, because Fox News treats Bordertown like a government conspiracy. They say the government is behind the rumors to keep the economy unstable. I have no clue how that works.

I first heard about Bordertown from a drunken friend of my mother’s at one of my parents’ parties. He said he’d been there as a kid. “It’s up the northern highway, but the last time I tried to go, I always found myself back here. Maybe Borderland didn’t want me back.” Because, of course, it was all about him.

Things had been bad at home. I embarrassed my mother because I looked nothing like my so-called father, and my so-called father didn’t like me. I was the result of my mother’s “mistake,” but he had married her anyway, as he reminded her more than once. I shut myself in my room with my painting and drawing. I began to cut myself. I threw up to lose weight. They didn’t notice. Maybe that crazy Bordertown would be better than this, I had thought, but no one could find it anymore, so I headed for a regular city as far away as I could go, somewhere I could try to make my own magical transformation, but the city wasn’t fun without money or friends, and I was hungry and cold.

One wet night, a kid asked me if I needed help. He said there was a warm, safe place I could stay with lots of food. He knew this doctor who took in runaways. It took me a while to figure out the runaways were all sick. By that time, I was sick, too.

I didn’t realize what the doctor’s game was at first. He was smart and handsome and looked after me. He called me pretty. He asked for my advice. He gave me interesting books and didn’t sneer at my questions. So what if I sometimes fell asleep as he talked to me and woke up with a stiff neck? But soon I couldn’t eat, even though I wanted to, and I grew thinner and thinner. My warm skin faded to ivory, and my blue eyes lost their color. Dr. Vee told me I should kiss necks now, because I’d feel better—yes, that’s what he called it, the smarmy bastard. He put me on his “special diet,” and I hated that, but I did it because he made me feel important and safe. He said we had a bond now and that he could find me anywhere. He said one more kiss from him and I would be able to live with him forever—I would be his best girl. But he was old and I didn’t think of him “that way,” and I didn’t want to live with him forever. I decided to tell him that, but I saw him snap the neck of a kid who disagreed with him, so I ran away again. Maybe I shouldn’t have set fire to the house before I left, though.

The streets were tough, and I was alone and abandoned and betrayed, but I had grown much stronger and much faster. I stalked my food successfully through trash-filled alleys and paved backyards. I stole spray paint and took to the walls. I scrawled warnings about Dr. Vee and signed them with a black bat that dripped with blood. Plenty of others had used those walls before me—there were multicolored names, faces, symbols, flowers, syringes, and giant sperm, and someone had tagged “Bordertown LIVES” over and over. *That* was a joke.

I didn’t hang in one place too long, because Dr. Vee’s kids were everywhere, and if someone tried to befriend me, the friendship didn’t last long. I got into fights. They ended badly—for the other kid. I guess I should have had more sense than to leave a trail, but I splattered the walls of the city with blood and hate.

All the time I worried about that “bond” and wondered where I could go where Dr. Vee couldn’t find me.

One night I had to run hard and far to dodge a couple of Dr. Vee’s kids. By the time I evaded them, I was in a fancy part of town with high-class stores. Some paintings in a gallery window drew me close to the pressed glass. They depicted street scenes full of elves and humans not much older than I was. In the pictures, people laughed, danced, and gave one another the finger. Motorbikes raced through the night up unknown roads—one of

them didn’t have wheels. A card propped up on a tripod proclaimed the painter’s name was Patrick Hale, under the title *Life on the Border.* I wanted to be there so badly.

“Do you think it’s still the same?”

I flinched and turned on the speaker with bared teeth.

A mousy girl with a backpack and duffel bag stood beside me, lost in the paintings. “I’m going there,” she said.

“You can’t,” I snapped.

Her laugher tinkled like Elfland bells. “Yes, you can. My stepmother’s brother came back, and he’s younger than me now.”

I didn’t believe her, but I had to take the chance. “I’m going, too,” I said.

She smiled. “Well, come on.”

The girl had two twigs stuck in the straps of her backpack—she said they were from oak and ash trees. I had no clue which was which or why they were important. She said one of the rules was to be kind to strangers, so she let me come along and shared her food with anyone on our way. That annoyed me because it slowed us down, but she agreed to travel at night, and I did enjoy some of the strangers. They were tasty. I left her alone, though; she was my guide.

“What’s in the duffel bag?” I asked one night when I offered to carry it for a while.

“Trading stuff,” she said. “Mostly T-shirts. My dad used to work for a Web store—I took them from the garage. I heard they don’t like World money in Soho, but I bet they like clothes.”

She told me a lot about Bordertown and elves as we traveled north. Time ran differently there, she said. She loved to talk about elves. Magic is in their blood, she said. People say they live a lot longer than we do because the essence of life runs in their veins. That idea fascinated me. Maybe elves were my ticket back to normal.

The journey went on and on. I thought it was pointless because we never arrived anywhere, but after a time, the roads we took became narrower and we didn’t see cars anymore. We didn’t notice any people soon after that, and we both ran out of food. The land turned barren and hot, which was odd considering the direction we went. “I can feel this is the right way,” the girl insisted over and over, her eyes bright. But she became weaker and weaker,

and we couldn’t find water anymore. Exposure and starvation placed their claim on her.

One of us has to get there, I thought, *and it had better be me.* So I was right, and the girl did me one last favor. She fed me.

She was sweet. I mean honestly, she was sweet. Sometimes I feel bad about her.

Several days later, a rickety camel-drawn omnibus rumbled up a dry gulch and pulled up beside me. There was a board nailed to the front with “Bordertown” spray-painted on it, and other kids were inside. On the back clung a sticker that said “My Mirage Is Smarter Than Your Honor Student.” The driver, who didn’t seem old enough to be driving anything, including a team of camels, asked for a fare. “A trade is fine,” he said, and eyed the duffel bag I carried. I gave him a lolcat T-shirt, size extra-large. He looked puzzled but well pleased.

That girl was smart. You can use T-shirts for money in Bordertown. The elves like band T-shirts, even if they have never heard of the band, and the human kids like to wear weird slogans, even if they have no idea what they mean. T-shirts clothed me, got me into clubs, and helped pay my rent in a boarding house for a month, until I found a place of my own. Those out-of-date T-shirts kept me going for a while in many ways. There’s something hilarious about a Highborn elf in a Jonas Brothers shirt.

If that girl was right about the T-shirts, I thought, maybe she was right about elf blood, too. The essence of life was exactly what I needed. So I made a plan: I would lay low for a while, then jump an elf, drink the magic in his blood, be cured, and go back to the World before anyone caught me; and maybe it would be like years later, and no one would be looking for me there either.

That was before I knew that (a) I liked it here, (b) elves are people, too, and (c) elfin magic can be scary.

So far, I hadn’t had the nerve to mug an elf for his blood. Elves looked strong, and they didn’t respond to my faltering powers of mesmerism like some humans did if caught off guard; elves would fight. Also, it was too hard to tell which ones had magic and how well they could use it. What if I ended up with a curse on me even worse than the one I already had? Anyway, I liked them, even though they were often snobs. I loved the way they looked, and the way they moved, and the way they spoke. I didn’t

know how much elf blood I would need to cure myself. It would be awful if I had to take it all. *I'll wait,* I thought. *I'll wait, and if I am very lucky, an elf will fall in love with me. I'll tell him my sad story, and he will sacrifice his blood to me—or get all his friends to pitch in.* Okay, that last bit was dumb, but it was more appealing than a hit-or-miss scuffle in a back alley and would do until I thought of another plan. Meanwhile, I would try very, very hard not to kill anyone.

* * *

The bouncer at the door to The Dancing Ferret surprised me. I'd seen her around—her black Mohawk was hard to miss. Laura, I think her name was. She waved away my hand when I offered to pay the cover. "You're that street artist, aren't you?" she said. "Locals get in free."

Wow! I thought. *Someone recognized me. I'm a local. Cool!*

The owner, Farrel Din, gave me a weird look and shook his head as I passed the booth where he sat, and a surge of anger sank my high. What did that fat elf know about me? Nothing! Who was he to judge? *I'm not a poseur!* I wanted to yell at him. *I'm not trying to look part elf—I'm undead, you asshole!* But perhaps he was only annoyed because he knew I didn't buy drinks. Maybe I should buy one since they had let me in free. I stashed my backpack under a corner table on the outskirts of the room, then maneuvered through the motley patrons to buy a Hobby Horse home brew at the bar. In Bordertown, there is no drinking age. As long as you look like you're past puberty and you don't act crazy, you're okay. I hurried back to my table to protect my goods, but the only person nearby was an elf kid a few tables over, reading a book by the light of a Puck's Brown Ale sign that someone had defaced to say the obvious. He was reading an actual book, not a Stick Wizard comic or anything like that. Why would you come to a club to read?

"Lambton Wyrm" proclaimed the name on the drum kit. Elves played bass, drums, and guitar, and a skinny human played everything from bagpipes to the bodhran, judging by what lay around him. Either they were new or they sucked, because the room was barely half full.

Sky was even more beautiful than I had first thought, if that was possible. His silver hair shimmered against an icy blue shirt, and his silver and blue

guitar matched. *Could I make him fall in love with me?* I wondered. *Could I make my fantasy come true?*

The singer, a muscular, bearded human with a fierce grin, took the mic. “Haway, we’re gonna start with this canny song we stole our name from,” he said in a dialect I didn’t know. “It’s an ald song from where I grew up.”

You find out a lot about old music in Bordertown.

He sang with only a pipe as accompaniment at first.

> Whisht lads, had yer gobs
> And I’ll tell yers ahll an ahful story
> Whisht lads, had yer gobs
> And I’ll tell yer boot the warm.

As the story unfolded, I discovered that “warm” meant “worm,” in the sense of a whacking great dragon, and more and more instruments joined in until the thrashing crescendo of a thundering fight and a tragic mistake. I was convinced that it would be my favorite of their songs—until they rollicked into “Cushie Butterfield”:

> She’s a big lass, she’s a bonnie lass
> And she likes her beer
> And they call her Cushie Butterfield
> And I wish she were here.

I wished I were loud and jolly and likable like Cushie, who was obviously not a skinny, ethereal elfin maiden but who had songs written about her nevertheless. I raised my brew proudly, then caught the reader elf looking at me and put my glass down again with a thump, feeling foolish.

I wanted to go up and talk to Sky between sets, but every time I tried to stand up, my heart lodged in my throat and I could only watch as he talked with other girls, accepted drinks from admirers, and traded elegant insults with his bandmates. I took far too long to work up the nerve, but at last he stood by himself next to the stage, examining a crumpled playlist, and I left my seat to approach him. He half smiled as I walked up, as if he had already forgotten me and was too polite to turn away. I was about to remind him, despite the knot in my gut, but the bass player emerged from a back

room to whisper urgently in his ear. Sky turned from me abruptly, climbed onto the stage, and slung his guitar strap over his head. He began to tune his guitar as if I had ceased to exist. I hurried back to my seat, head down, mortified, hoping no one had seen the snub.

I wasn't ready to give up yet, though. Sky was too beautiful, too tempting. He was full of the magical Faerie blood that could restore what I had lost, all wrapped up in the nicest package I had ever seen. I'd heard the phrase "cold as elf blood," but in my imagination, his blood was warm and comforting.

If I stay until after closing, maybe they'll let me help them pack up, I thought. If I was helpful, they might like me and I'd have a chance to get to know Sky better. So when the harsh overhead lights came on and changed the smoky exotic club into a dirty drippy room, I leaned into the corner and made myself seem invisible—I can do that. After the last drunk stumbled into the street, I relaxed, but as soon as I did, a diminutive server with a frown larger than she was marched up to me. "What part of 'last call' do you not understand?" she demanded, tossing her fuchsia ponytail.

"It's okay. She's with me," said a scratchy voice. Both the girl and I swiveled our heads in surprise to find Reader Elf had joined us.

The girl snorted in disbelief, but she left.

"How do you rate?" I asked.

He laughed. "Not 'thank you'?" He sat in the empty chair next to me.

"Yeah, sure. Thank you," I answered, abashed, but not too much so.

He laid his book on the table: *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins. I think my mother had watched that on Masterpiece Mysteries. It was all Victorian or something. Weird.

"I'm with the band," he said.

"Oh?" I found myself warming to him. "In what way?"

"I help recharge the amps and things like that," he answered, and made a face. "The guitarist is my brother."

"Sky?" I'm afraid my voice squeaked.

He nodded.

No way, I thought as I looked him up and down.

I didn't think elves could appear ordinary, but he was the drabbest elf I had ever seen. He looked to be about my age, but he could have been much older, of course. He wore stiff new jeans and a white short-sleeved dress

shirt. All he needed was a pocket protector. I noticed that his dandelion fluff of flaxen hair had a pale green tint. *Pond scum*, I thought, and giggled. I couldn't tell if that was his real color or a subtle dye. One of his pointy ears had a weird little kink.

"What's so funny?" he said, but he didn't look annoyed.

I shrugged. Maybe he'd introduce me to his brother if I was nice to him.

"My name's Moss. What's yours?" he asked.

I had no clue what to say. I had had many names out in the World, but here in Bordertown, no one called me anything. Once upon a time, I had been Elizabeth Mary Washington. In the city, Dr. Vee had called me Little Bit, but after I ran away from him, people called me Bloody Mary. That never felt like me, though. That was someone in a story.

"Lizzie," I told him. It sounded friendly, like "Cushie."

He chuckled. "What, no fancy Bordertown nickname?"

"Nicknames are given by other people," I said.

"Not around here."

"Well, they are in the World," I said, "and they're usually not nice." I didn't tell him my sister called me Beastie and the kids at school called me Lizard. Yeah, they weren't friendly nicknames. I glanced over at where the band was packing up their equipment. Wasn't Moss going to help them? Wasn't he going to invite me to join in?

"Where do you live?" he asked.

I hesitated. "Down by the South Wall," I answered vaguely. "You?"

"What does that mean?" Moss asked. He pointed at my shirt and ignored my question—the nerve.

I wore a T that said "YR PWND, DUDE."

"That means 'I'm better than you,' " I snapped, then heard how arrogant I sounded.

He looked at me blankly. "In what language?"

"Mistyped English." I spent time trying to explain computer gaming to make up for my rudeness. He loved the whole idea, although I wasn't sure he understood clearly.

"You're new in Bordertown, aren't you?" I said, because even the people who grew up here have some knowledge of the World, if only along the lines of a bad Wikipedia entry.

Moss blushed a tender shell pink.

“Why did you come?” I asked. “I mean, you lived in a magical place, so why come here?”

“Adventure,” he said.

I raised my eyebrows and pointedly examined the dingy bar.

“Well, Bordertown is different anyway,” he said, “and there are no endless lessons.”

“School?” I asked, ready to be sympathetic.

“Sort of.” That’s as much as I got from him on that subject.

“But you had to give up magic that worked all the time.”

“And you had to give up computers.”

I scowled. “There were reasons.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “There were reasons.”

We both fell silent.

“Why did you help me?” I asked after a while.

“You’re interesting,” he said. “You might be my adventure.”

I burst out laughing—the best laugh I’d had in a long time. The boy might be plain but he sure had the elfin tongue.

That’s when I noticed the band had left, and Moss noticed, too.

He cried out an unintelligible word and jumped to his feet. “The band’s at Sluggo’s tomorrow night,” he told me. “Ginger and Green Lady Lane. See you there?”

“Uh, yeah!” I answered as he ran for the back door.

“And drink your beer next time,” he called over his shoulder, “because I’m buying.”

Outside, I passed the alley that ran behind The Ferret. A loaded cart attached to a put-putting trike sat ignored. The band surrounded Moss and seemed to be giving him a hard time. *It must suck to be the kid brother*, I thought, *especially when all your brother’s friends get in the act, too.* As if he felt my eyes, Moss looked over at me. I waved and left him to his fate. I had business at the docks.

I ate down by the river often. There were scavengers there who were too messed up on river water to say no to me, and if they ever remembered what happened, no one would believe them anyway. When I’d first arrived, I wondered if the Mad River tasted like blood, but I didn’t try it. The water made the kids who drank it taste funny, though, and I had to force myself. Maybe that’s why the last two had made me throw up. Polite elves say to

their host, “I ate quite well. I’ll now be sick.” That wasn’t meant to be literal. Luckily, I kept down enough blood not to starve. If it got worse, though, I’d have to find another source of food, and I didn’t even want to think of the danger that entailed.

I rounded up my dinner with no trouble, but I couldn’t find the right angle or something. My teeth wouldn’t slide in smoothly; I had to try several times. I made a mess of his neck.

After I ate and threw up, I cried.

Even without Dr. Vee’s final bite, I would be exactly like him, forever and ever, and I wouldn’t even be good at it, and I would never, never, never find a way to stop.

When I finished crying, I wiped my face with my sleeve and headed home.

I had found myself a nice little squat on a cobbled, dead-end road not far from Hell’s Gate. Ma always said I would go to hell. I guess she was right. But hell was a long walk away, and streetlights were rare—I was thankful I could see well in the dark.

The Old Town was crowded when you were up on Ho Street, but there were many ruined places scattered through the Old Town where no one came anymore. For a few blocks, I passed occupied houses. I liked to peek through the windows at the cozy rooms hung with bright fabrics and lit by spell lamps draped with patterned scarves. Farther south on Hell Street, the houses looked gap-toothed and hollow-eyed, with vacant windows and broken-in doors. More and more empty lots with broken fences lined the road, and after them sat a burned-out gas station where fuel was a memory. The sign had once read “Shell,” but someone had managed to shatter the “S.” I wondered if that was how the road got its name.

The night became all indigo and purple shadows, and the outlines of roadside trees rose like torn construction paper layers, ragged against the moony sky. I had to be careful of roots that pushed up through the paving stones. As I passed a squat deco apartment building, I thought I heard footfalls behind me. I flattened against the wall and peered back through the darkness. Nothing.

I had been happy when I first got to Bordertown—relaxed for the first time in ages—but lately I’d felt a growing unease. It prickled on my neck at

night and squirmed in my stomach. The feeling had been worse the last two weeks.

I had read there were catchers in Bordertown—people who dragged runaways back to the World—but I had left home a long time ago. How would my parents know I came here, and would they care? No, it was Dr. Vee I thought of every time something skittered in the shadows or a darker silhouette moved against the night. He didn't take kindly to ungrateful kids.

Halfway home, I took a detour through Damnation Alley over to South Street. I needed a few more sketchpads. Just my luck, some Packers were hanging out by the stone-pillared entrance of South Street School. This was no place to be mistaken for someone part elf. I dashed across the street, cut though a corner parking lot, ran down the side road, dodged around the back of a rusted Camry, and climbed through the torn chain-link fence behind the school. As I approached an open window, a shower of pebbles clattered against the cracked windowpanes.

I turned. A gangbanger stood behind me, but he took off running in the direction of the Camry. What the …? I didn't wait to figure him out; I slipped through the window of the boys' bathroom.

Inside, I ran down the corridor and took the stairs up to the second floor. My footsteps echoed. The peeling, graffiti-covered walls made my fingers itch to add my own tag—but I wasn't Bloody Mary anymore, was I?

I trotted past the cobwebbed classrooms. Next to the media center, carpeted with mildewed books, was the art room. On one of my previous expeditions, I had found a cupboard in there, behind a jumble of dented file cabinets and the shards of a desk. No one had been curious enough to clear the debris away, but pickings were slim, and so I did. Jackpot! Inside sat stacks of sketchpads filled with yellow-edged sheets of paper. There were also pencils, brushes, dried and cracked poster paint, charcoal, grease pencils, and construction paper that was hidden from the light, so the colors were still bright. But the prize was a set of Prismacolor pencils and pastels. I had carefully barricaded the door again, loaded what I could in a black-smutted curtain, and hefted my treasure back home.

Tonight I had to huff and heave to move those file cabinets out of the way. I felt certain the work had been easier last time. After I grabbed three sketchpads, I decided to move only one file cabinet back in place. *You're becoming a wuss,* I told myself as I ran down the steps at the other end of

the corridor that led to the gym. I negotiated the piles of volleyball nets, punctured basketballs, and ancient beer cans, and let myself out the door on the south side of the school, where the buses used to pick up the kids. I guessed a lot of those buses were now down in the trailer parks, past my place, substituting for caravans.

I lived near the South Wall, as if I had barely squeezed inside Bordertown and possibly still didn't belong. My place sat on the presciently named Woodland Road, where the crumbling brick houses squatted like wild animals among feral garden foliage, their roofs covered with the fur of lichens, trees sprouting from attic dormers like horns. The abandoned dwellings looked as if, when they had evolved enough, they would shamble out into the Never-never to find new nomad lives. In the light of one predawn, I had been sure I'd seen fruit on the branches at the back of my house, but when I climbed over the wall to check, I couldn't find any.

As I walked up to number 44, the leaves rustled and whooshed in the trees, but I felt no breeze. Under the bushes, trash rattled. The skin on my back crawled, but I shook the feeling off. *Animals*, I told myself, but I glanced around before I ducked into my overgrown yard and crept toward the house with caution. Halfway down the path, I froze. The nightlife had stopped chirping.

A commotion broke out in the undergrowth on my left—scuffling, scrabbling, squeaking. I snarled and whirled, my fists clenched, ready to face my enemy. Then something crashed away toward the next house.

I waited for I didn't know what, but the normal night sounds started up once more and my shoulders slumped in relief.

Two of Flora's cats fighting, I thought. Flora is my nearest neighbor—out back and over two. She runs some kind of sanctuary for crossbred elfin cats people have tired of—oriental-looking creatures with bright green points or pink stripes. Flora called her cats in when I walked by. Her distrust hurt me. I never bother cats. I like cats.

A bird sang a lonely song, and the sky slowly turned pewter. *I'd better go inside*, I thought. I moved the shaggy coat of ivy to reveal my front door and whispered the key. A dandy from the Dragon Fire gang had swapped me a protection spell for a watercolor of his chopper. He didn't want a picture of a girl or his family; he wanted a picture of a machine. He might be worse off than me.

Inside smelled of home—moldy, dusty, safe. Even though the ceiling had collapsed into the front parlor, there were two good back rooms in the house and a kitchen tacked on that might have been called a scullery in times gone by. Water still ran from the faucet; I didn't know why. Maybe the water came from a well. At least I could wash. I had lived in worse places.

I stashed my supplies in a corner and checked the curtains on the back windows; then I changed into an extra-large World of Warcraft T-shirt. I curled up in a pile of blankets to sleep as the sun rose, my arms around a stuffed toy tiger I had found in the fallen plaster upstairs. I mean, who could throw that away? It would be heartless.

* * *

Sometimes I wondered if Bordertown rearranged itself every so often. I had found streets that I was sure hadn't been there the day before, and occasionally streets I thought I knew spat me up in unexpected places. That could worry a person who wanted to reach home before sunrise. It took me a while to find Green Lady Lane, even after I asked three people. None of them had ever heard of Sluggo's. Where was this club? I walked up and down the lane three times and was just about to give up when a stout oak door burst open and a blond kid with zits wrestled an ungainly wooden sandwich board out onto the sidewalk and set it up. "Sluggo's" was emblazoned on the sign in red and gold.

"Don't do anyone any favors," I griped.

The blond kid poked his tongue out at me, then went inside to leave me staring at old, bowed, multipaned windows glazed with thick, ancient glass—rippled, uneven, and greenish. The place looked like a refugee from a Dickens novel.

"You're early," Moss said with delight in his scratchy voice when I found him in front of the stage. Tonight he wore a perfectly fitted black dress tailcoat over a white T-shirt and washed-out jeans. I couldn't decide if that looked impossibly cool or totally dorky. He had another book under his arm.

The band was busy setting up and tuning and testing mics, but when the bass player saw me, he tossed his mod shag and snapped at Moss in Elvish. Perhaps he didn't approve of interracial hookups.

Moss replied calmly, also in Elvish, and the bass player thumped his strings with the palm of his hand in discordant ire.

“It’s no biggie. I’m not dating him,” I protested. I mean, I hadn’t dressed up, had I? I’d changed my shirt, that’s all. “WTF” it said.

The bass player turned on me. “I am sworn to protect him,” he spat.

“Huh?”

The plunking and banging onstage quieted, and the band gathered around.

“Hadaway, divvent scare the lass,” the singer said. “She’s only a bairn.”

The other human punched him gently on the arm as if to say, *Keep out of it.*

“She’s a street hustler,” said the bass player.

That pissed me off. “I’m not a con artist,” I said. There it was again, that thing elves had against me because of my looks.

The drummer poked the bass player with one of his sticks. “Quiet,” he said. “We don’t know who she is.”

That was better. Some respect at last.

“Lizzie is my guest,” said Moss. “Please be gracious.” I liked the forcefulness that gathered in his voice. It was totally at odds with his meek appearance.

Sky looked sympathetic. I waited for him to say something nice to me, but instead he addressed Moss. “Don’t think that you’re infallible because nothing has gone wrong since you’ve been here. Don’t go courting mischief.”

Courting! I thought. *You’ve got it wrong. I’m not with him. I’m available*, but all I could stammer out was, “I’m not mischief.”

The bass player put his hand on Moss’s shoulder. “You are your kindred’s hope,” he said.

“I’m their tool,” said Moss, removing the bass player’s hand firmly.

I was impressed. He was so composed.

“It’s what you get for having a perfect record,” said the drummer, and laughed like he was trying to lighten things up.

“I hope I’m not perfect,” said Moss. “If I’m not, my parents won’t have so many plans for me.”

“I don’t think you’re perfect,” Sky said to Moss. “I’ve been here longer than our parents. Things don’t work the way people expect in Bordertown,

no matter what they believe.” He finally turned to me. “Be gentle in your dealings with Moss. He has many who love him.”

Was it my imagination or was there a threat in those words? I opened my mouth to protest again but decided to curb my tongue and wait. If they let me hang around, Sky would soon see I was a decent person. We’d laugh about this one day.

I followed Moss to a table, and he beckoned to a bartender clad in a sari and combat boots.

“Wow, overprotective much?” I said after she took our order. I tried to wriggle the tension out of my shoulders.

“They only want what’s best for me,” he answered, as if it amused him.

My stomach gurgled. I hoped he didn’t hear. *I might have to leave early to eat*, I thought. I was always hungry lately, even after the blood, as if my body yearned for something. Elf blood maybe? “What’s the book this time?” I asked to distract myself.

He showed me a copy of *The Bride Wore Black* by Cornell Woolrich. “A femme fatale on a quest for revenge,” read the blurb on the back cover. The book looked absurdly noir for elf reading.

“So you like mysteries,” I said as Sari Girl set two beers in front of us.

He nodded enthusiastically. “And adventures.”

“Yeah, you said.” I flipped through the pages. No illustrations despite the promising cover.

“Sometimes I think I’d like to write a book,” he admitted, and then he blushed.

I stifled a giggle. No one comes to Soho to become a plumber, though I suspect that there are many who move uptown eventually and find a trade.

“But I don’t know those places to write about them,” he continued.

It’s funny, I’m usually tongue-tied with people, but he was such a nerd that I had no problem talking to him. “Who says they have to be set in the World?” I told him. “Mysteries happen here, don’t they?”

He laughed hard. “Drink your beer,” he said.

I’d given up trying to eat and drink real food ages ago, but because he watched, I took a tiny sip. I was surprised that the beer went down smoothly. I didn’t push my luck, though.

“I don’t have any notebooks,” Moss said. “I’d need a notebook to be a writer, right?”

“I know where you can find some notebooks.” If there were art supplies at South Street School, I was sure there was a closet with notebooks somewhere. Maybe he’d pay for them.

Before I could ask him that, two humans came up to the table. The bald guy wore a T-shirt that said “TCP” and the girl’s said “IP.” They were a couple, I guessed. I wondered a little jealously where they bought the Ts. “Hi. I like your pictures,” the girl told me.

I could barely stutter out a surprised thank-you, and I wasn’t sure what else to say. She gave me a hesitant wave as they went back to a table full of kids talking loudly about heliographs and pigeons. “Guess what?” she screeched at them. “They found a dead wharf rat under Riverside Bridge this morning.”

“You’d make people feel more welcome if you didn’t glower so much,” Moss said.

“I don’t!” I protested, but all I could think about was that dead wharf rat. Did I do that? Would I get caught?

I looked around nervously and discovered that the little bar had filled up. One gorgeous, willowy elf girl wearing long, long braids streaked silver and rose and a skintight New Blood Review T-shirt over leggings leaned close to talk to Sky as he tuned his guitar. I hated her right away. As I wondered how to interrupt them, the front door crashed open and a human boy, dressed in a motley quartered tabard that featured peace signs and kanji symbols, ran in and banged a beribboned staff on the ground. Everyone fell quiet.

“Territory change,” he announced. “Truebloods back one block. Pack advances.” Then he dashed out, the bells tied around his calves jingling.

People mumbled and several elves left. Soon after that, some Packers swaggered in all black leather and black jeans. Someone said something to someone else, and I had to duck an ashtray that suddenly flew past my ear.

The place became chaos. Some people screamed, and quite a few made for the exits. There were always those who were game for a fight, though, and they stayed.

“The instruments!” Moss cried, and leaped up.

A Packer sporting a hammer tattoo on her forehead took that as an invitation to swing at him. I yanked the table aside as I came to my feet

under the girl’s arm and jabbed her in the gut with a left hook. As she doubled over, I finished her with a right.

Moss gave me a shocked glance, but he tugged my arm and we ran for the stage, where the band rushed to move their instruments out of harm’s way. We jumped onto the low platform and defended it from invaders. I kicked and Moss swung the mic stand. His moves were more agile than I expected. I was enjoying myself. The singer belted out a rollicking drinking song as he grabbed the last drum, and the others hustled the amps out back. Sky picked up the impossibly beautiful elf girl, tossed her over his shoulder, and ran for the back door, both of them laughing. A hollow formed in the pit of my stomach. *I have no chance with him. No chance at all*, I thought, and I didn’t have the time to wait for a beautiful elf to fall in love with me. I’d take the one I had.

I pushed Moss in the shoulder. “Come on, let’s go.” I dragged him through the middle of the brawl and away from my cruel disappointment. He followed willingly, whooping with excitement as we ducked and weaved.

We ran out the front door hand in hand.

Rain had fallen while we were inside, and the air smelled fizzy and full of life. I expected the street to be deserted, but people like a train wreck. Gawkers strained their necks to see through the windows and “oohed” and “aahed” at each crash. I felt sorry for the owner, who would have to clean the mess.

“Sluggo’s is the wrong name to give that place,” Moss said.

I must have looked blank.

“Sympathetic magic,” he elaborated. He must have seen my eyes glaze over because he changed the subject. “Those notebooks,” he said. “Can we fetch them now?”

I hesitated a moment. Normally I would have insisted on going for them alone to protect the location of my stash, but South Street School was quiet and deserted. And what I had to do might be noisy.

“Okay,” I said.

“Great!” He rubbed one of my hands between his own. “You’re cold.”

He was warm and friendly, not aloof like his brother, and I was planning nasty things. I removed my hand from his. “Yeah, I’m cold.”

“Wait a minute,” he ordered, and left me at the curb while he dashed off around the corner. He came back pushing a bright orange Vespa scooter. If I had friends, I wasn’t sure I’d want them to see me on that.

He waved his hand over the spellbox, and the engine burst into life. I’d seen other people struggle and fiddle for minutes to start their bikes. “You’re good.”

“I have a knack,” he said quietly. He seemed pleased that I’d noticed. When he smiled, he actually looked kind of cute, and to my surprise, I felt a fluttering response.

I climbed on behind him and he revved the engine. “No one is impressed,” I snapped, because that flutter had thrown me off-kilter. I told him how to get to the school; then I wrapped my arms around him as we left the curb. This close, he smelled even better than his brother did. “Don’t stop if you see the Pack,” I yelled.

He might be a friend, I thought. *A real friend. I should let him go.*

I wanted to scream. I couldn’t wait for him to like me enough to forgive what I was and maybe, just maybe, help. I was out of control. I had to stop myself now. And whether his blood cured me or not, I would have to go back to the World. I liked Soho; I didn’t want to ruin it with me.

The night air whipped through my hair and tangled it, and the sleeves of my jacket flapped. The tears in my eyes were from the wind, I told myself.

No one was hanging around the school, so Moss secured his scooter to a pillar and we went through the front door. He brought a bag.

“Notebooks aren’t heavy,” I informed him.

He shrugged and pulled a flashlight from the bag. He intoned “abracadabra,” and the light turned on.

“Joker,” I said. *Damn him for making me smile.*

As we climbed the main steps, our feet crunched dried leaves and rat shit. Water dripped musical notes from a hole in the decaying roof to a puddle somewhere above us, and an object clattered on the third floor landing—maybe a twig from a nest?

We were inside. Alone. I could do it anywhere here, but I led Moss down the corridor to the art room anyway. Most of the doors were off their hinges or were missing entirely. Skitters erupted in one of the classrooms as we passed, and I heard the occasional squeak. Moss inspected the ceilings and

the walls and peered into the rooms. He'd probably never seen a human school before.

Moss helped me move the file cabinet away from the supply cupboard and waited respectfully for me to find him what he wanted. I hated to leave that lovely loot behind, but I just grabbed two small spiral-bound sketchpads and three blue exam books and walked out of the storeroom.

"Will these do?" I asked.

He balanced the flashlight on top of the file cabinet and reached for them.

It has to be now, I thought.

As he bowed his head to put the books in his bag, I slid behind him and placed my hands on his shoulders. He chuckled. He probably thought I was coming on to him. If only that were true.

If only? When had I started to feel *that* way?

Ignore it, I told myself. *Be prepared to grab him tight. Grip him until paralysis sets in.* My throat ached and my eyes stung with tears, but I could think of no other way to get elf blood.

I lowered my teeth carefully so I wouldn't rip him like I had the kid the night before. *I'm so sorry.* His skin was fragrant and smooth, and the sight of that funny kinked ear tugged at my heart for a moment. I tightened my lips.

But no fangs grew.

What the …?

I grimaced and willed my fangs to emerge.

Nothing happened.

Was he immune? I choked back a howl.

He raised a hand and laid it over mine. "You know that Truebloods live for a very long time, don't you?

"What?" I gasped. *I can cut him*, I thought. *I can still have his blood.*

"But still, there are those who lust for more," he continued, oblivious to my panic as I realized I had nothing sharp.

"They use blood magic," he said.

All thoughts of cutting him fled and my panic condensed into pinpoint attention. "What did you say?"

"We have descendants in the World who have only a drop of the Trueblood, but want to use it to live forever. They use blood magic for power over death, but it changes them. And it changes those they use in

their rites. What they don't tell you is that you can change back. Trueblood magic favors life."

"What are you talking about?" My voice was shrill.

"Away from the attentions of your maker, you are coming alive," he answered, and twisted into my arms.

I stepped back to break his embrace. I was icy sober. "You … you know what I am?"

"Yes. You are a drinker of blood, trapped between life and death, the victim of a Lankin. But you are mending."

Fury possessed my tongue. "And you knew I couldn't bite you, you fucking tease?"

He blinked. "No, I didn't know that," he admitted, "but I was curious."

"Are you crazy?" I shrieked. "I'm evil. I killed someone last night."

"No, you didn't." Moss tried to take my hand again, but I snatched it away. "You pulled him out of a puddle so he wouldn't drown, and you propped him against a wall. You tied a bandanna around his neck to stop the flow of blood."

"Yeah, but it obviously didn't work—they found him dead.…" My mouth fell open as I realized what he had just said. "Wait a minute—you weren't there."

He looked embarrassed. "I followed you. You were my adventure—my mystery. Everyone said rotten magic surrounded you, and I wanted to find out the cause."

Rotten magic? *That's* why elves didn't like me? "But the dead wharf rat this morning …"

"Some other fool who fell off the bridge … Shhh!" He raised a finger, then cocked his head.

While I stood dumbfounded, he pulled a wadded bundle out of his bag. I recognized volleyball netting. What was he going to do to me? Panic surged once more. I took another step back, ready to run.

A high-pitched squeal and a *fwap fwap fwap* broke the silence. I looked up. A bat hurtled toward my face. I shrieked and raised my arms to ward off the creature.

Moss pointed to the bat, pursed his lips, and sucked.

I couldn't catch my breath. I couldn't breathe. The bat crashed to the floor with no air to hold it up. Moss threw the net over the struggling beast

and blew out softly.

I dragged in a ragged breath as atmosphere returned and looked at Moss, aghast.

“Lessons,” he said.

I didn’t know what he studied in the Realm, but it sure as hell wasn’t calculus. “You sucked the fucking air out of the room!” I cried.

“That was merely symbolic,” he explained.

I didn’t answer right away because I was too busy panting. “You knew about that bat?” I asked finally. My voice trembled.

“It tracked you last night,” Moss told me. “It reeked of evil and bad intentions. I almost caught it outside your home, but it got away.”

I remembered the noises in the bushes.

“What is it?” he asked.

“One pissed-off bat,” I said, but then I looked closer.

“That’s the bastard who turned me into a monster!” I kicked the bundle. The bat squealed and thrashed. One of its claws was lumpy and scarred. I wondered if the fire I’d set had done that. I hoped so.

“The Lankin himself!” Moss seemed to grow taller; his fists clenched.

“Will that net still hold him when he changes back?” I damned my shrill, frightened voice. My heart thumped hard. I’d forgotten that feeling.

“I believe it’s trapped in that shape,” Moss said. His eyes were fierce. “Even pure power warps in the Borderlands; what chance has magic already corrupt?”

“Are you sure he’s stuck?”

Moss uttered some angry words I didn’t understand. “I am now,” he said coldly. “Ask Wolfboy about all that.”

A claw inside of me loosened its grip. For a moment, I felt lighter than air. I couldn’t find my voice.

“What do you want to do with it?” Moss asked after a minute. He sounded calm and amused once more. “Do you want to keep it as a pet?”

I shuddered. I wanted to kill it, but I suspected Moss wouldn’t approve. “Let’s dump it in the Nevernever,” I said.

“It might find its way back to the World,” Moss warned.

“Yeah, but it might get eaten, too,” I answered.

“Or regain life?”

“If it has to,” I answered.

Alive, I thought. *He said I'm coming alive.* No wonder I threw up blood.

I made Moss carry Dr. Vee to the scooter—the bat shape creeped me out. Maybe I was in shock, but I was kind of a pest all the way there.

"Am I cured now?" I asked.

"Your craving for blood might come and go," he said, "but we'll work something out."

"Can I eat real food?"

"I'd take it slowly if I were you, Fang."

I rolled my eyes. "Will other elves stop hating me?"

"That's up to you."

"Will my color come back?"

At that point, he started to laugh, but that didn't shut me up. I was too excited.

"Will I age now?"

"Maybe gradually."

"That makes me a perfect girlfriend for an elf, doesn't it?"

"As long as you don't expect that 'elf' to solve all your problems."

"I'll stay put and solve my own problems from now on," I promised, "but you'll help, right?"

"I expect so." He grinned, and my face hurt because I was grinning, too, and couldn't stop.

"Are you some kind of wizard?" I asked as I took charge of the prisoner so Moss could drive.

"Sort of," he answered.

"You're extra good at magic, aren't you?"

"So far, but we'll see."

He was looking for trouble. I could tell.

"You're a mystery, too," I whispered as we set off for the Nevernever.

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“Damiana!” Beti used her hands to part the veil of rag strips she’d strung from the cone-shaped hat she was wearing. The veil covered her face completely. I didn’t know how she could see where she was going in that costume of hers. “Juju in the air this morning, oui?” she shouted over the brassy music from the camel-drawn omnibus. It’d been repurposed as a moving platform for some of the musicians in the parade.

I smiled. “Juju weather for true, yes!” Beti and I had only met four days ago, but she’d already learned the phrase “juju weather” from me. She mangled my accent, though.

I scanned up and down Ho Street as far as I could see. Which wasn’t very far, what with the parade floats and banners and, apparently, all Bordertown spilled into the street to celebrate. Around us, people were dressed up like devils, like dragons, like whatever the rass they pleased. All of us were dancing, strutting, jamming, chipping, rolling, and perambulating down Ho Street however we might to the rhythms blaring from the various bands marching the parade route. The racket was tremendous.

I couldn’t see Gladstone anywhere near us. I blew out a sigh of relief. Beti wanted nothing more than to find Gladstone, her new girlfriend, in all this comess, but Gladstone was pissed at Beti and was cruising to do some bruising.

The camel bus had a black banner draped around it. The lettering on it was made to look like bones, and read “We Dead Awaken.” Through the windows we could see the musicians, all of them wearing funereal black suits, including top hats tricked out with black lace veils. Even the musicians were playin’ mas’. It was a brass band, instruments shouting out the melody to a song I almost recognized.

Today was Jou’vert; the daylong free-for-all we were pleased to call a “parade” ushered in the week of bacchanalia that was Bordertown’s more or less annual Jamboree. Word had gone around town that this year’s theme was “jazz funeral.” I was dressed as a Catrina from the Dia de los Muertos—a gorgeous femme skeleton in sultry widow’s weeds, complete with a massive picture hat.

I suppressed a sneeze; my sinuses were tingling. Juju breeze for true, blowing a witchy front of magic from the Realm into Bordertown. Juju

weather always made things in Bordertown especially … interesting. My fellow human friends made mako on me when I said I could sense the pools and eddies of magic as they wafted through Bordertown. Only Gladstone, half Blood as she was, had ever backed me up. And now her new girlfriend Beti, too. Or possibly her newly *ex*-girlfriend Beti. Beti, who might be from the Other Side, or who might just be a young brown girl playing out her own personal power fantasy.

Gladstone's life could get complicated.

Gladstone could deal. It was Beti I was concerned for, so young and so naive. Newbies to Bordertown never believed they were as out of their depth as they really were.

Beti swung a turn around me. She was completely covered by multicolored strips of old clothing that Gladstone had helped her collect from the discard bins at Tatterstock, the trashion clothing place in Letterville. Her voice growled softly from her whirling dervish center: "Do you see Gladstone?" It made my heart ache. Poor baby butch Beti. In the few days I'd known her, I'd already learned that her gruff voice came out lowest when she was trying to play it cool.

"Come," I replied, "lewwe go further down the road. I sure we going to buck up on Gladstone soon." Over my dead body. Glads was gunning for Beti, certain that Beti'd betrayed her. Striding to the beat, I set off down the road, weaving my way through the other mas' players. Beti followed me obediently, a little devil dustling sticking close to its mummy.

When I ran into Gladstone last night, she'd been propped up at a table at The Ferret, well into the snarly phase of a drunken bout with her favorite flavor of self-pity in a bottle—Mad River water chased with anisette. Gladstone sober was the best friend a person could hope to have. Gladstone on a binge was a snake-mean nightmare best avoided. I had a scar on my chin to keep me from ever forgetting that. I intended to make sure that this town—and Gladstone, my dearest friend—wouldn't ride roughshod over Beti, shiny as a new copper penny, with not the slightest hint of silver to her eyes or her hair. It was kinda funny the way the three of us had bucked up on each other just four days ago:

* * *

Screaming Lord Neville sashayed over to greet the customer who'd just stepped tentatively in through the doorway of the Café Cubana. "Table for one, sweet thing?"

The sweet thing was a sturdy, burnished brown tomboy with that leonine Bob Marley face you find on a lot of Jamaicans. She gave him a shy nod. She was wearing fancy runners with the laces not exactly tied, a plain baggy T-shirt, and jeans two or three sizes too big, her hands slipped into their back pockets. One of the newest styles to hit Bordertown since people had started flooding into it from the World last month, claiming that Bordertown had disappeared for thirteen years.

"This way, sugar." He led the way, practically voguing as he went. He had reason to show off. He was a tall, light-skinned brother with the kind of figure that could carry off any look. Today he was decked out in a shimmering purple confection of a satin gown, an off-the-shoulder number with deep décolletage—I had to admire how he pulled that off—a nipped-in waist, and a full, bouncing poodle skirt made even fuller by a froth of lavender and sage petticoats peeking out from under it.

The girl slouched along behind him as he led her to a booth. She glanced at me, and more than glanced at Gladstone, who didn't notice. I was on the alert, though. Any rude gesture from that girl, any comment about Gladstone's halfling looks, and I'd be on her like a dirty shirt.

Instead, she said, "A good day to you both." She smiled at me, practically beamed at Gladstone. I nodded a greeting. She was almost to her table before Gladstone realized someone had been talking to her and mumbled a hasty "good morning."

I leaned over and whispered to my friend, "How you figure baby girl keeps her pants up?"

That barely earned me a smile. Gladstone had a fragile look to her this early Noneday morning. The skin around her eyes seemed thin, the blue threadworm of veins there showing even through the rain-soaked-earth brown of her skin. Outwardly, Gladstone looked anything but delicate. She was sporting the usual threads: black leather boots; loose faded jeans encasing her strong, flared thighs; a worn red flannel shirt with the arms cut raggedly off to display broad shoulders and biceps sculpted by her work as a navvy. All topped off with a close-cropped nap of silver hair, thick as a silverback's pelt, and a—usually—shit-eating grin that flashed a single gold

tooth. Her eyes were also silver, from the Trubie side of her family, and they only strengthened her overall studly glamour. Many a femme and the occasional butch went all weak-kneed and tongue-tied in Gladstone's presence. Me and Gladstone had had a thing once. That was long over—too many years between us, two different worlds of experience. Now our thing was that kind of staunch, comfortable friendship where neither one of us had to mince words. No, me and Gladstone story done. It's Beti's story I'm telling you now.

* * *

I swung aside the skeletal bustle that was the skirt of my gown just in time to get it out from underfoot of a staggerline of Trubies, every one of them dressed to pussfoot in gleaming white canvas bell-bottoms, sailor shirts, and beanies. All that silver hair only made the white suits seem even whiter in the Jou'vert morning sunshine. The line of them careened toward me in time to the road march tune. What was that chorus? It was nagging at me, half remembered. *The prettiest … the prettiest …*

A twenty-foot-tall stilt-walker wearing horns, red body paint, and not much more did a nonchalant daddy-long-legs step over the Trubies and proceeded on down the parade route, her bud breasts bouncing as she went. Two of the Trubies grinned at me and called out, "Jamboree!"

I gave them back the response, *"En battaille-là!"* and swung my noisemaker around on its stick so its racket sawed at the air. I shook my head at the silver flask one of them slid out of a back pocket to offer me. She was only being friendly, but they had a way of forgetting that some of the things they drank for pleasure could cause humans serious pain. The line of them changed direction, stumbling cate-a-corner off in the opposite direction, zigzagging through the crowds of people jumping up to the music. I said to Beti, "Truebloods playing Drunken Sailor mas'! What a thing!"

Beti stopped her dervish whirling long enough to peer at me through the strips and tatters of torn cloth and reply, "But they are not masquerading as the dead. Shouldn't they have obeyed the edict?"

"It was a *suggestion*, not an edict. Too besides, some of them had white skull faces painted on. Not that you could notice white face paint so easily

on that lot.”

Beti was pogoing now. I picked up the hem of my gown and followed her, chipping down the road to the music. Edict! Jeezam peace. I was getting used to the weird-ass things that Ti’Bet could come up with. Is not like anyone was going to police what people wore. Nobody coordinated or organized the Jou’vert parade; it just happened. Nobody picked an official theme for each year’s parade; word just got around. And half the masqueraders completely ignored the theme and wore whatever pleased them. I even saw someone dressed up as a cell phone. The new, teeny kind. New to Bordertown, anyway. We’d learned about them last month, when newbies started flooding into the town again after a two-week absence. Only all the newcomers swore it had been thirteen years that Bordertown had disappeared from the World. And now here they were, chattering on about tweeting and MyFace and complaining that they couldn’t “text” anyone with those ridiculously tiny portable phones they carried everywhere.

* * *

I said, “Neville, we ready to order over here.” I’d tried making conversation with Gladstone, but I was only getting one-word answers.

“You mustn’t address me as Neville today,” announced Neville as he came over.

I turned my face to one side so he wouldn’t see me roll my eyes. (Always some drama with Neville.) He slipped a pencil from behind his ear and produced a small, neat notebook from somewhere amongst the frills and flutters of his outfit. “Today, my darlings, I am the Beneficent Miss Nell. Your order, sweet children? I just put a pot of the house special blend to steep—fresher than your old uncle Charlie with the wandering hands! And the raisin cake is good today. The cook was in a nice, nice mood this morning.” He leaned in closer. “Only whatever you do, darlings, don’t order the scones. Cookie was never any good at those. He say is English people’s food, all starch and no flavor. I mean to say, Cookie is a sweet man, sweet can’t done.” In a stage whisper he continued, “But he have his little blind spots, you know?” Then he burst into a gleeful cackle. He was the selfsame cook, but he never ceased to tire of his joke.

A gruff voice called out, "What is in the house blend?" It was the handsome mannish girl tomboy, sitting alone in her booth. I couldn't place her accent. Not Jamaican, then.

Neville—Miss Nell—beamed at the question. "Oh, sweetheart. The house blend have ginger grated fresh by the nimble fingers of a certain handsome young man; dried nasturtium petals, squash blossoms, and rose petals, all grown when magic permits in the summer garden of the best-looking negro this side of Soho; and nuggets of dried apple as sweet and lingering as that brown man's kisses. The house blend will fix anything troubling your heart, darling daughter. And for finger food, too besides, we have ripe banana dipped in sweet batter and fried, and green banana to boot. Cookie does fry them up nice-nice in olive oil, sprinkle them with a little coarse salt and some cayenne, then drench them in so much butter, you going to be licking your fingers and wiping grease from your mouth with the back of your hand and belching one rude belch, and thanking the stars in the heavens that you find your way to Café Cubana at long last."

By the girl's frown and her baffled look, Miss Nell had lost her early on in that flight of language. She pointed at Gladstone and said, "I want what that one has." Her two eyes made four with a startled Gladstone's. Not a bit of shyness to the butchling's gaze this time. It was Gladstone who blushed and looked down. I ordered our usual: roasted hazelnut and hemp tea for Gladstone, with fried ripe bananas. Madagascar Muckraker for me, with fried green bananas, extra butter. No scones for either of us.

Like a seven-foot hummingbird, Neville—Miss Nell—flitted and flashed from customer to customer, taking orders and giving banter. From what I could tell, he did so in at least five languages, including High Middle Elvish and La'adan, which was popping up everywhere now that the River Rats had for some reason taken a shine to it.

A tinny tinkle of a tune came from somewhere about the girl's person. She pulled a cell phone out of the kangaroo pocket of her sweatshirt, flicked it open. She spoke a greeting into it, in a language I didn't know. All around the café, people smiled, shook their heads. Another newbie come to check out Bordertown now that it was open to the World again. She would find out soon enough; over here, a cell phone might take it into its head to dance a jig, to loudly broadcast the audio from the last time you'd had sex, even to

ring. What it would not do was allow you to have a conversation with another person. Not for long, anyway.

Gladstone, still looking like someone had stolen her puppy, muttered, "Last year, me and Charlotte marched in the Jamboree Jou'vert parade together. I was dressed in Pierrot Grenade, and she was my Pierrette."

I closed my eyes. "And two weeks after that, she left you. Don't tell me that is what all this moping and sulking is about."

She looked at her hands. "This time of year is just reminding me, you know? Everyone's gonna be at the parade, all coupled up and shit. Not me, though."

I sighed and rubbed the scar on my chin. "Gladstone, you know I love you, and I sorry to be so harsh, but Lottie's not your girlfriend anymore. Not for nearly a year now. Good thing, too."

I opened my eyes. Gladstone's face had gone ashen and completely still, as though someone had slapped it. Feeling like a shit, I continued, "Let me guess; you got drunk out of your mind again, you probably tried to get violent, and she'd finally had enough, and she left you. Same old story, doux-doux." Okay, so that was the real reason I'd broken up with Gladstone. Same blasted reason everybody did. "She broke up with you, and she been hanging out with Nadine from since. The two of them happy like pigs in mud. She not coming back to you."

Gladstone sighed. "The pretty ones always leave."

"Yes, if we want to remain pretty." I managed to pull my fingers back before they touched the jagged place on my chin.

The tomboy girl was babbling into her cell phone. Unusual for the conversation to have lasted this long. I couldn't place the language, but she looked upset. Her voice was getting louder.

Gladstone muttered, "I give them my heart and they toss it back in my face and it just makes me crazy, you know?"

The girl barked a panicked question into the cell phone. Agitated, she started arguing before she could have heard much of the answer.

Gladstone wailed, "Lottie left, you left. They always leave."

I sighed. "Where's Nelly with that blasted tea?"

* * *

Beti had stopped dancing for the moment. From the torque to her pitchy-patchy costume, I could tell that she was turning this way and that, trying to peer through the crowd. “Can you see … anyone?” she asked me. Jokey question, seeing as how the street was packed with people. But I didn’t laugh at her.

“Not yet,” I answered.

She seemed to shrink into her already-small self. I felt like a shit for the dance I was leading her on.

Over there. Was that a nap of silver hair on a burly body? Yes, but it wasn’t Gladstone. I let out the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

I spied out Stick on the sidelines, leaning against a telephone pole, wearing his usual grim and faintly disapproving sour face. Wouldn’t hurt him to come and join the bacchanal. He was even dressed right for a jazz funeral: black jeans, black boots, black T-shirt. But for all his grace when beating people up in his self-appointed role as Bordertown’s helper of the helpless, I was sure that dicty negro couldn’t shake his groove thang if his life depended on it. His ferret, Lubin, was doing it for him, weaving around his ankles for joy of the music, and occasionally standing on her hind legs to do a little ferret jig. Lubin just loved to dance, oui?

But wait—was Lubin wearing something? I squinted, but the blasted myopia wouldn’t let me see clearly. Trailing a swirling Beti, I casually chipped my way closer to Lubin and Stick. A troupe of man-bats blocked the view for a few seconds until, with a swish of their leathery outstretched wings, they moved past. Lubin stood up on her hind legs again and began to hop about. I busted out laughing.

“What?” asked Beti, midpirouette.

“Stick’s ferret. That guy, see? His pet is wearing a Carmen Miranda costume.” Lubin wore a tiny layered miniskirt, each layer a different color, and a little purple cotton halter that left her midriff bare. Each front leg sported a yellow armlet ruffle, high up. I couldn’t make out the details of the colorful hat secured under her chin with an elastic strap, but I’d bet it was a mini cornucopia of tropical fruit.

Beti looked where I was pointing. “That man comes from across the river,” she said.

“Who, Stick? I can believe he’s crossed the Big Bloody.”

From the movement of the motley covering her top half, she must have shaken her head. “Not the Mad River. The one running through my town. He has a look to him like the people who live on the other bank.”

Uh-oh. Tickle in my nose, and that sensation like my hair was lifting up off my scalp.

From since I was a small girl back home—back *home* home, that is, not my second home of Toronto, Canada—I used to know when it was going to rain, even before the rainflies came out to fill the sky, to flit and dance in the air until the rain came down and washed their wings from their bodies so they could transform into adults. In Bordertown, I could sense magic weather as well as the regular kind, and right now, there was big magic heading our way. Gladstone on a tear could send a stormwash of the stuff on ahead of her like a shock wave. Only Gladstone’s juju could give me the kind of migraine that was suddenly a threatening whisper behind my left eye. When I’d seen her last night she’d muttered, “Bitch thinks she’s too good for me, huh? I’ll show her.” She hadn’t seemed to be particularly aware of who I was. She was just announcing her pique to the general air.

I put my hand on Beti’s back to urge her forward. “We gotta go.”

“Very well. But I wanted to watch the small woman dance some more.”

“Small woman?” I kept moving us through the crowd. Over there, was that a broad shoulder in a red plaid jacket with the sleeves cut away? Best as I could, I ducked us behind a very tall, thin girl wearing a very tall, thin cardboard box that had been decorated to look like a coffin.

“The one you just showed me,” said Beti, sounding frustrated. “The tiny one in the plenty skirts. With the guy from over the river.”

“Lubin?” I nearly tripped over my own bustle in surprise. “But Lubin isn’t a woman.”

“She’s not a girl.”

“She’s a ferret, Ti’Bet. An animal.”

“A woman animal. Like you.”

Weird kid. “Sure. I hear the Horn Dance has their own crew planned for today. Lewwe go see if we can find them.”

* * *

The Beneficent Miss Nell returned from the back-room kitchen, apron and cap abandoned so she could show off her ensemble to advantage. She was holding aloft two trays loaded with orders. And she was singing, in a booming, tuneful bass, the old calypso about Frenchmen and their predilections for cunnilingus. I thought I could see the browned crushed-baton shapes of fried green bananas on a saucer on one of those trays, and a saucer of golden rounds of batter-dipped fried ripe bananas. I sat to attention, hopeful. Sure enough, Nell began sweeping in our direction, and then it was like slow motion, like the way things happen when you're in a car that's about to collide with another, and you can see

it

happening, but

it's too late

to stop, and you're thinking, oh shit this is going to hurt, *and then everything speeds up and the butch girl was striding toward Nell, out of her line of sight, but she was arguing on her cell phone, not looking where she was going, and before I could shout out a warning, bam! And then there were spilled bits of bananas and broken crockery everywhere, and Miss Nelly was down on the ground, petticoat askew, and the girl was looking shocked and dismayed at her and was shaking banana bits out of her short dreads, and Gladstone was already out of her seat and on the way over there.*

Gladstone asked them both, "Are you okay?" The girl turned those marsh-green eyes toward her, and I swear that Gladstone gasped. The girl smiled at her, and there it was; Gladstone get tabanca just so. Just like the last time, and the time before. A big believer in love at first sight, Gladstone was. So of course it happened to her all the time. It was the first step in her personal dance of self-destruction.

The girl slid the cell phone back into her pocket. In the quick glimpse I got, it looked more like a shell than a cell—white and crenellated on the outside, pinkening to a deep rose center. When I left the World nineteen years ago, there were cell phones with superheroes on them and cell phones that lit up in the dark. Looked like there was a fad for organic now.

Gladstone and her new crush helped Miss Nell to her feet, the girl apologizing the whole time in that accent I couldn't place. She really was astonishingly striking. Small and sturdy and muscly, a one-person puppy pile of energy and enthusiasm. By the time Gladstone and the girl were done cleaning up the mess that Beti's carelessness had made, the two of them were good, good friends, and Gladstone was introducing her to me (her full name was something unpronounceable that apparently meant "a blessing on our house"—I made do with Beti, the part of it I could say) and offering to show her the best places to get a last-minute outfit to wear to the Jou'vert parade, since she was so new in town and Gladstone knew her way around. They scarcely noticed me paying both sets of bills. "Gladstone, man," I complained when we left the Café Cubana, "I never got to taste my green banana."

Beti gasped. "I am so sorry," she said. She touched my arm briefly. "This is my fault. We must go back and get you another meal."

Both gracious and graceful. "Nah, is all right, never mind that," I said, smiling. "What I really want to know is how come you were getting reception on your cell phone."

"My cousin called me."

Gladstone's lips twitched. "From the Other Side?"

"Whoa, wait," I said. "You're from the Realm? A human from the Realm?"

"She says she's not human," Gladstone replied. "Elvish." She and I shared a covert, amused smile. New in town with a bad case of the elf wannabees. Most of them got over it. I had, and was still grateful for Gladstone's patient indulgence in those years I'd swanned around in gauze skirts festooned with what I'd fancied to be Elvish runes.

Beti had the grace to look abashed. "Not from the Realm. From …"

The syllables landed on my ears and slid away, like marbles rolling in oil. Gladstone's face did something peculiar. Interested, hungry, and resentful, all at once. "Wow. Really? I've heard about you guys."

Beti simply nodded. "What's that?" She was pointing above our heads.

Gladstone replied, "What? Oh. That's Jimmy."

I asked, "What's that place allyuh talking about? That unpronounceable place?"

Gladstone looked embarrassed for me. "A country across the Border."

“The Realm, you mean?”

“No, a different country. There isn’t only the one, you know.”

I hadn’t known.

“Jimmy?” Beti reminded her.

I answered this time. “The stone gargoyle. He lives there on top the Mock Avenue Church tower.”

Gladstone cut in. “I could take you to see him. They say that if the bell ever strikes the right time, he’ll come to life. I could take you and show you. If you’d tell me more about …”

I started herding us toward where Gladstone and I had chained our bikes. “A different country? Wow. Live and learn. Okay, but if cell phones don’t work in Borderland, they sure not going to work on the Other Side, either.” Why was Gladstone going along with Beti’s story?

Beti said, “It’s kind of like texting, okay? Except with kola nuts. Though jumbie beads work just fine, unless you want to get all self-righteous and ancestral and shit.”

The common-class stylings combined with her odd accent were cute as hell. “Kola nuts. Jumbie beads. Right.”

Beti didn’t reply, just turned those mossy eyes on me with a sweet smile. For the next four days, that’s how she responded any time we bucked up against some mystery about her.

That’s how it all started. Bordertown was a place of collisions that led people’s lives in new directions. For the four days before Jamboree, Gladstone wandered everywhere with Beti. The two of them were just totolbée over each other. They were holding hands within minutes of meeting, kissing within hours. Gladstone took her to see Jimmy, and to hang with her skateboarder friends at Tumbledown Park. Plus shopping for a Jou’vert costume. I bet if I had said “Lottie” to Gladstone them days, she would have replied, “Who?” She would have forgotten me, too, had it not been for Beti. Gladstone told me; every little trinket Beti found, every sight she saw, it was, “We must tell Damiana!” and she would drag Gladstone to come visit me at Juju Daddy’s.

* * *

Stick saw me looking at him and Lubin. He nodded gravely at me. I swear the man knew who I was even under my skull makeup and the big picture hat decorated with small gravestones and teeny crows. Stick gave me the creeps.

Beti lifted some of the motley from her face and looked around. “When will Gladstone be here?”

My heart ached for the poor kid. “I don’t know, Ti’Bet.”

She frowned the way you frown when you’re trying not to cry. “But I want to see her before this is all over. I want to dance with her while I still can.”

“Plenty of time, doux-doux. The last lap around the market isn’t till sunup tomorrow. Come, lewwe try and find some other Catrinas.”

“Like you?”

“Yes, like me.” She and I had given up trying to dance for now. Too many people. We kept pushing on through the thronging bodies, the laughter, the dancing. Through the musk-salt sweat of human bodies and the lavender-salt sweat of Trubie ones. Through the sense-memory of me lying with my head cradled on Gladstone’s chest, both of us damp from the exertion of fucking. My musk-salt sweat and her complicated lavender-musk-salt one. I wondered what Ti’Bet’s sweat smelled like: salt, or sweet? Or maybe both? What was she, really?

A breeze tugged at my hat, horripilated the little hairs on my arms. Jumbie weather. Coming in on little cat feet, like those light sun showers of sweet rain that can turn in a flash into a full-out storm.

For all the pushing and shoving and comess, I nearly jumped right out of my skin when a howl cut through the music, and a figure tumbled past us, throwing itself into a triple somersault. Whoever or whatever it was landed on its feet facing us. It was wearing a pallbearer’s suit, complete with top hat. A wolf skull peeked out from under the brim of the hat. I drew back. I swore I could see through the empty spaces amongst the bones of the skull to the paraders dancing on the other side of the person. Then he pulled the mask and hat off in one to reveal his own lupine head and furry snout. The mask was solid again. Juju weather, making me see things.

“Ron!” I squealed. “Jou’vert, sweetheart!”

Ron the Wolfman sketched a deep bow at us, flourishing with his hat and mask. He bruised the air with another howl that just might have been the

words, *“En bataille-là!”*

Ti’Bet launched into a ululation of her own. Which only increased my horripilation. She started dancing around him. He grinned, reached to take her hands. She pulled hers back. I winced. Ron was really sensitive to people freaking out at his looks.

But then she clapped her hands onto his shoulders. He took her by the waist. Together, man-thing and mystery woman, they capered through the crowd, barreling into revelers, who greeted them with cries of *“Jou’vert!”* and *“En bataille-là!”*

* * *

“Jeez, girl. Look at how all these colors fighting with each other, nah?” With thumb and forefinger, I sorted through the pile of discarded rags Beti and Gladstone had dumped on the kitchen floor of my squat. “You couldn’t find anything nicer than this?”

“They are from people who may be dead. That’s the theme, right? To celebrate your ancestor spirits?”

“I guess.”

“I will make an egungun, then. Spirit of the ancestors. It beats people with sticks to remind them to be good.”

“My granny used to threaten to do that to me. She never did, though.”

“The sticks are also to keep people away. To touch the egungun is to die. Only Gladstone says I mustn’t beat anyone with sticks during the parade.”

I made a face. “Shit, no. That used to be the tradition centuries ago, back home. ‘En bataille’ means ‘Let’s rumble.’ ”

“I do not understand.”

“Never mind,” I said. “Nowadays the ‘en bataille’ is only pappyshow. No real fighting supposed to happen.” Sometimes she worked too hard at this being an elf thing. So did Gladstone, but she at least had a reason. She was half elf, after all. Half elf and all Bordertown. Beti was probably neither.

“You realize most of these clothes too mash up to mend?”

Beti grinned at me. “I’m going to, uh, mash them up even more.” She took a crumpled and stained linen dress shirt from me and began tearing it into long strips. Her hands were strong. “Today I walked through your

marketplace, and I visited a place across the Mad River," she said happily. "Lots of people brown like me and Gladstone. And I ate jerk chicken."

"You were in Little Tooth, then. The Jamaican section."

"Yes. Tonight, Gladstone is taking me dancing."

"Like you trying to experience all of Bordertown at the same time!"

"I have to go soon."

"After only a few days? School must be out for the summer by now."

Beti hesitated. Then she said, "I would like to stay longer, but someone is coming to take me away."

Damn. I'd been hoping a casual mention of school would get her to make a slip one way or the other about this elf business. I'd just have to keep trying to get the real story from her. I held one of the rags up against her. "This purple is good on you. Bordertown don't let everybody in. This person who wants to take you away may be the wrong kind of person."

For a second, hope lit her face. But the light went out. "This one, borders cannot stop him."

"Who is he?"

"My brother. Do you really think he might not be able to come here?"

Gladstone whisked into the room, her arms full of more gaudy rags. "Who might not be able to come here?"

Beti turned to her. "My fiancé," she said.

I chuckled. Wherever she was from, English was certainly not her first language. "Ti'Bet, you just told me he was your brother. He can't be your fiancé, too."

She went still, then gave a dismissive laugh. "Brother, betrothed—I always get them confused."

Gladstone dumped her armful on top of the one I was already sorting. "So which one is he?" I could tell she was trying not to let her suspicion show.

"My brother. My blood, yes? He's coming soon to be with me."

Before I could ask her about the difference between "take me home" and "be with me," she tackled Gladstone, knocked her down into the mound of rags on the floor. Giggling, they began to wrestle. Gladstone had Beti pinned in under a minute, but Beti laughed her growly teddy-bear laugh and somehow managed to twist her body and use her legs in a scissors hold around Gladstone's waist. The wrestling turned into groping and the

giggling was silenced by kisses. I watched them. Only for a little while. When buttons started being unbuttoned by eager fingers, I left the squat and went for a walk. It was high time I had a girlfriend again.

* * *

Beti and Ron were still dancing their jig. They'd been joined by Sparks, Ron's girlfriend. Briefly, I wondered whether Ron had dog breath. I used to give Glower those soft cakes of raw yeast for his. But I wasn't really paying them too much mind, oui? I was busy keeping a watch out for Gladstone. Too besides, the turreted shape of Beti's pitchy-patchy costume had finally jogged my memory. The song that the chorus of the road march was sampling was:

> In a fine castle, do you hear, my sissie-oh?
> In a fine castle, do you hear, my sissie-oh?

So long I hadn't played that game! Not since small girl days back home. We'd form two circles of children. The circles would haggle with each other in song:

> Ours is the prettiest, do you hear, my sissie-oh?
> Ours is the prettiest, do you hear, my sissie-oh?

The response, a simple expression of longing that even when I was a child had struck me as endearing in its brave vulnerability:

> We want one of them, do you hear, my sissie-oh?
> We want one of them, do you hear, my sissie-oh?

But suppose it hadn't been a plea, but a threat? *Give me one of your pretty ones, you hear me? Or else.*

Or else what? And was the first team's reply an act of generosity, or a capitulation?

> Which one do you want, do you hear, my sissie-oh?
> Which one do you want, do you hear, my sissie-oh?

No. Not Beti. They didn't want our Beti, did they? All that talk about having to leave soon, not having much time. Beti was jumpy as a cricket in a chicken coop today. And where the hell had she gotten to? I'd lost her in the crowd.

My left eye twitched. Oh god. Juju heading our way. That twitch in my eye; in the bad years, that's how I'd learned to tell when Gladstone's nature was running high. How to tell when to stay away from her.

* * *

Gladstone slouched casually against her bicycle and mine. We'd leaned them against the bus stop where we'd arranged to meet Beti. Mine was chained the usual way. Gladstone's had only a piece of old rope looped around the fork, trailing untied to the ground. The way she put it was, if the bike believed it was tied up, nobody would be able to steal it. Seemed to work, too. In any case, no one had ever stolen her bespelled bike. I'd lost five bikes to thieves since I came to Bordertown. Gladdy and I were going to take Beti mudlarking along the banks of the Big Bloody. Sometimes you found cool trash to keep or trade.

Gladstone looked up and down Chrystoble Street. "You see her yet?"

I sighed. "No, girl. But I sure she going to come."

"I just want her to be safe, is all."

I nodded. If you didn't have your own wheels in Bordertown, there was always what passed for a transit system; you found some simulacrum of a bus stop—this one was a dead tree still standing at the curb of Chrystoble Street, the length of its blackened trunk painted shakily in green with the words "The Bus Stops Here." And you waited. There was no schedule, no official transit system. Anyone with any kind of vehicle could take it into their head to set up a route and charge whatever they pleased. You never knew what would show up. A rickshaw pulled by a wild-eyed youth with spiky red hair and the shakes from Mad River withdrawal. A donkey cart, complete with donkey. There was even a bus pulled by a unicorn that only let virgin passengers on.

"I'm actually having a hard time keeping up with her," said Gladstone. "Beti, I mean."

“Like I used to with you.”

“She keeps wanting me to take her to all this stuff I’ve never heard of.”

“Like what?”

“She wants to see a movie about a guy wearing an iron suit. The second one, she says, ’cause she’s already seen the first and the third. She wants to try something called an ecsbox. She wants a Hello Kitty vibrator.” Gladstone blushed.

Me, I thought my belly was going to bust from laughing. “You mean, Sir Gladhand’s flashing fingers not doing it for her? Like you slowing down in truth, gal! Oh, don’t be like that. You know is only joke I making.” Then it dawned on me. “Wait one second; those things she wants, they’re all from the World. Things from the time when the Way to Borderland was closed.”

Gladstone was still sulking. “So?”

“Why would a newbie come here for things she can get out in the World?”

A bitter chuckle. “You still don’t believe she’s from across the Border?”

“Do you?”

She shrunk in on herself a little. “I’ve heard about … you know? That place she says she’s from?”

“It’s a real place?”

“It may only be stories. My da used to tell me them.” She looked at me, longing making her face vulnerable. “A country on the Other Side where people have both my skin and my magic.”

Huh. Maybe Beti was telling the truth, then. I wasn’t convinced, though.

A team of boys riding three tandem bikes pulled up to the stop, off-loaded two guys with backpacks and a woman carrying a live chicken by its bound legs. No Beti. The guys paid for their ride with smokes. The woman paid with the chicken. They wandered off in separate directions. The bikes moved on.

“So you going to go there?” I asked. “To Unnameable?” I tried to keep my voice light, to prepare my heart for yet another loss.

She stared at her shoes. “She won’t tell me anything about it. Nothing that counts, anyway. Just like all those other Bloods who think they’re better than us halfies.”

“Girl, get real. I see how she looks at you. If she not telling you anything, maybe she can’t. Is you self tell me that people from beyond the Border are

forbidden to talk certain things."

Gladstone scowled. "Yeah."

"Well, then." She wasn't going to leave me. Relief. Triumph. Guilt.

"Damy, all that stuff she wants that I've never heard of, I can't give it to her." Shame burned deep in those silver eyes, banking to anger. Outcast in the World, outcast over the Border. Gladstone would probably live out her life in Bordertown, and she knew it. And even here, she had to steady battle closed doors and sniggers behind her back. "Beti can go wherever she wants, in the World and out of it. Comes here flaunting it, slumming with the halfie."

I sneezed. "Don't go sour on this girl the way you do, okay? I like her."

Gladstone huffed and stared at the ground.

* * *

"Beti!" I called. I pushed between a scary clown wearing a T-shirt that read "Why So Serious?" and a near-naked Trubie. The Trubie was ancient as the hills and thrice as wrinkled. He had a boa constrictor draped over his arms. Age had blanched the two braids hanging down his back from silver to pure white. They were each nearly as thick around as the snake, and their tips tickled his dusty ankles. His eyes were an opaque fish-belly pale, but they followed me all the same.

The snake charmer was suddenly blocking my road. Blasted Trubies could move quicker than thought. He leaned in toward me and croaked, "What will you give her, do you hear, my sissie-oh?"

I sneezed. The man looked startled, as though someone had just shaken him out of a dream. He smiled at me. "Excuse me, cousin," he said, his vowels liquid with the accent of the Realm. "I did not mean to bar your way." He stepped aside.

"Don't fret," I replied. My skin was still crawling with the surprise of the first thing he'd said to me.

"Did I misspeak you, cousin?" he asked. "It seems to me I said something, though I don't remember what."

"No. Nothing much, anyway. It was nothing."

I could lie with words, but never with my face. He studied the polite fib he saw written there, and probably my fear, too besides. He gave me a

rueful smile. “There is a wild magic in the bloods of both our races, my friend. We must give it sport from time to time, yes? And sometimes the bacchanalia calls our spirits forth in ways we do not ken.”

I wasn’t sure what he was talking about. I needed to find Beti. I gave him the Jou’vert greeting, though my voice cracked midway.

“To battle, then,” he replied. The response didn’t sound so lighthearted in translation. I shuddered. As I moved on, he was crooning at his snake, which had raised its head to his and was flickering its tongue over his lips, scenting his breath.

“Beti! Where you dey? Beti!”

Into my left ear, the juju breeze whispered something that sounded like: *We will beat her with green twigs, do you hear, my sissie-oh?*

I yelled, “That don’t suit her!” The general commotion swallowed up the sound of my voice. I muttered, “Do you hear that, my fucking sissie-oh?” I pressed on, calling out Beti’s name. And I found myself muttering under my breath, “You didn’t come to Bordertown for this, oui? Playing mother hen to baby dykes and sullen butches with substance abuse issues.” But is lie I was telling.

In truth, I’d never planned to come to Bordertown at all, for any reason. People don’t believe me so I don’t talk it much, but I swear I didn’t leave Toronto. It left me.

It had been a bad year, is all. My girlfriend at the time had just left me. Something about me being smothering. I’d had to put my nineteen-year-old dog down once his heart trouble was too far gone. Then Grandma died back home, and I couldn’t afford to fly down for the funeral. And the last straw: I’d been temporarily laid off yet again from my job at the forever precariously funded crisis center.

The Change happened slowly, in the weeks that followed. At some point it crossed my mind that the flashily overlit Honest Ed’s Discount Emporium seemed to have seamlessly metamorphosed into a store called Snappin’ Wizards Surplus and Salvage—More Bang for the Buck, More Spell for the Silver. Sure, the words on the sign had changed, but the place still sparkled with enough lights festooning its outside to illuminate half the city, and was still piled to the ceiling with everything from army parachutes to sex toys. And sure the Swiss Chalet chicken place across the street had been replaced by a club named Danceland, but that was construction in downtown Toronto

for you; they were always bulldozing the old to replace it with something else. The little import shop where I bought my favorite fair-trade dark chocolate ran out of it, and then chocolate was scarce everywhere. I didn't drink coffee, so is not like I missed that.

And as to the presence in the city of fine-boned people with fancy hair, high style, and higher attitude? Toronto'd always had its share of those. By the time I had to accept that I was no longer in Toronto and those weren't just tall, skinny white people with dye jobs and contact lenses, it didn't seem so remarkable. People changed and grew apart. As you aged, your body altered and became a stranger to you, and one day you woke up and realized you were in a different country. It was just life. I hadn't needed to travel to the Border; it'd come to me. I'd settled in, found a new job, started dating Gladstone. Life went on, if a little more oddly than before.

I got used to it: to dating a truly magical mulatress, to reading by candlelight when the power outed, to riding a bicycle everywhere, in any weather. I even rigged up a Trini-style peanut cart: a three-foot-cubed tinning box attached to the front of a bicycle, with a generator powered by the action of cycling. Or by a spellbox, when electricity wouldn't manifest. Peanuts roasting inside it. The outlet chimney was a whistle, so the escaping steam would sing through the whistle as I rode. That and the smell of roasting peanuts would make people run come. Daddy Juju loved it. He painted the store name and address on the side of the tinning box, and I rode the streets of Bordertown and served out fresh roasted peanuts in little rolled cones of newspaper.

I made a good life here. Working at Juju Daddy's was my job, true. But it wasn't what I did. There was a reason I'd worked at a shelter in Toronto. A reason my Toronto ex had said I was smothering. I watched out for newbie baby dykes and shy hunter fairies (human or elf) as tough as nails and as brittle as glass; I kept an eye on bruised halflings who didn't realize they were already whole in and of themselves. I smoothed ruffled feathers and mediated lovers' quarrels, and fed the ones who couldn't feed themselves, and tried to keep the people I loved from hurting each other too much.

"Beti!" I shouted.

The street took a sharp turn, and when I rounded it, for an instant I had the crazy thought that Beti had somehow multiplied. I was in the middle of a crew of Betis, a proliferation of Betis. Cone-shaped masses of rags and

tatters danced all around me, and jesters in motley, and hobo clowns in torn jackets and pants and crumpled top hats. A pitchy-patchy crew! No matter her fancy name for her costume, it was a plain old pitchy-patchy mas'. I laughed, relief making my voice a little too wild and hyenalike. The dancers didn't have musicians, but were making their own music by singing: *We will give her a wedding ring, do you hear, my sissie-oh?*

* * *

With a clomping of hooves, the camel bus drew to a halt at the crumbling curb. Gladstone's face brightened. "She's here!"

Through the windows of the bus, we saw Beti stand and take the hand of a pretty Trubie girl, tall and slim with big cat eyes and a complicated fall of silvery hair. Laughing, they headed for the bus's exit. I didn't have to look at Gladstone to know the change that had come over her face. The shocked shift from eager anticipation to self-protective sullenness. "Gladhand Girl, don't jump to conclusions, okay?"

"You see? Like always calls to like. Why stay with the half-Blood when you can have another purebreed?"

"They may just be friends."

"Friends. Right. I gotta go."

* * *

And that was the last Beti and I had seen of Gladstone. At least, that's what I was telling Beti. I hadn't mentioned running into Gladstone last night.

The other girl had been just a friend in truth; someone Beti had met on that same bus that had picked them both up as they were wandering around the outskirts of Bordertown, trying to figure out the way in. Beti'd only wanted her new friend Lizzie to meet her new love Gladstone. And the real kicker? Beti told me that Lizzie wasn't even a Trubie. Just one of the rare humans who kinda looked like one.

Someone spun me around. I recognized the particular configuration of strips of cloth. "Beti!"

She grabbed me around the waist, spun me so my back was against her front. We went into a classic dutty wine like the people all around us, hips

gyrating together. She caught on fast, this one. She'd been watching how back home people danced to soca music. It was sexual, yes, but it didn't have to mean sex. It was a pappyshow of sex, a masquerade. Sex is powerful and beautiful and dangerous. Is bigger than peeny humans. To wine up dutty with somebody else is like playing mas' in corpse makeup. Is like saying, these things have power over us, but right now, we can laugh after them. First time Gladstone saw me dance like this with someone else, we'd had one big mako row. She'd been convinced I was about to lie down right there so on the floor of the club and start getting nasty with the fella I'd been wining with. With some fella who wasn't her, never mind that he was a stranger I'd only clapped eyes on five minutes before, and a fella to boot!

That was the first time she'd given me blows. And like a fool, I'd gone back for more. Hadn't protected myself, hadn't insisted she find a way to stop trying to own me with her fists. All those years in my previous life I'd worked to help battered wives, husbands, parents, children. But of course, when I was the one getting beat up by someone who loved me, I decided I didn't need help. I was the expert, right? I could handle this all by myself. I could manage Gladstone, oui? Be her lover and her therapist.

Gladstone wasn't the only one who needed to learn that control is something you might try to exercise over a runaway train, not over a lover.

The revelers started bellowing out the song about not giving a damn, 'cause they done dead already. So long I hadn't heard that kaiso! From the big standard the two Frankenstein flag-bearers were dancing with, the crew was called the Jumbie Jamboree. Dead mas' all around us. Vampires. Ghosts. Even *douen* mas'—small children dressed as the spirits of the unbaptized dead, wearing panama hats that hid their faces, and shoes that made it look as though their feet were turned backward. If you hear the sound of children laughing in the forest, don't follow their footprints. Because they might be *douens*, luring you deeper into the forest when you think the footprints are leading you out.

I leaned back into Beti's embrace. I turned my head toward her. "Why you disappeared like that?"

"I can hide with these people," she said, her voice rough. Like she'd been crying? I turned and took her in my arms.

"Don't worry, child. I won't let Gladstone find you."

She pulled back, pushed some of the motley away from her face. “Gladstone? You’re keeping Gladstone from me?”

Oh, shit. “She want to hurt you,” I blurted.

Beti reared back, startled. “Why?”

“She’s real mad at you for hanging with that girl from the bus. She thinks the two of you been cheating on her.”

She looked confused. “Cheating …” Light dawned. “You mean making sex with each other? But we haven’t.”

“Don’t matter. When Gladstone get like this, all she want to do is lash out. You have to stay away from her till she calm down. Believe me, girl, I know. Same thing she did to me.” I turned my face, showed her my scarred jaw.

The fear, the distress on Beti’s face tore my heart out. “She doesn’t realize,” she said. Through the prang-a-lang of the music, I thought the next words she said were, “She should be the one scared of me.”

“What?”

She smiled sadly, touched my arm. “Don’t worry. Things change.” Then she looked back behind us, crowded close to me. “What is that?” she cried.

Cold fear-sweat was crawling down my spine before I even turned to look. Whatever it was, I could feel it coming, feel it in my sinuses, in the savage change that had come upon colors.

Something parted the crowd like a wave, leaving me and Beti exposed in the middle of the road. The air had gone dark around us, damp and cold. I heard screams from the crowd. But the spectacle approaching us did so in silence. No sound from the pounding of the horses’ hooves, the baying of the dogs that weren’t dogs, the harsh, rasping breath of the quarry that they were chasing down the very middle of the Jou’vert parade, in what had been broad daylight a second ago. Beside me, Beti gasped. I hustled her over to the sidelines. We watched the Hunt approach. They were moving in slo-mo.

Beti asked, “What are those?”

Beside her, someone in a Phantom of the Opera costume replied, “The Wild Hunt. Here. Not the band. The real thing.” His voice shook. “We’re all in some deep shit now.”

“Why?” asked Beti.

“Anyone who sees them dies.”

A deep voice cut in. “We are. We’re all going to die. Someday.”

I turned. It was Stick. Lubin was riding on his shoulder, all a-bristle as she stared at the spectacle approaching us.

The quarry didn’t seem to be really there. I mean, we could see her. But her feet didn’t exactly touch the ground as she ran. They either landed a little bit above it or a little bit beneath the surface. For all she was of the Blood, exhaustion had blanched her face even whiter. Her hair hung in sodden ropes of merely gray that swung in dead weight whenever she looked over her shoulder to see how close the hounds were. Sweat had glued her once-gorgeous flowing dress to her body, and its streaked color was more mildew now than the pale green it probably used to be.

“Linden,” muttered Stick. “So that was her punishment.”

I hoped I would never again see anything like the dogs that were chasing that woman. Black. Small, about the size of terriers. But their heads and snouts were ratlike, only with the dangling, eager tongues of dogs hanging out from between their fangs. Too many legs. They ran more like centipedes than dogs. They swarmed over the road, red eyes intent on their prey.

As she drew level with us, Linden stumbled. People in the crowd cried out. She put one hand down to break her fall. It didn’t quite touch the ground, but some invisible solid surface just a hairsbreadth above the disintegrating asphalt of Ho Street. There were rings of silver and sapphire on three of her outspread fingers. One of the hounds leapt, caught the hem of her dress, but she was up again. She bounded away, leaving the hound with a scrap of sodden silk in its mouth.

Behind the hounds came the hunters themselves. Leading them was a Trubie on a motorcycle, her beautiful face grim. The rest were on horses, on goats, and I think I saw one riding a tapir. Silently, the whole mess of them bounded by. As the last few passed, the day grew bright again, and the wetness left the air. For a few seconds, we were all quiet. Some people were crying, some still just standing with their mouths hanging open, catching air. Stick muttered, *“Love wealth and glory more than life itself, and starve in splendor.”*

Then someone in the crowd started clapping, followed by others. People began shouting “Jou’vert!” and *“En battaille-là!”* Pretty soon there were noisemakers going, and whistles. The Phantom of the Opera shouted, “Glamour! It was just a crew with a glamour!” The band began playing

again. The Phantom put his arm around the waist of a chunky, purple-haired woman in a skeleton catsuit, and they careened into the steps of a jig.

Somewhere in the comess, Beti had lost her headpiece. “That was … pretend?” she asked.

Stick narrowed his eyes. “Could be.”

Me, I didn’t business with him and his constant suspicion. My headache was gone and my nose had stopped tingling. Real or make-believe, the Wild Hunt had been the source of the juju weather—not Gladstone, after all. Jubilant, I fumbled for Beti’s hand amongst her rags and patches, and we started dancing to the music again:

> We will frighten her half to death, do you hear, my sissie-oh?
> We will frighten her half to death, do you hear, my sissie-oh?

Bellowing out the verse, I swung the hoop of my skirt in a circle. It crashed against Gladstone’s leg. My two eyes made four with hers. Hers were rimmed with red, her face blotchy. She narrowed her eyes. Heart thumping, I pushed Beti behind me, but I was too late. Beti squealed, “Gladstone!” She ducked around me and flung herself into Gladstone’s arms.

Blasted child was going to get herself a black eye this Jou’vert afternoon. “Gladstone, wait!” I yelled. I leapt toward the two of them to try to intervene.

Gladstone shoved me away. I landed hard on the ground, heard the balsa wood frame of my skirt crack. “Leave us alone!” she said. She enveloped Beti tenderly in her arms. Beti twined her legs around Gladstone’s middle. The two of them gripped each other’s shirt backs, held each other like they would never let go. They swayed like that for long seconds, to their own music, ignoring the driving beat all around them. My heart cracked open, just like my fragile costume. I stood up.

Gladstone hefted Beti back to her feet. Beti started toward me. “See, Damy?” she cried out. “It’s all ri—”

Gladstone reached me first, grabbed the front of my blouse, yanked me to her. “It’s been you the whole time, hasn’t it?”

“Wha-at?” I squeaked. We were being buffeted about by revelers. No one to notice the drama going down in their midst.

Beti said, “Gladstone, what are you doing? Come and dance with me.”

But Gladstone only had eyes for me.

“Dowsabelle just got all withdrawn,” she said. “I started fighting more and more with her. Trying to get some reaction from her, I guess. Hated myself. Couldn’t stop. But who’d been whispering warnings in her ear every day, scaring her half to death?”

I drew myself up tall. “You *are* scary, damn it!” I tried to yank my blouse out of her hand. She held on.

“I got murder-drunk the night Lottie left me,” she continued. “*After* I came home and found she had moved out. Couldn’t find out for days what had happened. Where did she go, Damiana?”

I squeaked, “You were going to blow any minute. I could feel it.” Daddy Juju had let me put Lottie and her stuff up for a few days in a room above his shop, until she’d found her own place. When the juju weather headaches of Gladstone’s ire had faded, I’d told Lottie it was safe to move.

“And now you’re trying to frighten Beti away.”

“She doesn’t frighten me,” Beti answered. “You don’t frighten me. What’s coming frightens me, but it has to come”—she burst into tears —“and then you and Damiana both will turn your faces from me!”

We turned to her, startled. “Oh, Beti,” said Gladstone, bending and folding her into a hug. “We would never turn away from you.”

We. Did I deserve that “we”? Had I been minimizing the damage Gladstone could do when she was out of control, or had I been causing it?

It happened so quickly. A voice shouted something in a language I didn’t understand. An arm pushed me out of the way and grabbed Beti’s shoulder. A hand peeled Beti away from Gladstone as easily as peeling the skin from a ripe banana. Beti turned, saw who it was, and angrily spat out more words I didn’t understand. A young black man slipped in front of Beti, between her and Gladstone. He tried to shove Gladstone away, but Gladstone held her ground. “Fuck I will,” she said. “Get away from my girlfriend.”

“Go away!” Beti cried out, backing away. But I couldn’t tell whether she was talking to the youth or to Gladstone.

The young man was a sturdy tumpa of a thing, short and muscled and pretty. He wore his jeans and T-shirt as though they were a costume. His eyes were sad, longing. They were Beti’s eyes. He reached for Beti again, same time as Gladstone lurched at him. Magic smell filled up my nostrils.

“No!” Beti shouted. Quicker than thought, she slapped Gladstone’s hand away from her brother’s. He must be the brother come to take her home, right?

That blow had some serious power behind it. Gladstone grimaced in pain, covered her wrist with her other hand, pulled her hands in close to her chest. “But I love you,” she said to Beti.

Beti slung her arm through the crook that Gladstone’s made. “I know,” she replied sadly, pulling Gladstone away from her brother.

He followed them. Beti stopped, said something to him that sounded like a plea. He snapped angry-sounding words at her, reached for her hand. She pulled it away. She looked scared. Gladstone tried to reach around her. Beti grabbed Gladstone’s sleeve. “No!” she shouted. Little as she was, she was strong. She was holding Gladstone off with one arm and the weight of her body, backing them both away from her brother and arguing with him same time. I started forward.

Stick lifted a warding hand in front of me. “Stay out of this,” he muttered. He called out something in the language that Beti and her brother were speaking. The two of them turned, looking startled.

And then I saw something I never thought I would. Stick bowed the knee to them both.

Gladstone said, “What the hell?”

Stick raised his head and asked Beti and her brother a question.

Beti replied, pointed at her brother and Gladstone.

Her brother cut her off with sharp words.

She responded to him with sad, pleading ones.

He begged, scolded.

Stick stood. He shouted angrily at them both. He gestured at the crowd.

I sneezed, then slapped my hands to either side of my head as an eyeball-melting migraine hit me. Like a friction charge, some deep juju was building up between Beti and her brother.

Stick’s eyes went wide with alarm. He snapped an order, pointed a finger northward, in the direction of the Border. *Go,* he was saying to Beti and her brother. *Go back now.*

Beti protested.

Stick turned in a panicked circle. (Stick never panicked!) There were people thronging all around. “Run!” He yelled to the crowd. “Get the fuck

out of here!” One or two people started backing away, looking confused, but most didn’t even notice him.

Then the old snake charmer elf was by Stick’s side. Lubin sniffed curiously in the direction of his snake. The snake benignly tasted her air. The Trubie said something to Stick, turned, and began urging people to move away from Beti and her brother.

Stick yelled at Gladstone, “Let her go! Now!”

Gladstone shook her head, swung a protective arm around Beti’s shoulder. Beti shrugged it off.

I saw the hurt on Gladstone’s face, smelled the juju tide come rolling down. Blinding headache or no, I kicked off my shoes and ran toward my friend. “Gladstone, no!”

Beti turned sorrowing eyes on Gladstone, blew her a kiss. “It’s time,” she said.

Beti’s brother reached his hands out. Beti stepped forward and clasped them with both of hers.

Gladstone reached their sides, grabbed his forearm in one hand, Beti’s in the other.

Beti shouted, her voice so large and gonging that it exceeded sound. All the Jou’vert action went still with the shock of it.

Beti and her brother exploded into shards of prismed light …

I was still running, still screaming Gladstone’s name, though all around me was only painful brightness and I couldn’t feel my body, couldn’t hear, couldn’t see.

… and coalesced again. Not as a thick-bodied black boy and his sister, but as one faceless something. A something tall as a tree. A something cone-shaped with many-colored tendrils that flared out from it as it spun. A something that made a sound like monsoon winds through the branches of a dead tree. Like the whistle through the air of withies just before they struck bare flesh. But loud, so loud. People fell to their knees, those that weren’t running. Even Stick stepped back.

Not me, for I couldn’t see Gladstone anywhere. I ran right up to the thing. “Beti!” I screamed.

It kept spinning, whistling, clacking.

The old elf ran to stand between it and the crowd. He held up warding hands. The thing began to move away, but one of its flying tendrils whipped

across the snake charmer's face. He convulsed and fell, his snake with him. He was frozen in rigor by the time he hit the ground. Oh god; death had come to Jou'vert for true.

I planted myself in the path of the thing. It came on toward me. "Ti'Bet, stop it!"

It hesitated.

"Where's Gladstone?" I screamed at it. "What you did to her?" The thing dithered from side to side in front of me. I howled, "Bring them back!"

Gladstone, the snake charmer; they couldn't just be gone.

The tip of the thing leaned its deadly self toward me. I didn't give a damn. I done dead already, just like Stick said. Whether now or later, who cared? I'd meddled in my friend's life, and now two sweet beings were gone.

The Beti-thing's body smelled like dry rot, like carrion. It smelled like Granny's perfume, like my old dog Glower's breath, like grief and regret and resignation and goodbye.

And finally, it smelled like peace. It pulled back. It moved away, and there where it had been lay Gladstone, only Gladstone. Her clothes were torn, there was blood coming from her nose, and half her hair had been singed off. I dropped to my knees, felt her neck for a pulse. She was still alive. "Gladstone?" I said. No answer.

"Lemme see to her, sweetness." It was Screaming Lord Neville, dressed in the tiered plantation gown and madras cotton head wrap of La Diablesse, the devil woman. "I know a few little things," he said. He folded his long length down to sit beside us. Below the hem of his gown peeked one red sequined pump and one hoof. He saw me staring at it and smoothed the gown over his feet.

The pitchy-patchy thing spun away, in the direction of the Nevernever. People tried to reach the old snake charmer. His snake had coiled itself protectively around his body and wouldn't let anyone near. Please God I never again hear a snake scream in grief. And I won't, for it wasn't a snake. It drew itself up to man-height, howled that terrible howl once more, and became a searing red flame of wings with a dragon mask of loss. In seconds, it and the dead elf were only ash, dissipating on the breeze.

For the next few minutes, as my headache faded, I dithered around Miss Nell. She checked Gladstone for injuries we couldn't see. Stick brought

water. People offered cloaks to keep Gladstone warm and tore costumes into bandages for her. When she opened her eyes, it was like somebody had turned the sun back on.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I thought you were coming to hurt her.”

She smiled weakly. “Truth? I might have.” Gently, she touched my chin. “Thank you for keeping me from being an ass even when I’m too stubborn to ask for help.”

“What was she?”

“A rainfly, I think.”

Gladstone had never seen rainflies, but I’d described their life cycle to her. How joyfully they danced in the air before a rainstorm. How when the pounding rain came it drove them to the ground and pulled off their wings. How they wriggled and wriggled and then crawled away, metamorphosed into their adult forms.

Beti had been doing her last dance as a child. She and her brother had needed each other in order to move on to the next stage of their development. No wonder she confused the word for “brother” with the word meaning “two who will become one.”

“So she was really from beyond the Border?” I asked Gladstone. “Some kind of egungun for true?”

“Some kind of what?” Gladstone was staring longingly in the direction of the forest.

Lord Neville said, “Whatever she was, doux-doux, she knew she couldn’t hide it forever. Brave, proud child. You two did right to care for her.”

He slid his platform shoe off one foot and massaged his toes. He kept the other foot concealed beneath his gown.

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THE WALL

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All mortals see the Border differently.
I've asked.
I go to Danceland, Café Cubana, The Dancing Ferret
With my notebook, my pen, my most interested smile.
These are their answers:
Northern lights
A stone wall with broken pixies on top
A wave of dark water, never-breaking
Blood-edged shards of glass
Apple blossoms and silver trout
A row of grim warriors, carved in onyx
Bones and stones and baby teeth
A sleeping dragon, infinitely long
Nothing.

I believe them all.
Believing is what I do.
I've asked elves, too,
In Trader's Heaven, Elftown, Gryphon Park.
These are their answers:
Laughter
Glamour
Bureaucracy.
The polite ones say:
"We do not speak of that."
The rough ones say:
"Mortal bones and skulls. You want to contribute?"

I record them all.
Recording is what I do.

I gather them and study them,
Poetry and fact
From runaways and questers
From artists and their muses
The enchanted and the cynics
The natives and the neighbors.
I make graphs, note patterns.

I formulate theories.

Here is one:
The lives of elves are long.
They are easily bored.
They eat dreams for breakfast,
Are empty again by lunch.
Here is another:
Mortal dreams are like snowflakes,
No two alike:
Each reflects the soul that dreams it
Like a mirror in a fun house.

And a third, to make up the spell:
Mortals need mysteries.
They may not like them, but they need them
As vampires need blood,
As elves need mortals.

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WE DO NOT COME IN PEACE

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I saw him again tonight, while out walking the streets of Soho: Alek or Aleksander, whatever it is he's called now. He's had plenty of names since I first knew him when he arrived almost a year ago, fresh and green from the World. One of the newcomers after the Way reopened. Mouse. Alek. Aleksander. Voice of the Nameless, voice for those who drink from the river whose waters curse them to return to it daily to forget their troubles, those who came and didn't find what they'd been told would be a glorious place free of the World's restrictions, where they could be themselves more than anywhere and wouldn't have to fight for it.

Right.

I was out late tonight, wandering the streets, kept up by a weird urgency that made my thoughts move around like snakes inside me. I couldn't stop thinking. *Should I stay, or should I go?* Living on the Border wasn't the same as it was when I'd arrived five years ago at the age of sixteen, when life was a song and everyone listened to my music, in every club and on every corner of Soho. Fair Ones and humans and halfies alike, all of them. They loved me.

Back then, I'd been like Aleksander: idealistic, still young. Youth is half of what anyone who comes to this city needs in order to make a way. The rest is a blend of luck, skill, and a friendly disposition. By the time you're like me, though—edging into your twenties and things haven't worked out the way you'd hoped—you might as well start looking for another way: ply your trade as a carpenter, clerk for the Fair Ones, open a business. That last one is what I just did, after I'd made some money and collected on as many owed favors as I could to establish myself.

A sort of shop, of all things, is what I opened, just a month ago. People laughed when they saw the sign go up. "Art and Lies." In red neon, as if it were a pub's "Open" sign. "What are you up to now, Marius?" people ask me.

"Paintings and sculptures and books," I say. "And, of course, coffee."

"But what about your music?"

"What about it?" I say. "I'm doing something else now, that's all."

Which is true, sort of. I am doing something else, but in fact I've lost whatever connection I had to the music that used to simply *be there*, in

reach, whenever I wanted, like a glass of water on a bedside table. When I reach now, I come back empty. I can play the notes, but there's no joy in them. After a while I realized that if music had abandoned me, I would need another way to live.

Should I stay, or should I go? was my refrain tonight, even though I have a store to run now, a secure life if I can let myself love it. The World may have changed since I left it at sixteen, but I could still go back to it. And then, as I turned a corner of a crowded sidewalk, I saw him. Alek. Aleksander. Mouse.

He was leaving the Café Tremolo with a group of young people, hands in their pockets, pants sagging below their waists, faces pressed against the autumn wind. I nearly raised my hand, got it halfway up in the air like a sail before I realized what I was doing, then dropped it, embarrassed. I was going to call out, I was going to say his name. And then what? What would Mouse do when he turned and saw his first friend in this city? Twenty-one years old, a washed-up musician, selling used books and bad art traded by new arrivals from the World or from past Elfhaeme Gate, where the Fair Ones come and go freely. A dealer in abandoned items, things looking for a home with people who are occasionally afflicted with nostalgia for everything they've left behind.

"It speaks volumes about you," Mouse told me the last time we saw each other. That was just three weeks ago, right after I opened my shop.

"Please leave," I'd said. He'd been trying to hurt my feelings, and I refused to be hurt by a sixteen-year-old punk in whom I'd already invested too much time and energy and, well, even love since I'd met him nearly a year ago. Or so I told myself.

But as I watched him and his friends tonight, their backs to me, going to whatever radical gathering they were probably late for, I had a terrible idea. It was terrible because as soon as I had it, I knew it was bad. But it was strong and grew to such a size so quickly it took hold of my mind and conducted me, as if I were its puppet, to follow, trailing them by a block or two, until I came to a run-down brick building on Hell Street where they must have been squatting, and there I stopped myself from going farther. Control reverted to me again. He'd always had that effect on me. Aleksander. Mouse.

I stood outside, watching the lights go on in the windows of that shabby building, remembering why I'd liked him, realizing I still liked him now, even though it was clear he'd gone crazy.

* * *

It was in front of Danceland on the west end of Ho, ten months ago, where I first saw Mouse. That was where he'd landed after making a wish so strong back in the World, he'd opened his eyes and found himself here. In Soho, Runaway Central, where kids arrive with awe forming teardrops in the corners of their eyes, thinking, *I've made it.*

I was across the street at my usual spot between the Hard Luck and Snappin' Wizards, busking as best I could despite my still-recent disconnect from the music, money clinking into the violin case at my feet even though I heard every bad note step on a good one. Then, between blinks, Mouse appeared, with his arms crossed over his chest as if it were cold wherever it was he'd come from, bewilderment covering his face like a billboard.

I snorted. He reminded me of myself when I'd arrived five years ago, thinking I'd just won a golden ticket. How long, I wondered, before his doe eyes acquired the squint of a person who knows they must assess everyone and everything they encounter? How long before his clean mop of soft brown hair was twisted with the filth of sleeping in abandoned corners?

And then, as I ran bow across string, bringing my song to a close, I saw a Trueblood come from the direction of Oberon House, down Ho Street, with a gleam in his eyes and a cat's grin creeping up his cheeks. He, too, had noticed the new mouse.

In the next moment I found myself locking my violin in its case with the bits of money I'd collected and dashing across the street. Even then, without knowing him, Alek had that effect on me: my legs brought me to him without any input from my brain.

Crossing the block at the same time, the Trueblood's eyes focused on Mouse's slight figure. Alek was small for his age, a bit pretty. Perfect for what goes on at Oberon House. I reached him first, though, and when I stood in front of him and asked, as kindly as possible, if he was looking for a place to stay, he nodded, held out his hand for shaking, said, "Yes. Yes, I

am. I don’t know where I should go from here. Just arrived. Name’s Aleksander.”

I grinned as the Trueblood came to a halt ten feet from us, his pearly smile fading as he realized I’d beaten him to his meal. “No,” I told Aleksander, warning him not to give away his true name so easily here. “No, your name is Mouse.”

I put my arm around his shoulders and walked him away from the Trueblood, who wrinkled his pasty white nose and tugged at a silver ring looped through one of his pointed ears. As we followed Third Street up to the canal, I told Mouse about Oberon House and why he should steer clear of it.

“They really keep human children in there?” he asked. “They make them … make them—”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s not much more than a brothel. A brothel for human storytellers.”

I’d learned that the hard way, but I didn’t tell Mouse that. I hadn’t told anyone, ever, about my first few weeks in Bordertown. I’d managed to get out of there before I’d lost too much of my dignity. A girl who was in there with me had shown us all the way. She and some of the others still told stories on the streets of Soho. They call themselves the Bards. I hadn’t seen her in a while.

“But I thought,” said Mouse. “I thought …”

“All that glitters, Mouse,” I said, but I didn’t finish that either.

“What you said about not giving my true name to strangers?” said Mouse. “I just … I thought it would be different here.” Wasn’t everyone here for the same reasons, he wondered: peace, love, happiness, equality, fraternity, et cetera, et cetera?

“If that was true,” I said, “everyone would be leaving the World to live here, now wouldn’t they?”

Mouse nodded, looked down at the black-gummed stains on the sidewalk as we trudged toward my neighborhood. He was naive but not stupid. A good chance he’d survive here, then.

We crossed the canal and headed west into the quiet streets of Letterville, where I rented a small apartment only slightly better than a Soho squat. The electricity was off again. Probably would be until the landlord could get

someone to come by to repair or recast. So we lit the candles I keep for that kind of emergency, which happens so often it doesn't really count as one.

"Thank you," Alek said after we'd set the place glowing. "For helping me out."

I lifted his chin with the tip of a finger, trying to make him smile. But when he turned his face up to me, I saw from his glassy eyes that he was holding back tears.

"Where do you want me to sleep?" he asked steadily. He glanced over at my bed, then back at me. Without the tears in his eyes, I'd never have known how scared he was.

"No worries," I said. Realizing he thought I wanted him to sleep with me as some sort of exchange, I pulled my hand away. "You don't have to do anything, if that's what you're thinking." I started making up a bed from an old mattress I'd found in the street and had used for a year before I'd been able to save up for a new bed of my own. "You'll catch on to things soon," I told Mouse. "I'll show you the ropes."

* * *

There are so many things to learn if a person truly intends to live on the Border. Nothing much is what you expect, nothing much is what it seems. Even when you hear your native tongue on the lips of others, rarely will the words mean what they did in the world you came from.

An object lesson: There once was an elf who often stopped by my corner to listen to me playing. He came for three days straight, then a whole week. He never spoke, only smiled, clapped his hands after every song, and threw coins into my violin case like they were roses. Whenever he stood there watching me play, it was almost as if I could feel his eyes traveling down the length of my bow, over my body, under my clothes, as if they were his delicate, long fingers. Eventually one night he did speak to me, at the end of a long evening. I couldn't help myself. The way he looked at me, I wanted to be seen like that even more.

So he took me to his splendid home on Dragon's Tooth Hill, where the streets are awash with the sheen of gold and the sparkle of diamonds, and there he covered me in kisses and told me he had never loved anyone as much as he loved me. My skin burned at his touch. The next morning, I

woke beneath his silken sheets, alone, like someone in a bad romance novel. I wasn't sure if I should be happy or sad. After locating the various pieces of my clothing and dressing myself, I wandered around until I found the dining room, where he was sipping coffee at the other end of a table as long as a corporate building's hallway. When I cleared my throat, he looked up from his book, tucked his silver hair behind the spade-points of his ears, and said, "Good morning. Would you like some coffee before you leave?"

They are like that, the Fair Ones. In the midst of passion, their love burns. In the light of day, the flame falters. His withdrawal could only be because of two things: I was human, and thus beneath him; and I lived on the coins others threw me, and thus was even further beneath him. So it goes.

He was the son of a businessman-turned-councilman who wanted to make a bid for the position of High Councilor. I discovered this only after his driver dropped me on the corner where the elf had picked me up the night before. The driver pressed a bag of coins into my hands before he gave his horses a secret word, and off they went into the traffic of bicycles, cars, and floating rickshaws pulled behind the strong legs of street runners.

Stitched upon the velvet of the bag was the elf's family crest. It was easy to recognize. It appeared on the side of a reconstructed skyscraper in the business district. Until that moment, I hadn't realized that the night before had been a transaction.

And when I complained about it a few days later at Danceland, where I'd gone to drink away my idiocy, the bartender, Valda, said, "I know exactly who you're talking about. He likes his humans, he does, that one. The sillier, the better." She laughed and poured me another drink. "This one's on the house, love," she said. "Go ahead. You earned it."

"Don't let my mistakes be yours," I told Mouse, giving him this story a few weeks after he'd settled in. I didn't tell him that I was paying our rent each month with a coin from that bag, that I was buying our food with the coins from that bag. I kept it under a floorboard beneath my bed, like buried treasure—hiding it not just for its value, but because it shamed me to see it, to be reminded.

"It doesn't make any sense." Mouse shook his head.

"What doesn't?"

“The stories about this place—back home, I mean—made Bordertown sound wonderful. People who were here before the Way closed off for all those years. I’ve read this one blog—”

“Blog?” I furrowed my eyebrows.

“Yeah, a journal someone keeps on the Internet.”

He was endlessly educating me about things that had occurred in the World since I last saw it. Planes had crashed into buildings, new wars had started. People kept private things like journals out in the open, for all to read on the Internet.

“Their stories made this place sound like heaven,” he said. “But really, it seems like it’s hard to live here without joining a gang or turning tricks or thieving.”

“I suppose it *is* wonderful here,” I said. “For some.”

“Yes,” he said. “For some. And that’s the thing that doesn’t make any sense. It seems silly to run away from one world only to set up the same rotten systems all over again in a new one.”

“I don’t make the rules, Mouse,” I said. “I just live here.”

“But you’re wrong,” he said. “You *do* make the rules here. *Because* you live here. Don’t you see?”

I ruffled his hair and laughed as I told him it looked like he was growing it long enough to pose as an elf. He shrugged my hand off as if I were a troublesome parent. “Sorry,” I said, and looked out the window over my kitchen table.

From my grime-streaked window, I could see clouds of smoke rising from the mill stacks down by the canal. That view was the reason I rented that apartment. Back home, where I’d come from, there’d been smokestacks I could see from my kitchen window, too. So when I looked through this one, I could pretend for a moment that I’d gone home a year ago, when I still could have, before the Way between the World and the Borderlands closed for those mysterious thirteen days, before enough time passed to make me a stranger to my old friends and family. Time has a funny way of bending here on the Border. Thirteen days here had been thirteen *years* back in the World, as we discovered when people like Mouse started coming through with their new toys and new ways of thinking. By now, back home, nobody’s heard a word from me for thirteen years. I’d probably been

declared officially dead. And if I'm not dead on paper, in the hearts of my old friends and family, I must be.

"Sorry," I said again, wishing things could be different for both of us.

"Don't be sorry, Marius," said Aleksander. "Be angry."

* * *

Over the short days of that winter, I showed him the city's darkest corners, its best angles, and the wild Nevernever that surrounded it. I pointed out the neutral territories, encouraged him to stick to those. And by his fifth month in the city, when spring returned and washed the streets down, he said, "I think I've decided to stay."

"Where?" I said. "In town? Or with me?"

That got a smile, a rare thing from Mouse, who had been carrying a frown around like an anchor.

But disappointment is an odd emotion to witness in others. It comes and goes as it pleases, returns after you think you've beaten it. For weeks—even after Mouse decided to stay, even after that glint of a smile he'd offered—it seemed he wouldn't speak unless I asked him a question. It was as if he lived inside the space of his own skull, and only occasionally would he come out, eyes blinking in the new light, mouth slowly opening to say, "I've taken a job as a bike messenger." That was in his sixth month.

"Where did you get a bike?" I asked, and Alek replied that he and a friend had gone in together on buying one. The friend paid for it, but Alek was paying his half off little by little with the job. Fair enough, I thought, hoping the work would be good for him.

Or, a month later, when summer was starting to heat up: "I met this guy who says the elves want to push the humans and halfies out of the Bordertown High Council. Said they've been up to something. Said he could smell bad magic brewing."

"And was this guy staggering around?" I asked. "That would explain a lot."

"He was perfectly sober," said Mouse.

I shrugged. "Just don't go getting caught up with anyone who worries about stuff like that too much." Gang wars sometimes break out because an elf looks at a human the wrong way, or a halfie tries to pass for a Trueblood

and gets caught. Already the streets were heating up early that summer with random spats of violence. “Don’t take any of that on yourself.”

“Oh, Marius,” he said, shaking his head, his mop of brown hair rolled into dreadlocks by that point. “I wish you weren’t so afraid.”

“Afraid?” I said.

“You’re exactly the sort of human they desire.”

“Who’s they?” I asked. “And what sort is that?”

“The self-policing sort,” said Mouse. “The sort that, in the back of their minds, really do believe the pointy-eared bastards are somehow better.”

“You’re a very rude boy,” I said.

“I know you’ve been here longer than me, Marius,” he said, “but don’t do what they do. Don’t try to pretend you’re better than me just because you’re a few years older.”

“Do you hate me that much?”

He shook his head. “I don’t hate you, Marius. I feel bad for you. I want to help you.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“By convincing you to believe you’re worth something.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

“You’re just not ready to hear the truth,” said Alek.

“Why are you still here?” I asked.

He looked shocked at the question. “Here with you?”

“Here in Bordertown,” I said. “I mean, you seem to not like it here very much. So I don’t understand. Why are you staying? The Way back to the World is there for you if you want it.”

We looked at each other, then awkwardly away. He put his hand over mine on the table. Finally he said, “I do like you, Marius. I do. You’re so very good. You’re much kinder than I am. Thank you for everything. I don’t say that enough. And there are things I like here. There are. And that’s why I talk the way I’ve been doing. There are good things here. But they’re threatened.”

“It’s almost evening,” I said, looking out the window. The sky was tending toward violet poured over a red horizon of buildings. “I need to get ready to go down to Ho Street and stake my corner. Coins are waiting to be tossed.”

“I may still be out when you get back,” he said as I got up from the table.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Down to Soho, too, with some friends from work. We’re going to the Magic Lantern to see a movie. Hopefully one will be playing.” He laughed. The Magic Lantern wasn’t a very reliable theater. Sometimes they would put on a live show so that if the movie cut out, you could keep watching. And you could never tell if the projector would show the intended film or some nonsensical silent movie that was a cross between watching a stranger’s family videos from the middle of the twentieth century and a surrealist experiment in green dogs and unopened umbrellas during winter. I sometimes went hoping for the stranger’s home videos, especially now that the twentieth century was so far behind me, sealed away, impossible to go back to. I was relieved to hear Mouse make a noise like that, though—a laugh—and also relieved he’d recently been saying words like *friends* and *hopefully.*

“Have fun,” I said, tucking my case under my arm to leave.

“Wait,” said Mouse. I waited with my hand on the knob as he stood there searching for the words to tell me something. After a while, he seemed to give up and settled for: “Be safe while you’re out there. I worry about you sometimes.”

I smiled. I didn’t know if he was somehow saying he loved me. And though I saw a possibility of love in him, I couldn’t help but feel he was too young, that I’d be no better than the Trueblood who’d spotted him when Mouse had first arrived. I couldn’t help remembering that Mouse had been a baby when I was already a teenager back in the World, thanks to the Way closing and screwing up time.

“No worries,” I said, my voice low in my throat, holding it in as if it might escape me. I was a master of self-restraint. It was my new art form. “I’m a big boy,” I told Mouse. “I’ll be careful.”

* * *

I’ve said that the music had left me. Although I didn’t know it then, I realize now it was right around the time the Way between Borderland and the World closed that it began to slip away. First for a night, as if it were just flaking out on me, not showing up where we’d arranged to meet. Then a week went by, and no matter how many times I placed myself on my

corner across from Danceland, no matter how many times I put bow to string, I couldn't catch a song. I could play my old music, but nothing new would come, and the songs felt funny all of a sudden, as if they were too old-fashioned. A change was in the air around that time, a big one—you could see it by the banners of shining lights that stretched over the city like the aurora borealis—but I had the strongest feeling that I was somehow being left behind. As if the bus I needed to catch had stopped while I'd fallen asleep on the bench, then continued on without me.

I started to toss in my sleep during those long nights, and inevitably my thoughts would return to the world I'd left behind. I'd think of all the good things first. My mother's voice in the morning, waking me for school. My father's hand on my head like a hat, after I'd brought home straight As. My friends in the school orchestra. My teacher, Mr. Humphrey, who told me I had talent and that I should go to college, that I'd get a scholarship for playing the violin the way I could. *Did.* Then I thought of all the bad things. A heart broken by a boy who didn't love me. The way my parents' faces fell when I told them who I really was, how all they could do was blink. Their silence. Their retreat from me. Thinking back on it, the things that had made me unhappy might have faded over time if I'd stayed. When I realized I was playing the game of regrets, though, I made myself stop and do other things.

I'd pace my apartment by candlelight, trying to think of something—anything—to make the music come back. That elf who had smiled and applauded and threw coins, who had taken me home and used me, I wondered if what he'd done had been the killing blow, because I'd already been bleeding confidence for a while.

Even after Mouse arrived—an event I'd hoped meant my fortunes were changing—I played my old-fashioned music on the streets only to keep the apartment and to keep us fed, to make the money from that elf last a little longer. Mouse's arrival hadn't changed things, not in the way I wanted. It didn't bring the music back. I'd been closed off from it, the way the World had been closed off from Borderland—but it didn't return after the Way was clear again.

* * *

For most of that summer, Mouse was gone during the day more and more. Delivering messages, I figured, on his shared bicycle. In the evenings he'd come back for a few hours, for dinner, some conversation, to ask how I was doing, to give me things he'd gotten on the job: a bag of coffee beans, a bar of dark chocolate, a package of cigarettes, though I never smoked as a rule. "You can trade them, then," he said when I rejected his offerings, and I realized he was, in his own way, paying me for room and board.

"You don't owe me anything, Alek," I said. "I've got the place covered. Do for yourself instead."

"No," he said. "We do for each other." He smiled, happier than I'd seen him since he'd arrived. I nodded and offered a smile of my own. That was our currency. No teeth. Just upturned corners.

I was happy for those offerings, but I was worried about where they'd come from. I wasn't stupid. I knew he must have been running something illegal on that bike of his—messages or drugs or black-market items from the World or the Fair Lands—but I traded his offerings anyway on the streets of Soho, for food and clothes and to keep the roof over our heads.

After Mouse started giving me things, I stopped playing my violin altogether. The *must* had gone out of me. Instead of playing on my corner, I started walking with my case under my arm, my collar up and my chin tucked against my chest. Rarely would I meet the eyes of a stranger, rarely would I do more than say hello to an acquaintance who stopped me to ask how I'd been doing. "Fine," I'd say, and keep moving. I didn't want to trap myself in a situation where I needed to explain why people no longer saw me out playing. I didn't want to admit I could still eke out a song but they all sounded labored now, awkward, as if I were a beginner all over again.

So I stopped trying, avoided my old haunts for a while, walked in other directions, my violin case tucked under my arm like a bunch of useless flowers. I looked like I was going somewhere, but I was hiding out in the open. And months later, in the summer, when I finally got up the nerve to go back to Ho Street—to what had been *my* corner—I found a girl with green spiky hair standing behind a table with a strange machine hooked up to two tiny speakers. She sang a song I'd never heard—the streets were full of them now more than ever—into a microphone attached to the machine. Her voice drifted down the block easily. I stood there listening, until she

brought her tune to a close. And then I went up to her and said, “I’m sorry, but … what is all of this?” I waved my hands at the equipment on her table.

“This?” She pointed at the main piece of machinery. “It’s a laptop.” When I didn’t respond, she said, “You know, a mobile computer? I can play downloaded karaoke songs on it? Well, as long as it’s been spelled. Live and learn. This place rocks, but it has its downsides.”

“Downloaded?” I said, vaguely recalling a word like this that Mouse had used.

The girl nodded but didn’t explain. Instead, she tapped the keyboard and stroked her fingertip across its bottom edge, tapped a few more keys, and soon a new song was playing and she was singing it. Another song I didn’t recognize. She smiled around the words. It wasn’t my idea of music, but I placed a few coins on her table before leaving.

On my way home, bemused and a bit melancholy, I stopped in a café, hoping a strong cup of coffee might change my mood. But when I sat at a communal table, where a halfie with a long coat and scraggly teeth poured tea from a pot into his cup, he looked me up and down before asking, “What’s wrong? Someone murder your sister?”

“Excuse me?” I said after swallowing a bitter sip.

“You look like you need a beer.”

“I don’t drink,” I told him.

“Name’s Billy Buttons,” the halfie said. I didn’t offer him mine. “New arrival, are you?”

“No. I’ve been around for a while. Why?”

“You look like you haven’t got a clue what’s going on,” he said. “That’s why.”

“I just saw a girl singing karaoke songs from a miniature computer. When I left the World, computers took up an entire desk.”

“Now they sit pleasantly on your lap like a cat,” said the guy. “Some in the palm of your hand. Must be one of the new kids. They’re bringing all sorts of nifty things with them from the World these days, aren’t they?”

“Seems so.”

“Well, you roll with the punches,” said Billy. “Otherwise, you get knocked down. I’ve been around B-town long enough to learn to make adjustments when the World changes. Of course, it’s worse for you younglings who were here before the Pinching Off. You’ve got all these

kids coming through now who look like you but don't think or act like you. Makes you old before your time. It's a shame."

I nodded but didn't say anything. Quickly I drank the last of my coffee, then excused myself. The weird halfie said to keep my chin up, said that things change in ways we can't expect, and didn't I know that, after living in Bordertown as long as I have? He laughed loud and long, and was still laughing as the door of the café closed behind me.

I decided to take the long way home, to walk off my bad mood. So I turned down empty streets and abandoned alleys that took me around the perimeter of my neighborhood. But as I turned down one of those alleys, I found a crowd farther in, clogging the path. The people had their backs to me, so I couldn't see what they had gathered around. Suddenly their arms went up and they let out a collective cry and shook their fists in the air. I'd seen plenty of odd gatherings during my years in Bordertown, but not in a back alley with a crowd who raised fists and cheered in unison.

The alley was lit with lanterns people carried, and several bespelled fire globes hung in the air above, casting an orange glow over faces and shoulders. When I reached the back of the crowd, I stood on tiptoe, but I still couldn't see beyond their heads. And as the cheers began to fade, a lone voice remained at the center. A familiar voice—I knew it as soon as I heard it—and this is what the voice said:

"They take the goods we bring from our World, those are fine enough for them, and they take your rent and they'll take your children in trade. They take and take and take, that's what they know how to do. And yet we are beneath them. And yet our World is a garbage pit compared to their One True Realm. Why, then, are they so interested in our World? Why, then, do they want what our World produces? And why have we allowed them to take possession of our streets while we cannot even *tour* their precious Realm beyond Elfhaeme Gate?"

"They're liars!" someone from the crowd shouted.

"They're cheats!" another sent up like a rocket.

Then the voice at the center resumed speaking.

"We will send them a message, my friends. We will make them know that we will no longer grovel like worms at their perfectly molded ivory feet. And when we come for them, my friends," said the voice at the center, "what will we tell them?"

A hush fell over the crowd for only an instant, allowing them to collect enough breath to shout, “We do not come in peace! We do not come in peace! We do not come in peace!”

I pushed myself into the mass of people and threaded through the bodies until I reached the front of the crowd. I put my hands on the shoulders of two men to lift myself up and look beyond them, to put a face to the voice —the Voice of the Nameless, I would learn some people called him. Alek, Aleksander, Mouse.

Our eyes met briefly, and in that moment, he recognized the shock on my face, and I recognized how much we were strangers despite living together, despite taking care of each other.

He said, “Marius …”

I turned away.

* * *

I don’t think of myself as stupid or naive. After all, I was the one who saw Mouse and the danger he was in when he first arrived. After all, it was I who taught him how to survive on the Border. But I must have been under a spell for at least one of these conditions when it came to Mouse. Stupidity, naïveté, it doesn’t matter; both lead to the same result: blindness to what’s happening right in front of you.

I was blind, then. Blind most likely because I’d fallen into some kind of love with Mouse despite my efforts not to. Maybe it was because he reminded me of myself when I first spotted him. And in caring for him, I believed I was somehow protecting that younger version of myself that no one had taken the time to protect when I first arrived. Maybe it was because I thought I could make him into a little brother. But despite all my efforts to box him into some other kind of relationship, I had failed. Now the jury had returned with a verdict: clearly I was guilty of perjury. I had lied to myself, over and over again.

When he returned later that night, clicking the door shut quietly, he scuttled over to where I lay in bed pretending to sleep. He nudged my shoulder and whispered, “Marius? Marius, are you awake?”

I rolled over, sighing. “It’s late, Mouse,” I said. “What do you want?”

“I’m sorry.” He sat down beside me, the mattress dipping. He put a hand near mine, but I didn’t take it.

“Sorry for what?”

“For not telling you what I’ve been doing. For keeping secrets.”

“You mean forming another gang? The streets are full of them. Do you really think another one is going to solve any problems? They just make more.”

“It’s not a gang,” said Mouse.

“Then what is it?”

“A group,” he said. “A group of freedom fighters.”

“You’re not free here?”

“Not necessarily that,” said Mouse. “But it is unfair.”

“Welcome to the world,” I said, and moved to turn over on my side again.

“No,” said Mouse. “I left the World for a reason. It doesn’t have to be like that here.”

“It’s like this everywhere, Mouse,” I said into my pillow. “Grow up. I had to.”

“Only because people like you allow for it.”

I felt his weight lift from the bed. And a moment later: the sound of the door clicking shut quietly.

* * *

Only so much truth can exist between two people until it becomes too much, and then they can’t bear to be around each other. I didn’t hold it against Mouse that he’d been keeping secrets from me. I had secrets of my own. When he’d been gone for a few weeks after that midsummer night when I’d discovered *his* secret, I decided I couldn’t go on living as I was. *This apartment is too small*, I told myself. *And the music has gone to wherever it wants to be. And anyway, isn’t it time to move on to something different, something real*?

Also, when I took out that bag of elf money from beneath its floorboard, it no longer rattled.

An object lesson I never shared with Mouse: I stood on my old corner later that day, holding that empty bag with the crest of a powerful

Trueblood family embroidered on it, and had a terrible idea. It was terrible because as soon as I had it, I knew it was bad. But it was strong, and grew so quickly that it took hold of my mind and conducted me, as if I were its puppet, to return to that elf's crystal mansion on Dragon's Tooth Hill, where I'd once spent a night thinking I was in love with someone, and once there I waited outside until that elf finally appeared and came to meet me.

"What do you want, Marius?" he asked with no hint of emotion.

"What I'm worth," I told him. I held the bag up and he looked away, embarrassed. I knew he would be. They have no scruples about doing shameful things, the Fair Ones. They only wish not to be reminded.

"You cannot blackmail me, Marius," he said, stiffening his back, lifting his chin, looking down his nose at me. "I've done no wrong here."

But an election was on the horizon, and his father's name had been on the tongue of every elf, human, and halfie all summer. Even Mouse had mentioned their family name once, when he'd come home with another bit of gossip he'd heard about the elves trying to edge humans out of the High Council. His father couldn't afford to have a reckless son paying street rats like me for a night of lust. It would be so … *tasteless.*

I reminded the elf of this and of the occasional bursts of violence that had flared in the streets once people realized the Way had closed. It made people nervous, even after it reopened, as if the entire city had been under a spell of magic. "And we all know where magic comes from, don't we?" I said. I stared hard until he looked away.

"You humans," he said, but didn't finish. Instead, he sighed and said, "If the money wasn't enough for you, what is it you want?"

I looked back at the gleaming facade of his father's mansion beyond his shoulder, smiled—no teeth, just upturned corners—and made my proposal.

* * *

Art and Lies. That's what I got out of a night spent as an unwitting prostitute. I'd meant to save my dignity, go my own way, but after Mouse left I couldn't save anything. No Mouse to bring home coffee and chocolate from his mysterious delivery service. No music to play for coins on a corner. Nothing left to trade for a roof and clothes and meals. It was either I

collect on that spell-promised favor, or I join the Wharf Rats and start drinking from the Mad River.

The elf sealed our deal with magic this time: I got what I wanted, and he got a spellbound promise that I would never return, never bother him or his family again.

It was only after I'd walked away from Dragon's Tooth Hill and back into Soho that I felt like I could release the breath I'd been holding.

When I moved from my apartment, I took the things Mouse had left behind and boxed them up. I stuck them in a corner of the crumbling Soho building the elf had restored for me. It was on Carmine Street, where I knew people, and I put up flyers advertising what I intended the place to be. People responded by bringing me paperbacks with dog-eared pages, CDs in plastic cases, vinyl records lurking in the corners of their attics, VHS tapes, VCRs covered in dust, flimsy comic books, paintings and sculptures from local artists. I paid for the used items and arranged for the art to be sold on consignment. A bit for me, a bit for the makers. Then I hung my sign in the window and pretended to be proud when people who knew me as a street violinist rang the bell over the door as they entered for the first time, smiling, congratulating me on my new venture.

And then, three weeks ago, I turned at the sound of that bell to see him come in, looking around cautiously as he stepped up to the counter, where I'd been pricing a set of semitattered books about teenaged love-crazed vampires someone had brought in. Alek, Aleksander, Mouse.

I didn't waste any time asking how he'd been or what he'd been up to. I just went to the back room to collect his box of left-behind things. When I pushed it across the counter, he said, "It's good to see you doing so well, Marius. Your place, it's really impressive."

"Thanks," I said, and tapped my finger against the counter.

"Don't you want to know how I've been?" he asked.

I could only shake my head.

"Then you don't want to know what's going to happen soon? Not far from here?" he asked.

I looked up, frowning. "Please say what you came to say."

"We're going to take it," he said. "We're going to take that bleeding Oberon House by storm, and then burn it to the ground."

“You’ve been drinking Mad River water,” I told him. “You have no idea what you’re saying. There are *children* in there,” I added through clenched teeth.

“I know what I’m saying,” he said. “I know what I’m doing, Marius. We have a plan. We’re going to take the building first, then burn it down after we get the kids out, so those bastards know they can’t abuse us any longer.”

“You’ll be killed,” I said. “It’s not possible. They’re too powerful.”

“We’re powerful, too, Marius. You’ve always underestimated us. Underestimated yourself.”

“I could turn you in to one of the elf gangs,” I said, hoping that the threat would scare him off his plans. “I could warn the Silver Suits.”

“You won’t, though,” said Mouse. “I know you, Marius.”

“No,” I said, “you don’t, actually.” Then: “Why are you telling me all this?”

“So you can tell others,” he said. “Afterward, when it’s over, we’ll need a song, like all important battles and revolutions have. So people will know what was meant by it. You should be the person who does that.”

“You shouldn’t count on me for that,” I said. “I don’t want anything to do with your schemes.”

“They’re not schemes,” said Mouse. “They’re acts of justice. It was you who first taught me I couldn’t trust them. Why are you trying to defend them? They wouldn’t do the same for you.”

My mouth dropped open for a long moment. Now *I* was at the root of his crazed revolution. “Stop,” I said. “I don’t want to hear any more.”

He stood in the doorway holding his box of things, looking around the place with a squint in his eye. “It speaks volumes about you, Marius, this place. But I’m not sure you know that, do you?”

“Please leave,” I said.

And he did leave, as soon as I turned away. I knew by the sound of the bell.

* * *

Tonight I waited in a doorway across the street from that shabby building his group had holed themselves up in, watching their silhouettes pass by windows, Mouse and his new friends. I couldn’t help myself, I couldn’t

make myself go home. And later, after nearly two hours had passed, I watched the lights in the building go off, floor by floor. Then the door they'd gone through opened, and the same group of kids spilled out again. I pressed myself into the shadows of my alcove and gasped when I saw the full backpacks slung over their shoulders, cans of gasoline in their hands, bricks clenched in their fists, baseball bats, trash can lids buckled across their arms like shields. They were going to do it after all. They were going to do what he'd said.

I stood there, unable to move. What could I say? What could I do? I couldn't bring myself to go to the Silver Suits about it. It wasn't just elves I distrusted. And anyway, I reasoned, they'll be caught. Surely they can't walk into Oberon House, take out the Truebloods running the place, and burn the place down. It would never happen.

I thought about going home, doing my best to pretend I hadn't seen anything. But even after I was halfway home, I found myself turning around, going back the way I'd come, back to Hell Street, then north to Ho, the street I'd seen Mouse and his gang go down. There were my feet, taking me to him as usual.

By the time I was a block from Oberon House, I knew I was already late to their party. Shouts and screams filled the air. Gunshots and spellblasts sounded off at random intervals. The scent of smoke reached me before I walked into a fine cloud of ash and found a mob moving down the street toward me; and at their backs, Oberon House loomed, smoking, creaking, tufts of fire eating the windows. Sirens wailed. Silver Suits were arriving. Truebloods and humans and halfies stood in the streets, some fighting, some looking up at Oberon House as it burned. The voice of the mob boomed above the smoke and fire: "We do not come in peace! We do not come in peace! We do not come in peace!" as they marched toward me, fists pumping in the air.

I put my face in my hands. *What have you done, Mouse?* I thought. And then: *What did I do by letting you?*

I looked out at the mob through the spaces between my fingers and dropped my hands. There he was, at the head of the pack, his face smudged with ash, a bloody gash across his forehead. *He's done it,* I thought, and for some reason I laughed, only a little at first, then full on, like someone

whose life has been changed by a tremendous tragedy or a miracle in an instant.

As the mob approached, I heard a faint whistling come from above me, as if a bird were perched somewhere overhead. No bird flew by when I looked up, though. Only the music. Only the music flew overhead, sifting through the smoke, waiting for me to take it, to shape it, if I would.

I'm not sure I've ever moved so fast as I did right then, taking my case from under my arm to release my violin. I stood there for a second and listened to what the music was trying to tell me, then I tried to play it—no, *let* myself play it—a song for Mouse, for Aleksander, the Voice of the Nameless, who stopped when he saw me and ran across the street to join me, while the mob marched on without him.

"Thank you," he said, after I finished my song for him, after I took the violin down and looked at his soot-smudged face and laughed at him, shaking my head.

"You're crazy," I said.

He only smiled and shrugged. "Seems like I have to go to extremes to get your attention. I knew you would come through for me, Marius."

"Well, *I* certainly didn't."

"I knew," he said, and put his hand on my shoulder where the violin had rested, pulled me down so he could kiss me.

I could turn you in to one of the elf gangs, I'd told him that day in the shop.

You won't, though, he'd said. *I know you, Marius.*

No, I'd said, *you don't, actually.*

But perhaps, to my surprise, he did.

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A Borderland Jump-Rope Rhyme

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Translator’s note: “Sweet Mistress Mab” is a fairy jump-rope rhyme. Playing with jump ropes—or skip ropes, as they are sometimes called by the Truebloods—is something the fairy children in Borderland have borrowed from their human counterparts. Their rhymes are often patterned after the human rhymes. For example, the following closely follows the rhythm of “Miss Mary Mack,” a popular human jumping rhyme. But it does not have the silly nonsense of that rhyme. Instead it begins with something akin to a murder or a mob hit and ends with a warning.

—Durocher, L., and Sharpe, Mary Elizabeth
The Streets of Bordertown: A Festschrift
Iowa City: University of Iowa Press

Sweet Mistress Mab, Mab, Mab
Lies on a slab, slab, slab.
Her silver eyes, eyes, eyes
I want to jab, jab, jab.

She is not dead, dead, dead,
Just dressed in red, red, red,
With thirteen rounds, rounds, rounds
Inside her head, head, head.

If they are iron, iron, iron
Instead of lead, lead, lead,
Then she will sure, sure, sure
Be very dead, dead, dead.

If silver made, made, made
She’ll be afraid, ’fraid, ’fraid
And in a trice, trice, trice
She’ll start to fade, fade, fade.

Oh humans all, all, all
Pray heed my call, call, call.
Don’t put a fey, fey, fey
Against the wall, wall, wall.

For if you do, do, do
And death’s not true, true, true,
Then watch your back, back, back.
We’re after you, you, you!

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THE ROWAN GENTLEMAN

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Ashley watches Renata take a last deep drag and then stub out her comfrey cigarette on her dressing table. It's already covered in spilled glitter, matches, paint, and the burned craters from other cigarettes. Ashley can hardly remember the fine wooden vanity Renata found on the street and dragged back to the Magic Lantern. It's suffered a lot since then.

"Open the box already," Renata says, pulling a lip liner from one of the drawers.

On the wall, a cracked mosaic of mirror fragments reveals Ashley's face, filled with trepidation.

The Magic Lantern was one of the first places Ashley came to when she arrived in Bordertown. She'd sit in the back and watch whatever was playing or doze because she was sure she'd be safe. Once Alain Bach Glaimhin took over from O'Malley and started casting for simultaneous live shows, Ashley knew that she wanted to be on that stage more than anything.

Ashley loves working at the Magic Lantern. Her hands hesitate over the ribbon on the large package, the one woven with sprigs of rosemary and ragwort. She knows the more gifts Alain gives her, the closer she is to being asked to leave.

"He really likes you," says Renata.

"Alain?" Ashley laughs. "No, he just likes the chase. It gives him something to do when he's not lying around on that scroungy old sofa like —" She was going to say "a prince in a fairy tale," but realizes how silly that sounds, considering what Alain is. She yanks at the ribbon instead, and as it comes apart, the box comes apart cleverly, too, shedding glittering petals. Inside is a folded length of fabric.

She picks it up and it unrolls in her hands: a scarf, ice-white, as light as cobwebs and spangled here and there with bits of shimmer—not as light as sequins or as heavy as actual jewels, they are like bits of trapped light, like the sun sparking off an icicle.

"Ooh," says Renata. "Pretty."

Of course it's pretty—everything Alain gives her is pretty. Elves are incapable of giving ugly presents; it offends their sense of aesthetics. Ashley's cheap, mostly bare room in the crash space she shares with most

of the other actors at the Magic Lantern is filled with pretty things Alain has given her: silk slippers too delicate to actually wear, a brooch that seems to trap the colors of the Mad River inside it, a starlike prism that fills her room with rainbows.

Someday he will ask to be given something in return for all these presents. Perhaps her heart or maybe the rest of her—possibly both.

"I shouldn't keep it," Ashley says, although she knows she will. She sets the box aside and starts to slick back her short black hair so that none of it will be visible underneath her long, honey-brown wig. It's not dress rehearsal yet, but Ashley has learned from experience that wigs take more than one performance to get used to.

"You can't. There's probably a serious violation of elfin custom—maybe even a deadly insult." Renata smiles as she spreads lipstick over her already bright mouth. "Besides, Alain is so cheap! You see that new tech guy? He's so clearly detoxing from the Mad River water. You can smell it when he sweats. Alain never hires anyone but addicts, criminals, and weirdos. You, my dear, are his one indulgence."

An indulgence. It is strange to be thought of that way. Alain certainly doesn't spend his money (and Ashley knows he has to have quite a lot, since he comes from one of those fancy Trueblood families with their big houses up on Dragon's Tooth Hill) on the Magic Lantern. She isn't even entirely sure why he bought it—maybe some kind of misbegotten rebellion against his seldom-mentioned father. The dingy glamour of the Magic Lantern is a far cry from the highborn elegance of the Truebloods.

It's the only place in town that even tries to show movies. With Bordertown's electricity being the way it is, the film projectors only work about half the time, even with spellboxes in place. So that the stories won't be interrupted, Alain employs a cast of real-life actors who act out the movies as they take place, in front of the screen, and whose performances continue in the event of electricity failure. Over the months, along with presents, Alain has given Ashley some of the best parts. She's been Mia from *Pulp Fiction*, Lara from *Dr. Zhivago*, and Thelma from *Thelma and Louise.*

The troupe acted the same pieces over and over, because those are the film reels they were able to obtain, but with the Way reopened, there's a flood of new material. *The Matrix*. *Titanic*. The new set of *Star Wars*

movies (though no one likes those). And *Lord of the Rings*, which Alain seems to think is a comedy. For their first new production, he picked one called *Pirates of the Caribbean*, though why an elf would be a fan of a film based on a theme park ride is unclear.

When Ashley and Renata get to the stage, the rest of the cast is already there, looking at the screen with awe. There's a flood of new technology, too. One of the tech guys must have gotten the little machine that played shining silver disks to finally work. Waves crash against the hull of a ship, and the arm of a monstrous octopus twists toward it, suckers undulating. The actors gasp in unison.

Kit, who plays nearly all of the leading male roles because of his square jaw and long legs, spots Ashley. He waves her over. "It's going to be a *good* show," he says, bouncing from one foot to another with barely contained glee. "But I wish I was playing Jack. He gets all the best lines."

"But not the girl," Ashley says with a small smile. They kissed a few times in front of a packed house when she played Thelma and he played the hitchhiking thief, so she figures it's okay to flirt with him. Kissing sets a precedent.

Besides, he's never given her a thing.

"There's a sequel," says Kit easily.

Ashley glances toward the wings of the stage, where Alain reclines on a scavenged couch, beautiful in a way no human can be beautiful. His eyes are barely open. He dozes, barely seeming to register when the movie finishes. At first she thought he didn't care when she flirted with other people in front of him; now she realizes he doesn't even notice.

Alain looks like what he is—a highborn elf slumming until he gets bored with human things and moves back to the Realm to do whatever it is that elves do there. Ashley likes Alain. He is good-humored, for an elf. Nothing ever bothers him much. He's beautiful, he gives her good parts, and he sleeps a lot—like a cat. She likes him, but she doesn't respect him. It's hard to respect someone who doesn't care about anything. Even the way he courts her is lazy.

Alain waves an arm languidly from the couch. "Go on, then," he says. "Rehearse. Only five days until opening night." He yawns and closes his eyes again.

"Inspiring," mutters Renata.

They take their places on the stage. They are rehearsing the scene where Elizabeth, Ashley's character, is saved from drowning by Jack. The ocean is represented by a blue circle painted on the floor. Ashley pretends to gasp and tumble into it, and is hauled out by Nat, the skinny teenager to whom Alain has inexplicably given the role of the pirate captain. His wig of multiple black braids has slipped to one side, and his eyeliner is smeared. He presses down hard on Ashley's chest, pretending to revive her.

"Ouch!" Ashley shakes her head. "Not so hard, there, big fella."

"Sorry." Nat hangs his head. He's one of the nicest members of the troupe, even if he isn't a very good actor. He's got big wide eyes like a startled baby animal and reminds Ashley of her little brother back in the World. A swaggering, half-mad Jack Sparrow he is not.

The troupe finishes the scene. No one forgets their lines so badly that they have to wake up Alain to paw through the script. He rouses halfway through anyway, to argue with himself about some blocking, but on the whole, everything is going according to schedule.

Until the bleeding girl staggers in.

Everyone freezes. Ashley scrambles up from the floor. When no one else does anything, she moves toward the girl, who has collapsed on the ground. Slowly the others gather around—everyone except Alain, who hasn't moved from his couch, although he is at least sitting up, watching what's going on through slitted silvery eyes.

The first thing Ashley notices as she drops down beside the girl is that she's obviously a halfie—the pointed ears, the white-blond hair, and the pale eyes are married with a human softness. The second thing Ashley notices is that there's a *lot* of blood. It's already starting to pool under the girl.

"Get a doctor!" Renata yells. "Get someone!"

The girl blinks once, heavily, and opens her mouth. She groans. "Robert said to wait for the Rowan Gentleman, but I was too scared. I—" she manages to say, then gives a terrible choking cough. Red dust comes from her throat, a fine powder that dusts her clothes, sticking to her lips and cutting off any further speech.

"The Silver Suits are coming," someone shouts, but the words come from far away. Ashley is focused on the girl, who has stilled. Her eyes go dull, her mouth slack. Nothing moves but the tide of blood.

“All of you,” Alain says in a voice she has never heard him use. “I want all of you out of here. Right now.”

For a split second, the cast just stares, shocked motionless by this new Alain. Then the actors trickle off the stage, some casting glances back at the dead halfie girl on the floor as they go, some studiously avoiding the sight. Renata is holding on to Kit’s arm; Nat keeps his eyes on the floor, his thin shoulders hunched.

Reluctantly, Ashley gets to her feet. It’s hard to tear herself away from the girl’s sightless eyes, hard not to want to smooth her hair and pillow her head, even now that it doesn’t matter. Even now when the girl can’t be uncomfortable.

Ashley follows them as far as the stage exit and then turns around, hesitating at the curtain. Alain has gotten up off his couch and is standing over the dead girl. His long hair hides his expression. He bends down as the front doors start reverberating with a loud pounding. He touches the girl’s lip and then brings that finger to his mouth. Someone is shouting for the doors to be opened; it’s got to be the Silver Suits. With a sigh, Alain goes to let them in.

“This is all my fault,” a voice near her says, keeping his voice low.

Ashley starts. One of the tech guys crouches in the shadows, peering toward where a single Silver Suit and two medics swarm around the girl’s body. It takes her a moment to recall his name—Tristan. He was the one who painted the blue circle on the floor. He’s got a shaved head that makes him look older than he is, and he wears sunglasses constantly, even indoors.

“What do you mean?” she whispers back. Ashley doesn’t think he’s that much older than she is. He might be twenty at the most.

Tristan shrugs his shoulders.

Ashley wonders if there was time for him to stab the girl and then come in the back way. She wonders if she is crouched beside a murderer.

She wonders why in the world Alain tasted the girl’s blood.

Across the room, Alain is speaking to the police. “Is she truly dead?”

The Silver Suit is an elf, tall and slim. He nods. “Did you see anyone? Hear anything?”

Alain shakes his head. “Her scream, nothing more.” He doesn’t care about the girl. Her death is an annoyance—an interruption to his daydreams. But Ashley remembers being a girl with nowhere to go and no

one to care about her. She could easily have wound up dead, and Alain would have been just as bored by her corpse.

"*I* heard her," Ashley says, coming out of the shadows quickly so that if Tristan means to murder her, too, he'll have to do it in front of the Silver Suits. "She said something about 'the Rowan Gentleman.' "

"Were you here when the body was found?" the Silver Suit asks.

"I was standing right next to her," says Ashley, nodding. "That's why I heard her and he didn't."

The Silver Suit writes something on his pad. "But then you left? Did you leave before or after she died? Was anyone else present?"

Ashley looks around the room, like she might find a good answer written on the crumbling plaster or threadbare theater chairs. She can't say it was because Alain cleared the theater; that would make it sound like the Magic Lantern had something to hide.

"Actresses are so dramatic," Alain says, yawning hugely. "Always rushing from rooms. Declaring they're about to faint at the sight of blood."

Ashley levels a glare in Alain's direction, but he is busy studying the Silver Suit's boots as if he's considering a pair for himself.

"So all she said was 'the Gentleman'?" the Silver Suit asks. "Have you any idea what she meant?"

"The *Rowan* Gentleman. That guy with the crazy mask and the cloak, right?" Ashley has heard whispers about the Rowan Gentleman, but they're as muddled as her explanation. Stories and tossed-off rumors that have either made him sound like a psychopath (luring those already down on their luck into some dark basement to be chopped up into pieces) or a saint (spiriting them off to his own personal sanctuary to be fitted with new identities and safe passage to the World or the Realm). People who are in trouble, or with the Wharf Rats and need help, or are in debt to the Bloods, or whatever—they all want to believe that someone will save them. Ashley figures they better save themselves; she's pretty sure that the Rowan Gentleman is either a myth or a dangerous lunatic.

The medics lift the dead girl carefully onto a gurney. The Silver Suit notes Ashley's and Alain's full names. He notes other things, too, although Ashley isn't sure what those things are. Clues, she hopes.

"Your father is worried about you," the elf tells Alain as he starts toward the doors.

Ashley sees the muscles of Alain's back tighten, but his voice is as light as ever. "Give him my best."

When the Silver Suit is gone, Ashley sinks down into one of the theater chairs in relief. "That was awful," she says.

"Come to dinner with me tonight," Alain says suddenly. He's standing with his back to her, still looking at the doorway to the ticket counter and the street.

"I can't," Ashley says. "Not after this. I'm sorry. I just can't." She stands up. "Thanks for the scarf, though."

Alain does not reply.

* * *

The lights are dim on Carnival Street when Ashley lets herself out of the Magic Lantern. Alain offered to walk her home but she refused, wanting to be alone. She keeps seeing the halfie girl, bleeding and dying on the warped floorboards of the stage.

Her heels click on the cobblestones as she walks in and out of the pools of electric light cast by the streetlamps. The light isn't very reliable, and everything on either side of her slides away into shadow. Ashley pulls her coat closer around her, wondering if she should have taken Alain up on his offer after all.

She's about to turn the corner onto Mock Avenue when a hand reaches out from the darkness and grabs her. All of a sudden, she's being shoved roughly up against a dirty wall in a narrow alley. She's too surprised to scream. The guy holding her there is tall, maybe six feet.

Ashley can hear faint music in the distance, probably coming from The Dancing Ferret up the street. The guy smells like sweat and metal and rage.

"I don't have anything valuable," Ashley babbles. "Money, or … or anything—"

He shakes her, slamming her back against the wall. "Where's Lydia? I saw her go into your crappy little theater."

"I don't know anyone named Lydia—"

"She's blond. A halfie. Pretty—"

"Dead." Ashley doesn't mean the word to come out so cold and flat, but fear has robbed her voice of emotion. "She was already hurt when she came

in. We tried to help but there wasn't anything we could do."

The man swears viciously. "Did the Silver Suits come?"

Ashley nods. The man turns his head aside and spits. He's human, with slicked-back greasy hair and bloodshot gray eyes. He's got stubble, and he smells like unfamiliar herbs, something bitter and weird.

"What about Robert?" he says. "Where's he?"

"I don't know any—" Ashley starts.

The man slams her head against the wall again, this time hard enough for her vision to go bright with pain.

"I'm s-s-sorry!" she stammers, hoping that she can act her way out of this. It doesn't matter that she doesn't know a Robert; the man believes she does. She just has to do what he expects. "Robert said he needed a drink. Maybe The Factory or O'Donoghue's. *I really, honestly don't know.* Please. Please don't hurt me."

Tears slide down her cheeks. *Think of the saddest thing that ever happened to you*, her mother used to say. *The most frustrating. The worst.* Since then, Ashley's been an expert at crying; she's never had to use glycerine eyedrops, not even once.

The man lets go of her arm, and Ashley stumbles back, wiping her eyes.

"If you see him before I do," the man says, "you tell him that me and my boys are looking for him. Tell him Nigel Barrow is looking for him. And if he doesn't come and find me, I am going to burn down the theater with him in it."

* * *

Ashley is still shaking as she closes the front door of the apartment. It's the whole floor of what used to be a warehouse. It's been partitioned off into rooms with cheap drywall here and there, or sometimes a Japanese screen or some printed Indian cotton hanging from tacks on the ceiling. There's a big shared kitchen, a somewhat smaller shared bathroom, even a room of shared computers whose lights blink and glimmer and fade along with the unpredictable electricity.

This is where Ashley has lived since she came to work at the Magic Lantern. Lots of the actors use the squat, along with some of the tech folks. It's safer than anywhere she's slept before.

A bunch of the others are in the kitchen already, sitting around the big wooden table—it was a door once, in a previous life, now laid across stacked concrete blocks—and they greet her as she comes in.

"You look all shaken up," says Renata, pushing a mug of hot tea in her direction. "We were just talking about the dead girl at the theater."

"Someone … grabbed me on the way home," Ashley says, gulping back the tea, tasting lemon balm and rosehips. It burns her tongue, but she's glad of the distraction from the throbbing of her head and the way her eyes are filling with tears again. "He was looking for her. He didn't know that she'd … she'd …"

Nat comes around the table and puts his thin arms around her. "We're here," he says. "Everything's going to be okay."

"No," Ashley says, slightly hysterical. "It's not. The man said he would burn down the theater to get to Robert. But there isn't any Robert! And Alain won't care. He'll just buy something else that amuses him, but the theater! The theater will be gone!"

"Calm down," says Kit, standing up. "Breathe."

A moment later, Nat, Kit, and Renata are hugging her, all at the same time, which should be ridiculous, but she can feel herself relaxing.

"You poor thing," Renata says.

"Had you seen the guy before?" Nat asks. "Hanging around the theater maybe?"

Ashley shakes his head. "He said his name was Nigel Barrow, though. And Robert … Robert was the name the girl, Lydia, said before she died. She said, *'Robert told me to wait for the Rowan Gentleman.' "*

"Why didn't she, then?" Renata asks, startling Ashley with the sharpness of her tone. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean it like that," she says after she notices Ashley's expression. "It's just that I don't know her, and all I care about is that you got hurt."

"The Rowan Gentleman *isn't real*," says Ashley. "Waiting for him is like waiting for Santa Claus to save you. Or the Tooth Fairy."

Once upon a time, Ashley had waited for someone to save her. She waited in the offices of agents while her mother discussed her commercial potential; she waited in front of cameras where she had to hold painful poses and suck in her gut; she waited on sound stages while directors yelled at her mother for drunkenly disrupting rehearsal. She waited and waited,

until one day she saw herself in the mirror, saw her own hollow eyes and slack mouth. That was the day she couldn't wait anymore.

What I like about you, Alain had said to her the first time she tried out for one of his productions, *is that you never seem to feel much of anything when you're not onstage. But up there you feel everything.*

It's called acting, she'd told him. Ashley wonders if he would say the same thing about her now.

" 'If you wake at midnight, and hear a horse's feet,' " Renata intones, delight in her voice, " 'don't go drawing back the blind, or looking in the street. Them that ask no questions isn't told a lie. Watch the wall, my darling, while the Gentlemen go by!' "

"A Boiled in Lead song?" Kit says.

"It's Kipling, you heathen." Renata takes a bottle of nettle wine out from one of the stacked boxes they use like cabinets. "Ashley needs a drink and I need one, too, so we're opening this, and when we're done, we'll open three more like it."

* * *

When Ashley finally goes to bed, it's three in the morning and her throat is hoarse from talking and drinking cheap nettle wine. Her room is one of the partitioned spaces without windows—she lies on top of her bedspread in the stuffy, dank air, tossing and turning, unable to get the dead girl's face out of her mind. Finally, she gets to her feet and pads toward the kitchen, wanting to splash some cold water on her cheeks. She can tell from the gray light coming in through the window over the sink that it's almost dawn.

Just as she turns off the water, she hears a sound—someone moving through the apartment. Not sure why exactly, she steps back into the shadows, watching as the person reaches the front door. It's Tristan, and he has a rucksack slung over one shoulder. He looks around furtively before opening the door and slipping outside into the hallway.

All their shoes are lined up by the front door—Ashley finds a pair of ballet flats that she's pretty sure are hers and jams her feet into them. Otherwise she's wearing a tank top and flannel pants, but there's no time to change, and weirder outfits have certainly been seen in Bordertown. She grabs her keys and slips out the door after Tristan.

She’s never followed anyone before, so she’s pretty impressed with herself that he doesn’t seem to notice as she darts in and out of doorways, keeping to the shadows as the sun rises, turning the gray sky to a hollow blue. He’s taking a familiar route, down Mock to Carnival, and she’s starting to feel foolish as they near the Magic Lantern. It doesn’t look like Tristan is up to anything sinister besides getting to work really, really early.

As he heads for the backstage door and fumbles with a key, she considers going back to the squat and lying down for a few more hours. The adrenaline is starting to ebb, and she finds herself exhausted. Ashley decides she can nap on one of the couches in the back of the theater. Alain always does; they must be comfortable.

Tristan disappears through the door.

And even though Ashley figures that there’s no reason to sneak anymore, she goes around to the front and unlocks that door, pushing it open slowly, stopping for a long moment with each creak. Alain lives above the Magic Lantern and, like most elves, is a light sleeper.

She creeps through the darkened theater and through the heavy velvet curtains at the back of the stage. As she walks toward the green room, she hears a rustling coming from the wardrobe area. Curious again, she slips inside and goes toward the back of the room, where the three-way mirrors are.

There she stops, ducking instinctively behind a hanging row of old-fashioned dresses. Peering between them, she can see Tristan—tying on the black, long-sleeved outfit of the Rowan Gentleman, complete with flowing cloak. The berry-red half-mask hangs around his neck.

“What foolishness is this?”

It’s Alain’s voice. Ashley jumps and pulls farther back into the shadows. Alain, striding into the room, seems not at all surprised to see Tristan dressed like a lunatic who’s not supposed to be real. “We planned no—” he says.

Tristan cuts him off. “I thought I could handle things with Lydia. All this is happening because of me. It’s my fault. I’ve got to make it right.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Robert,” Alain says, and Ashley has to swallow her gasp, because if Alain knew that Tristan was really Robert all along, why did he hide that from the Silver Suit? From her? “We have all made mistakes. Going after Nigel Barrow alone will solve nothing.”

Alain knows the name of the man who grabbed me, Ashley thinks in a daze.

“We’ve got to do something, or more kids are going to die,” says Tristan.

Ashley refuses to start thinking of him as Robert. She’s confused enough as it is.

Alain paces back and forth. He moves with a restless energy, so utterly unlike his usual self that, for a moment, Ashley wonders if it’s him at all.

“We don’t know what he’s doing,” Alain says languidly. His voice, at least, is the same. “Lydia was supposed to be the one who would tell us, but she never got the chance. You want us to just go in there unprepared? We’re supposed to be saviors of the lost, not punishers of those who do wrong. The Silver Suits can sort them out.”

“He roughed up Ashley,” says Tristan. “In an alley near Mock Avenue. Tried to get her to tell him where I—Robert—was.”

Alain turns. There is real concern on his face and in his voice, making it sharp. “Is she well? How badly was she hurt?”

Tristan looks surprised at the vehemence in Alain’s tone. “She wasn’t hurt—just shaken up. But it means he’s coming after us. Our best chance is to go after him first.”

“I told her I’d walk her home,” Alain mutters, and Ashley realizes he is still talking about her. She wouldn’t have expected him to care that much.

“Are you listening to me, Alain? We have to go after Barrow and his crew before he comes to the Magic Lantern and burns it down.”

“I hear you and I agree.” Alain sounds grim. “Meet me tonight by the Mad River. There is an alley across from Dragon’s Claw Bridge with lots of useful shadows. We’ll search Nigel’s warehouse, see what he’s been up to. Tell the other eighteen to be ready in case we have need of them.”

The other *eighteen*? Ashley is so stunned she barely hears Tristan’s muttered acknowledgment. She presses herself back into the shadows just before he rushes past, letting himself out the theater’s back door. When it closes behind him, she peeks out again, but Alain is already gone.

Everything looks like it always does, except for a trunk shoved haphazardly back in place. Nothing she would have noticed before. She drags it out from the wall. The loose floorboard is obvious, and when she pulls that up, more than two dozen Rowan Gentleman costumes are revealed.

Ashley slips out the door after Tristan, her heart pounding in her chest, a cloak and mask in her arms.

* * *

Having barely slept the night before, Ashley naps fitfully through the day before rising at sundown. The apartment is empty—everyone else is out taking advantage of the night off. Everyone but Tristan, and she knows where he is.

She dresses herself carefully in a Gentleman's outfit—the material is soft and flexible, the trousers only a little too long. She folds them over at the waist and ties her hair back, tucking it up under the hood of the cloak. In Kit's cubicle, she finds a prop sword that could pass for the real thing and tucks it against her side, beneath the cloak. She feels the same shivery excitement she often feels before stepping out onstage, ready to throw herself into a part, to embrace someone else's life.

Ashley finds Dragon's Claw Bridge easily, and the alley across from it. It is as shadowy as Alain had promised—so shadowy that at first she doesn't see him. When he steps out from the darkness in his black cloak and red mask, she nearly yelps out loud. He actually does look frightening.

He ducks his head in greeting. "Tristan. Are you ready?"

Ashley is speechless. This is not how she thought it would go at all. She had thought she would arrive and confront them both, not that Alain would mistake her for Tristan. Where *is* Tristan? She opens her mouth, but no words come out.

Alain takes her silence for agreement. "All right, then. I'll take point." He steps in front of her. What she had thought of before as a lazy stride now has a fluid and deadly grace.

Ashley follows him through the street, copying the way he tips his head forward so the hood of the cloak hides the mask. Her fingers go to the pommel of Kit's fake sword, closing around it as though it were real. Unless Nigel Barrow is afraid of splinters, the sword is useless—and so is she.

Just as she convinces herself to tell Alain the truth, he slips into a doorway.

"I walked by before," he says, sticking a pin into the lock. "No one home. Lucky us. Remember, we touch nothing. We're just here to find out

what's going on."

Ashley nods once and then Alain turns the knob, leaning his shoulder against the door and is inside.

"Alai—" she whispers, trying to make her voice sound low, like Tristan's.

"Shhh," he says, cutting her off and motioning her inside.

It's a big, mostly empty room, lit by moonlight. There is the reek of sweat and the strong smell of Mad River water. It's hot, almost swampy, and it's not hard to see why. There's a row of fireplaces along one wall. Fires burn in each of them, heating the bottoms of massive iron cauldrons.

"What *is* this?" Alain says, clearly baffled. "What are they doing here?"

Ashley shakes her head and shrugs, not daring to speak. She's in it too far now, she realizes. She has to keep pretending to be Tristan unless she wants to endanger them both. Instead, she points at the long wooden table that runs the length of the room's center. Stacked on the table are glassine packets of reddish dust—the same substance the girl in the theater coughed up when she died.

Alain moves gracefully over to the table, running his hands over the packets. "Could it be …" He looks up, and though his expression is hidden by the half-mask, Ashley can tell he is angry. "They're dehydrating Mad River water," he says. "Processing it—turning it into a drug you can easily smuggle into the World."

"Lydia, the halfie girl," says Ashley. "They must have been using her as a mule. That's why she coughed up powder when she died."

Alain stands frozen, staring at her, and Ashley realizes with a sinking feeling that she has forgotten to disguise her voice. "Ashley?" he says, in a voice that does not sound like his own. He stands stock-still. "Is it you?"

She is trying to think of how to reply when the doors burst open and Nigel's crew swarms into the room.

* * *

It is her fault, all her fault. As Ashley sits in the hot, stinking darkness, pulling at the rope binding her wrist, waiting for Alain to wake up—hoping Alain will wake up—that's all she can think about.

He was shocked, staring at her, off-balance. One of Nigel's men ran at Ashley, and instead of trying to get out of there, Alain threw a knife at him. It hit, but a moment later, the rest of them were on him. It was shocking how many he took down. Maybe ten, some of them looking as though they might not get back up again.

Ten wasn't enough.

Alain stirs, finally, and groans a little. They are tied to sturdy wooden posts in what Ashley has guessed is a storage room. They are only a few feet from each other. Alain raises his head and looks at her; his face is bloodstained, bruises blooming on his cheek.

"I'm so sorry," she says, her voice breaking. "So sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I didn't mean to—"

Alain makes a harsh sound that it takes her a moment to recognize as laughter. "Not much surprises me these days," he says. "But you, Ashley, are always a surprise."

"I overheard you and Tristan—Robert, I guess—talking in the wardrobe room," she says. "First I thought he was the Rowan Gentleman; then I thought maybe you both were—"

"There are twenty of us," says Alain matter-of-factly. "Nineteen members, and one to lead them."

"And that's you," Ashley says.

"And that is me."

"And all this time I never thought you cared about anything," she marvels.

Alain says nothing to that.

"Why do you do it?" Her voice drops a level, as if someone might be listening, as if she's asking him to tell her a secret, which, she supposes, she is. "I mean, you're helping humans, right? Humans and halfies, you're getting them out of Bordertown when they're in trouble. Why?"

He's quiet for a long moment. "Where I grew up, my parents had no use for humans, save as servants. They treated those servants very poorly, though the servants seldom complained of it. Glamour can make a bare closet seem like a bed heaped in silk. It can make the most meager, most foul food taste like roasted duckling and spiced cake. But I saw them as they were: thin, covered in sores, some worse than that. Eventually, it was a game between my parents and me—how many servants could I smuggle out

without getting caught? I got quite skilled at it. So skilled they asked me to leave. They procured me the Magic Lantern on the condition that I never return."

Ashley shudders. Sure, her mom had been a drunk and a mess, but she'd never thrown Ashley out. Never paid her to leave. "Why there of all places?"

"When I was very little, I would ask for stories from my human nannies. And I was told marvelous ones, big epic, grand adventures. Sometimes a nanny would get maids or the butler to help her act them out. It was only later that I realized those stories weren't written down in any book. They were films. *Casablanca*. *The Wolfman*. *Star Wars*."

Ashley laughs a little at that last one, but it isn't really funny. It's sad. She thinks how lonely he must have been, a child up in one of those big houses on Dragon's Tooth Hill, left alone most of the time with no one but humans —who must have been half crazy by then—to take care of him. She hopes they loved him, more than his parents did. They must have, to have made him so determined to pay them back somehow.

Ashley wishes she could reach across the darkness and touch his hand. His eyes have a silvery shine as he meets her gaze. "Why did you give me all those presents?" she asks.

Before he can answer, the door swings open. Ashley yelps in surprise. A tall man in the costume of the Rowan Gentleman is there, mask over half his face.

"Tristan?" Ashley says quietly.

The Gentleman looks from Alain to Ashley and then back again. Finally, he pulls off his mask. It's not Tristan, but Kit.

"You told her?" Kit asks, sounding surprisingly petulant.

"She followed me," Alain says. "And seems to have stolen your sword, too, so please don't start on how I should have been more careful."

Kit raises his eyebrows. "When you didn't show up, Tristan called in the troops. I think we got most of them. Quite a laboratory downstairs."

"I wonder how much of the stuff made it to the World already," Alain says. "Or if it works so far from the Realm."

"Let's hope not," Kit says, "because Nigel is no genius. If he's thought of it, others have, too."

Alain grunts. "Now perhaps you could untie me?"

“Got him,” Kit calls back into the hallway, and two more masked Gentlemen—one slight enough to be a girl—come into the doorway.

Kit makes quick work of Ashley’s bonds, and the other two cut Alain free. Ashley watches him get up, grabbing for the window frame for support. Under the cape, she is sure he is a mass of bruises.

He moves carefully out into the hall and down the stairs, a parody of his affected laziness.

Nigel and a few other men are tied to chairs, blindfolded and gagged. Another Gentleman is carefully writing a letter to the Silver Suits on the wall, with arrows pointing to the no-longer-boiling cauldrons, to the bags, and finally to the men.

As Alain steps into the center of the room, the dozen or so masked Gentlemen walk toward him, exclaiming loudly. Then they see Ashley—see the cloak on her shoulders and her bare face—and stop. Alain just smiles and reaches into his pocket.

“You were a Rowan Gentleman tonight,” Alain says. “Would you like to cast the berries?”

It’s intimidating to be stared at by a bunch of masked people. “Uh, sure,” Ashley says.

Alain passes the handful to her. They are bright red and hard, like rubies.

“I just throw them?” she asks.

“You just throw them,” says Tristan, looking slightly aggrieved. She can’t blame him; he probably panicked when he got to the meeting place and there was no sign of Alain. She’ll have to apologize to him properly later.

Ashley casts the berries, high and wide, and they land near one of the fireplaces. That is the signal for the group to disperse, for one by one they slip quietly out the doors, until only Alain, Ashley, and Kit are left.

“I’m heading back to the apartment,” says Kit, leaning around the door. “Do you want to come?”

“Let me accompany Ashley home,” says Alain, in a voice that brooks no disagreement.

Kit shrugs. “Have it your way,” he says, and is gone.

Ashley walks slowly, matching her pace to Alain’s. He is still wincing, but he doesn’t seem to have sustained any serious injuries. It’s close to dawn, and the sky is lightening, the Mad River turning from black to red.

“I’m sorry,” Ashley says, after the silence stretches too long. “I guess I never really believed in the Rowan Gentleman because I just couldn’t believe there was someone like that—someone who helps people just for the sake of helping them. I think I came here tonight expecting to find out it was some kind of elaborate joke. But it isn’t. This is really what you do.”

“It really is,” Alain says. “But don’t be sorry for not believing. Sometimes I hardly believe myself.”

“But now …” Ashley pauses, but she knows she has to go ahead and say it. The truth. “Now I’m afraid you won’t let me be one of you. Because I acted crazy and messed up your plan tonight.”

Alain laughs. “The Rowan Gentlemen are—all of us, to a one—mad as cats. We don’t recruit people known for making reasonable decisions. We’re all crazy and if you’re crazy, too, then I’m happy to know it.”

“Does that mean I’m recruited?” Ashley asks.

“Maybe.” He gives her a complicated smile. “If you like. But before you agree, I should tell you that those gifts—the shoes, the shawl—they were given to you with less than noble intentions.”

“You mean you wanted to get in my pants?” Ashley grins.

She expects him to smile, too, but he doesn’t. “I try to maintain a certain reputation. Incompetent. Lazy. Spoiled. And so I thought that courting a girl who cared nothing for me would fit.”

Ashley frowns. “You thought that I—”

“Love cannot be bought,” Alain says. “And you, quite smartly, distrusted me for trying.”

“And now?” she asks.

“Now I am ashamed,” he answers. “I chose both poorly and too well when I courted you. Poorly, because you saw right through my artifice, but too well, because now that I wish to declare my true admiration, I must do so knowing that you have little reason to believe me.”

“So, if you were courting me for real, there would be no presents, no dinners, no nothing?”

Alain laughs. “Perhaps I have no knowledge of courtship, false or true.”

Ashley gently bumps against his side. “Maybe I could help you learn. Why don’t you let me start by buying you something?”

He raises his eyebrows. “Buying me something?”

“It won’t be anything fancy like nine-million-thread-count sheets or exotic bath beads from the Realm,” she warns him. “I was thinking we should start small. I could buy you breakfast.”

“Breakfast?”

“Breakfast at Café Tremolo. You, me, muffins, a couple of espressos, and an ice pack for your face.”

Alain’s smile is as wide as the sunrise. “I’d like that.”

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THE SONG OF THE SONG

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There’s a song that they sing
at the edge of the world
about leaders and armies
with banners unfurled
and the blood of the brave
on the glittering sand
while the mountaintops ring
with the crash of the band
and they sing it a lot.
It might even be true.
But it’s not.
Listen, you …

There’s a boy loves a girl,
she has skin fair as milk,
she has breasts like ripe apples
and lips soft as silk,
so he sings of such stuff,
how he’ll love her for aye
though he’s ragged and rough
and he sleeps in the hay,
yet love makes no mistakes.
It is perfect and clean.
She is gone when he wakes,
and I mean …

On each side of the Border
wherever you stand
in these days of disorder
you must understand
that some songs are convincing,
persuasive and smart,

so in moments they’re mincing
away with your heart,
like songs do. They inspire,
but beware, because song
(like desire)
can go wrong.…

So heed my example
I was once a young ditty
on all sorts of lips
as folk wandered this city
but now I’m forgotten,
replaced by new strains
while my rhyme scheme is rotten
and little remains.
But I told them the truth
for a while. So beware
of a song
sung when nobody’s there.

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A TANGLE OF GREEN MEN

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- 1 -

When Tía Luba talks, everybody listens. That's just the way it is for us kids, on or off the rez.

I'm getting my release from the Kikimi County Young Offenders Correction Facility, which is just a fancy way of saying juvie. I've been on good behavior, done my time. Studied for my classes—even got my grade nine. Didn't mouth off to the guards or psychologists or counselors. Moved rocks and dirt around on the weekends to build character and amuse the guards. Basically, I kept my head down and my nose clean.

The guard accompanies me from the buildings to the outer gate. As we walk toward it, I get a good look at the twelve-foot-high chain-link fence with the barbed wire on top that makes a big loop around the facility. I've stared at it for the past eight months, but the last time I was up this close, I was on the outside being bused in from the city.

The guard talks into his walkie-talkie and the gate swings open. I step through and taste freedom.

"There's two buses a day," the guard says. "You missed the first one but another comes by at five."

It's noon. The sun's high, beating down on the desert. It's got to be 110 out here on the pavement. The road stretches as far as I can see in either direction. There's only scrub and cacti.

The guard spits on the ground as the gate closes.

I start walking. I've got two choices: the city or the mountains. The city's what got me in trouble the last time, so I walk northeast to where the Hierro Maderas rise tall and graying in the distance.

My baseball cap helps against the sun, but there's only so much it can do. I can feel the moisture leaving my body. A couple of hours of this and I'll be as parched as the dirt on either side of the blacktop.

When I hear the pickup slowing down behind me, I don't turn around. I just keep walking. Being around people's another thing that got me in

trouble. I either buy into their crap—which is how I found myself in Kikimi—or I end up taking a swing at them. I don't seem to have a whole lot of middle ground, but I'm working on it.

The pickup pulls up beside me and a familiar voice says, "You want a ride?"

I sigh. When the truck stops, I pop the passenger door and get in. I look at my aunt. She looks back at me, those dark brown eyes seeing everything. Her skin's brown but still smooth. Her black hair's tied back in a braid. She's wearing jeans and a man's flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

"Hey, Tía," I say as she puts the pickup in gear and pulls away. "What brings you out here?"

Like I don't already know.

"I was interested in seeing which direction you'd choose."

"I'm guessing since you stopped, I got that part right."

Her lip twitches, which is about as much of a smile as I've ever gotten out of her. She pulls a pack of smokes out of her pocket and tosses them onto my lap. I take one out and light it with one of the matches stuck into the empty half of the pack. When I offer it to her, she shakes her head. I close up the pack and put it on the console between the bucket seats.

"So now let's see how you do with the second part," she says. "I've got a ticket to Baltimore. If you're interested, Herbert's got a job for you there and you can stay with him."

What she doesn't say is I'm turning eighteen next month. The next time I get busted, I won't be going into juvie. Instead I'll be going into the adult prison system, which for my people is pretty much the biggest rez in the country.

"What's the job?" I ask.

"Well, you won't be stealing cars."

I nod. "I'd like that."

"If you screw this up …"

"I won't," I tell her.

I probably will. So far it's been the story of my life. I can see in her eyes she's thinking the same thing. But I'm willing to give it a try and she sees that, too.

Her lip twitches again.

"We'll make a man out of you yet," she says.

It’s a ways to the rez. I reach over and turn on the radio, moving through the bands till I get the tribal station. Her lip twitches a third time. She must be in a really good mood.

* * *

Uncle Herbert lives like he’s still in the shadows of the Hierro Maderas. He’s got a basement apartment that smells of piñon, sweetgrass, and cedar. He’s eating Indian tacos and beans and flatbread that I have to admit taste as good as anything I ever had back home. And he still makes his coffee the way we do on the rez, water and coffee all mixed up in the same pot. Doesn’t matter how well you strain it, you’re still picking grounds from between your teeth, but seriously? I can’t think of a better way to start the day.

He was a medicine man back on the rez, but he left when the war of words between the traditionalists and the casino crowd got too heated.

“If we were supposed to fight over possessions like white men,” he told me, “the Creator would have made us white men.”

Except now he lives here in Baltimore and works as a foreman for a company that provides the setup gear for conventions and shows. Go figure. I feel like telling him he’s living like the casino crowd except he’s poorer, but keeping my mouth shut’s been working pretty good these days, so I keep it to myself.

The work’s easy. It’s hard, sweaty work, but you don’t have to think—that’s the easy part. We just follow the floor plan that the organizers give us. We haul in all the tables, chairs, and podiums, set up the bare bones of the booths, build stages—whatever they need.

Uncle Herbert’s got a solid team. They’re mostly Mexican and black. They aren’t afraid to work and they love Uncle Herbert to a man. It was like that back on the rez, too, which is why he left. People were ready to go to war if he just said the word. He knew if he stayed any longer, he’d end up doing that and he didn’t want anybody’s blood on his hands.

“Do you miss it?” I asked as we drove home from a job one night.

He’s got this old Ford pickup that’s held together with rust and body filler, but it runs like a charm. Me, I’m still saving for a ride.

“I miss the quiet,” he said, then looked at me and grinned. “And I miss living on Indian time.”

Having spent the eight months before I came up here following an institutional schedule, I’m used to getting up early and being on time. But I gave him a smile and nodded.

“I hear you,” I said.

Uncle Herbert goes to bed early—pretty much after dinner. I’d maybe get bored, but I fill my time. I’m trying to teach myself wood carving. I don’t have any tools except my jackknife, but wood’s cheap and I’ve got all the time in the world to learn. Uncle Herbert doesn’t have a TV, just an old radio that someone left on the curb. He tinkered with it until he got it working again, so I listen to Public Radio while I work on my carvings. Little bears and lizards and birds like Hopi fetishes except they’re made of wood. Sometimes I go to the corner bar and nurse a couple of ginger ales while I watch a game on their big screen.

* * *

We get all kinds of gigs, but the ones that give me the biggest kick are where the people all play dress-up. Since I got here, we’ve done two sci-fi conventions. The setup’s no different than it is for any other kind of convention, but if you hang around the back halls of the hotel, you can watch them walking around like spacemen and barbarians and everything in between.

Seeing grown men and women dressed up like their favorite characters just puts a smile on my face. It reminds me of the powwows, where everybody trades in their jeans and Ts for ribbon shirts and jingle dresses. For a couple of days they get to step out of their lives and be the people they wish they were.

But the sci-fi conventions have nothing on our current job. At this FaerieCon pretty much *everybody’s* in costume, from the organizers to the people working the tables in the dealers’ room. Some of the guys working the faerie theme look like walking shrubs, in cloaks with leaves sewn all over their shirts and pants, and masks that look like they’re made of leaves and tree bark. There are a lot more girls, too—pretty girls with sparkles in their hair and faerie wings on their backs.

“Man,” Luther says, “I’d like me a piece of that.”

He’s checking out an Asian girl wearing leather with lots of buckles, high boots, and a short skirt. Her top hat’s got brass buttons all over it and what looks like a weird pair of binoculars resting on the brim. And of course she’s got wings.

I nod like I do when anybody says something to me. I find when you do, people pick the response they want, so you don’t have to actually say anything.

“She looks good,” Luther says, “and she knows it. Wonder what she wears when she’s not playing dress-up?”

I shrug.

“Yeah,” he says. “Doesn’t make much difference. Girl like that, she doesn’t even see a guy like you or me. But she sure is hot.”

I go get another table from the dolly.

* * *

I’m outside on a smoke break later when I see one of those guys wearing a costume all made of leaves. I quit smoking since I moved to Baltimore, but I’ll take the break. This guy’s pretty old—in his fifties, I’d guess—and not in the best of shape. I watch him for a moment as he wrestles with some big box in the back of his van, so I go over and ask him if he wants a hand.

“Hey, thanks,” he says as I take one end of the box.

We put it on his dolly and get another box from the van.

“Can I ask you something?” I say.

“Sure.”

“No offense, but what makes a guy your age dress up the way you do?”

He laughs. “What do you think I’m supposed to be?”

“I don’t know. A tree?”

“Close. I’m a Green Man.”

“I still don’t get it.”

He straightens up and launches into his spiel. As he talks, I’m still not sure I get it, but I like his enthusiasm.

“The Green Men are the messengers of spring,” he says. “We’re the ones who carry the seeds of rebirth. We’re always looking for a good resting

place because we have to sleep away the winter, dreaming the promise of renewal."

"And that's a Baltimore thing?"

"No, it goes back to England. Have you ever been over there?"

I shake my head.

"You see the image of the Green Man all over the place," he says. "On pub signs and on carvings in churches. They're literally everywhere. On some buildings you see them in place of gargoyles, the water draining from their open mouths. The funny thing is, people don't really notice them anymore. And if they do, most of them don't understand their significance."

"That they're messengers of spring," I say.

"Exactly. We're symbols of hope, but it's more than just a promise. The Green Man brings in the spring. Without us, all you get is winter."

"So the people coming to this convention—it's like a spiritual thing for them?"

"Partly. For some of us. But it's also fun to just dress up and fill a hotel with a gathering of faeries and goblins and all."

We're done loading his dolly and he locks up his van.

"So how come it's all European faeries?" I ask. "I've never heard of Green Men before, but I've seen faeries in kids' books, and the people here look like they do in the pictures or in a Disney movie. How come there aren't any native faeries?"

"You mean Native American?"

"Sure, but I was talking more about North America in general."

He gives me a curious look, and I realize that since I moved here, this is the longest conversation I've had with anyone except for Uncle Herbert.

"I've got to get this stuff inside and set up," he says, "but you should come by my booth when the Market closes. We can talk some more then."

I shake my head. "I don't think I'd fit in with your crowd."

"You'd be surprised," he says. "We come in all shapes and sizes." He offers me his hand. "I'm Tom Hill. If you change your mind, I'm in booth forty-eight."

I take his hand. "I'm Joey Green," I say, then laugh. "Maybe I *would* fit in."

"What's the story behind your surname?" he asks.

"As in what does it mean?"

He nods.

I shrug. “It just means one of my ancestors liked the sound of it. We never used surnames until the government forced us, so people just made up whatever they felt like calling themselves.”

“I still think this is an auspicious meeting,” he says.

I’m not sure what the word means, so I just give him another shrug.

“Thanks again for your help,” he adds. “Think about dropping by later.”

“Sure,” I tell him, because it’s easier than coming up with excuses.

* * *

I don’t realize I’m going to take him up on it until later in the day, when this part of the job’s all done. Uncle Herbert comes over to where I’m sitting out on the loading dock with the rest of the crew, listening to them talk.

“You ready to go, Joey?” he asks.

I shake my head. “One of the guys in the show asked me to stick around, so I thought I might.”

He checks me out with a look that would do Tía Luba proud, then just nods.

“I’ll see you later, then,” he says.

I like the fact that he trusts me enough to not give me any advice.

“You got your eye on one of those girls?” Luther asks.

I don’t bother answering.

Luther laughs. “See if she’s got a friend for me,” he says as he heads off with Uncle Herbert and the others.

I have second thoughts when I go back into the hotel. What do I really think is going to happen here? Hill will probably just give me a blank look when I show up at his booth.

I hesitate in the doorway of the Market. The place is transformed. It looks more like some old-fashioned market in a forest glade than a dealers’ room in a hotel. Somebody comes up and starts to tell me that the room’s closed, but I tell him I’m part of the setup crew.

“I’m supposed to meet Tom Hill,” I add.

The man nods. “Do you know where his booth is?”

“Number forty-eight.”

But when I get to the booth, he's not there. There's only a pretty girl about my age in a silky green dress with flowers and leaves sewn onto it. Her long red-gold hair hangs in a braid halfway to her waist, and she's got the little points on the tips of her ears that everybody here seems to have. I walked by a booth that was selling them on my way to Hill's. The girl is sitting with a closed book on her lap—a big old book with a tooled-leather binding—and she's playing with a beaded bracelet. The only thing that seems out of place is the pair of cat's-eye sunglasses she's wearing.

I stand at the booth, unsure again, so I check out what's for sale. Hill specializes in tooled-leather masks. His work's incredible. I've got a cousin who does this kind of thing with boots, so I know how much artistry and skill are involved. Most of the masks are intricate collections of leaves with eyeholes. Some are simple, little more than leafy Zorro masks. Others are so complicated I can't imagine how many hours it took to complete them.

I look at the price tag on one of them. If people are buying these, he's making a good profit.

I'm about to turn away when the girl suddenly lifts her head.

"Is someone there?" she asks.

I feel like telling her that she'll see a lot better without the shades on, but all I say is "I'm looking for Tom Hill."

"He's my dad. He just stepped out to talk to the rest of his hedge, but he should be back soon."

"His what?"

She laughs and it sounds like delicate bells.

"Are you new to the con?" she asks.

"Pretty much."

"Do you know what a Green Man is?"

I nod, but she doesn't go on, so I add, "Yeah, your dad was explaining them to me."

"Well, a hedge is what they call a line of Green Men. I think they're working out a welcome for one of the Guests of Honor."

"Okay."

She laughs again, and I find myself wishing I had a recording of it so that I could play it whenever I wanted.

"Why don't you come into the booth?" she says. "You can keep me company while you wait for him. I promise I don't bite."

“You should be careful about who you talk to. I could be anybody.”

“But that’s one of the cool things about life,” she says.

“What? That strangers can be dangerous?”

“No, silly. That we can be anybody we choose.”

“It doesn’t really work that way in my world,” I tell her.

“Now you really have to come sit with me and tell me all about this world of yours.”

Why not? I think. Maybe I can get her to laugh some more for me.

As I come around the table to where she’s sitting, the bracelet she’s been playing with drops from her hand.

“Crap,” she says. “Would you get that for me?”

She doesn’t even look at where it fell.

Why don’t you get it yourself, princess? I want to say, but then I suddenly realize something and I feel like a heel.

“You can’t see, can you?” I say.

“Well, I can see light and dark shapes to some degree, but I’m pretty much legally blind.”

She just says it like a fact, with no hint of bitterness or self-pity.

I don’t know what to say, so I settle for “Bummer.”

“Yeah. I miss colors most of all, especially with all the costumes here at FaerieCon.”

“So you weren’t always blind.”

She shakes her head. “I like to say that I strayed into Faerieland and it was such an intense experience that I went blind—you know, like the stories that say some people go mad when they come back.”

“Faerieland,” I repeat.

“Work with me,” she says.

“Okay. You lost your sight going into Faerieland. Got it.”

“And so,” she goes on, “the only way I can get my sight back is if I return there. Or maybe I can find my way to Bordertown and some faerie mage can cure me.”

“Bordertown?” I repeat. “The only border towns I know are places like Nogales, and I don’t think you’re going to find any faeries there.”

“No, I mean the capital ‘B’ Bordertown that sits between Faerieland and our world.”

“Right.”

“I thought you were working with me,” she says.

I grin, but she can’t see it.

“Well, let me know if you need someone to take you there,” I say.

That earns me another hit of that intoxicating laugh of hers.

“Are you volunteering?” she asks.

“Isn’t that how it works in fairy tales? You’re supposed to help people out as you wander around trying to make your fortune.”

“Is that what you’re doing?”

“No, I’m just trying to save up enough to buy myself a pickup.”

I sit on her extra chair and lean down to pick up the bracelet for her.

“Here,” I say.

She takes my hand in one of her own and plucks the bracelet out with the other. Then she lifts her free hand toward my face.

“May I?” she asks.

It’s like butterfly wings on my skin as she explores the contours of my face.

“You’ve got a strong nose,” she says.

“Yeah, that’s why they called me Big Nose back on the rez when I was growing up.”

I don’t add that they stopped because I went after whoever used the nickname. If you don’t nip something like that in the bud, you’re stuck with it for life. Just ask Six-Toes George, Uncle Herbert’s brother.

“You’re Native American?” she asks.

I nod, then add, “Yeah,” because I’m not sure how much she can see with her limited sight. “I belong to the desert tribes. Kikimi on my mother’s side, and my dad was a Yaqui.”

“Not exactly fairy-tale country.”

“Not so much.”

“So what brings you to FaerieCon?”

“I’m with the crew that set up the booths,” I tell her. “I ran into your dad this afternoon. He said I should come by so we could talk some more.”

I figure that’ll be the end of any interest she might have in me. Girls like her don’t hang out with the behind-the-scenes joes, who are supposed to stay invisible. But she only smiles.

“I should warn you,” she says, “when Dad says ‘talk,’ he usually means he talks and everybody else listens.”

“He seemed okay to me.”

“Oh, he’s awesome. He’s just not a good listener. But he’s full of all sorts of interesting information, so he’s rarely boring.”

“That’s not a problem,” I tell her. “I’m more of a listener myself anyway.”

“Really? You’ve got such a compelling voice.”

Is she flirting with me? Time to shut that down. The last thing I need is to have some nice middle-class white girl flirting with me, even if her dad does think he’s a tree.

“I just find that things work out better when I don’t talk too much,” I tell her. “I can have a big mouth and it gets me into trouble. Or at least it did back when I was still drinking.”

That should do it.

“How old are you?” she asks.

“Seventeen.”

With the sunglasses on, it’s hard to tell what she’s thinking.

“Me too,” she says. “But I’m thinking I’ve still had a way easier life than you.”

“I don’t think of it like that,” I tell her. “Growing up the way I did—that’s just the way it is down in Kikimi County. I could beat myself up about it, but I’d rather look at it as a learning experience that shaped who I am today. I’ll be the first to admit I’ve messed up a lot, but I’m getting better at doing the right thing.”

Speaking of which …, I add to myself.

“I should go,” I tell her.

I don’t know what it is about this girl and her father that has me yakking away like girls on the rez.

“Don’t,” she says as I stand up.

I hesitate. I know I shouldn’t stay, but I can’t help feeling flattered by her interest. I can’t remember the last time that happened. Maybe never, unless I was paying for the drinks.

“What’s your name?” she asks.

“Joey.”

“I’m Juliana.”

She puts out her hand and I automatically shake. As soon as her fingers close around mine, she pulls me back down onto the chair.

“I’m enjoying your company,” she says. “Because of my disability, people can feel a little awkward around me. It’s easier for them to just give me a friendly hello, then go off to carry on with whatever else they’re doing. They don’t actually want to sit with me.”

“That’s got to be hard.”

She shrugs. “It’s what it is. But it can make me feel a little lonely sometimes.” She pauses before she adds, “You don’t seem to focus on it at all.”

“I guess I can stay awhile longer.”

She beams. Then she lifts the book from her lap.

“If you don’t want to talk,” she says, “maybe you could read to me.”

“I’m not that good a reader.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“I can read,” I tell her. “I’m just slow at it.”

“Then maybe you could tell me a story.”

“You mean like a Kikimi fairy tale?”

“Do you know any?”

“Not really.” Though right now I wish I did. “All I know are Jimmy Littlecreek stories.”

“Who’s Jimmy Littlecreek?”

“He was kind of a legend back on the rez—always getting into complicated situations and making even more of a mess out of things. But at the same time, he had these desert rat smarts that always made things work out. Back home, everybody knows a story or two about him.”

“He sounds like a trickster.”

“I guess he is. Sort of a little cousin to Coyote.”

“I’d love to hear one.”

So I tell her about how he and Bobby Morago stole a train in Linden and drove it backward all the way from the mountains down to Santo del Vado Viejo, just so they could have a date with a couple of Mexican girls they’d met the previous weekend. It’s a good choice, because I get the reward of her laughter over and over again. Truth is, I stretch it into an even taller tale just to keep her laughing.

I’m just finishing when her dad shows up. He stands there smiling as I tell the end of the story.

“Sorry I didn’t get back sooner,” he says. “Green Man business always seems to take longer than I think it will.”

“That’s okay. Juliana’s been keeping me entertained.”

She laughs. “It’s more like the other way around.”

Tom’s still smiling, but I can see he’s studying me. Probably regretting that he asked me to come around to his booth. But then he surprises me.

“I was wondering if you could do me a favor,” he says.

“What do you need?”

“My friend Sam drove the van you helped me unload this afternoon, but I just found him in the bar and he’s had far too much to drink. Now I’m stuck with having to get both the van and my station wagon home. What makes it more complicated is that I also have to drive to the airport to pick up Juliana’s mother. Her plane’s coming in around nine and it’s already eight.”

I nod to show I’m listening, but I don’t know where he’s going with this.

“So I was wondering,” he says, “if you’d mind dropping Sam off at his place and then taking Juliana home. She hates the drive out to the airport at night.”

“Hate it,” she puts in.

You don’t know anything about me, but you’re going to entrust your daughter to my care? But then I remember the way he was studying me a moment ago. He had that look in his eyes that Tía Luba gets when she’s taking somebody’s measure. Maybe he’s got her gift for reading character. If that’s the case, he knows he can trust me.

“I can do that,” I tell him.

“Yay,” Juliana says.

“I really appreciate it,” Tom says. “I’ll go round up Sam and meet you in the parking lot.”

After he leaves, I help Juliana gather her things. She slips her hand into the crook of my arm. I don’t think I’ve ever walked arm in arm with a girl before. Back on the rez I wouldn’t be caught dead doing this. But I like it. At least I like it with this girl.

We get to the station wagon around the same time that Tom and Sam do. Tom’s half-carrying his friend. I remember how that feels. It looks even less pretty.

Sam’s geared up like a male version of that girl Luther was lusting after. He’s wearing a mix of pointed ears and wings with some tooled-leather

clothes and boots. The jacket has odd little clockwork accessories sewn onto the shoulders and lapels, and he's wearing a top hat that has something like a combination of a monocle and a short telescope attached to the brim.

Tom takes off the hat, unhooks Sam's wings, and steers him into the backseat. He puts the hat and wings beside him. When he straightens up, he looks at me.

"Did you drive here?" he asks.

I shake my head. "I'm taking the bus home."

"I'll give you a lift when I get back."

"Or he could just stay the night," Juliana says.

Tom laughs. "Or you could stay the night." He gives Juliana a gentle poke in the shoulder. "But not in your room, young missy."

I've never been around people like this before. Is this how the rest of the world lives?

"Thanks again, Joey," he says. "I'll see you kids later."

I walk Juliana around to the passenger's side, then get in the car myself. I adjust the rearview mirror and see that Sam's already passed out.

I start up the car.

"I forgot to ask your dad for directions," I say.

"There's a GPS in the glove compartment, but I can tell you where to go. I won't be able to tell if you make a wrong turn, but we should be fine."

"I'm in your hands."

For some reason, that makes her giggle, which is just as endearing as her laugh, and I realize I'm in trouble.

When it comes to girls, I'm not the most experienced guy in the world. I've never fallen for one before; I've just hooked up. Stoned or drunk at a party, maybe in one of the bars back home that will look the other way for a minor who's got the cash. The longest "relationship" I've had lasted a weekend.

And I'm not saying I've had a lot of hookups, though to be honest, I can't really remember. Those days just blur into each other. I remember my times in juvie, but I was sober then. Juvie's like jail: rehab for poor people, and it doesn't usually take. But I'm good right now. Ten months and seven days, counting jail time. That's the longest I've been straight since I was twelve.

I remember how scared I was, the first few times I got locked up. But this is scarier. Maybe Juliana's just slumming, having some fun as she flirts with

me. But if she's not, if she's feeling anything like what I'm feeling, I've got to step up to a world of responsibility. I've got to do right by her. And for damn sure, I can't start something I can't finish.

I'm getting way ahead of myself. Who knows what she's thinking? But that's the funny thing about hope.

* * *

We drop Sam off at his apartment. I take him upstairs and get him laid out on top of his bed.

"You're on your own now," I tell him.

He pushes his face into his pillow, and I doubt he hears me leave.

Back in the car, I set the GPS to "home" and read out the address it gives me.

"That's us," she says.

It's not far to the Hills' house, and I'm feeling nervous right up until we pull into the driveway. I was expecting something fancy, all modern lines and expensive. I see old buses and cars parked along one side of the property. The house itself is a bungalow that's been added onto a few times, so that it does this zigzag walk into the backyard. A couple of lanky dogs get up off the porch to greet us, and I feel right at home because none of this would be out of place back on the rez.

"That's Lucky and Bud," Juliana says as the dogs push their noses into my crotch.

"I would have thought they'd have faerie names," I say as I help her out of the car and walk her toward the porch.

"What, like Titania and Oberon?"

"I don't know who they are, but yeah, that sounds about right."

"Can you see these guys with fairy-tale names?" she asks as Bud shoves his nose back into my crotch.

"I guess not."

I'm not saying she was particularly timid moving around earlier, but she gets way more confident as soon as we step onto the porch.

She takes a key out of her pocket and fits it smoothly into the lock, using a finger to guide her. Swinging the door open, she reaches around the doorjamb to turn on an overhead light. I follow her inside.

The room we're in is the kitchen—a big, friendly, and very cluttered space with rustic furniture standing shoulder to shoulder with modern appliances. From where we stand, I can see another room past the kitchen. It's poorly lit at the moment, but it seems just as welcoming and cluttered.

"Want to see my room?" she asks.

I laugh. "Maybe later."

When her parents are home.

"Okay. How about some coffee or tea?"

"Sure, I—look, I'm new at this, but I'm just going to go with the assumption that if you need help with anything, you'll ask for it. Is that okay?"

She smiles as she effortlessly finds the kettle, fills it, then takes a couple of mugs and a box of herbal tea down from a cupboard.

"That's one of the things I like about you, Joey," she says as she plugs the kettle in. "With most people, my disability is like a third person in the room that we don't really want to have hanging around, but there she is all the same."

"Don't you think that people are just being sympathetic? That they only want to help you?"

"Oh, I know that's most of it. But it also makes everything awkward because they can't forget about it, either. So it never just feels normal."

I feel bad for her. I think about how few people in the world I'm close to. But that's always been my choice—or if I'm going to be honest, the result of the bad decisions I used to make. The thing is, I never really tried to fix it. Juliana's had it pushed on her through no fault of her own.

When the tea's ready, she leads me through the cluttered dining room into an equally cluttered living room, where we sit together on a fat sofa.

"So tell me more about faeries in Baltimore," I say to keep the mood lighter. "Or maybe this Bordertown you were talking about."

"Only if you'll tell me more about Jimmy Littlecreek."

"Deal. But you first."

"It'll be easier to show you," she says. "Are you coming back to FaerieCon tomorrow?"

"I hadn't really thought about it. Do you think I should?"

She taps her fist against my shoulder. "Of course I do. It'll be fun."

“I can’t really get away until later on in the day. We’re doing the setup for a motivational speaker tomorrow.”

“That’s okay. Things don’t get hopping until the evening. Everybody gets all dolled up and parades around the halls, and then we all go to the Good Faeries’ Ball. Mom says she’s got some surprise outfit for me that she picked up in Eugene—that’s where she’s been, visiting a friend from college.”

“I don’t really do costumes,” I tell her. “Even back on the rez. At the powwows, I was always the kid sitting under the bleachers swapping a bottle with the other reprobates and making fun of the dancers.”

Her hand brushes my arm, butterfly-light. “You really have had a hard life, haven’t you?”

“It’s just what it was,” I say. “I’m working on making it different.”

There’s a moment of awkward silence, and I wonder if I’ve said too much and who knows what’s going on in her head because of it?

“So, let’s forget about that stuff for now,” I say. “What about this Good Faeries’ Ball?”

She brightens up. “There’s live music and dancing and just, you know, fun. But you’d probably like the dance on Saturday night better. That’s when we have the Bad Faeries’ Ball.”

“You think I’m more into bad faeries?”

“No, but you’re a guy and the girls wear some pretty sexy outfits.”

“And are you going to have a bad faerie costume?”

She smiles. “I’m thinking about it. I guess it depends on if Mom’s willing to help and Dad’ll let me out the door.”

I laugh. “So they’re *that* sexy, are they?”

“You’ll just have to come and find out.”

I want to put my arm around her shoulders. No, that’s not true. I want to lie naked with her on the sofa and forget about everything else in the world but her. But if I know anything, too much too soon is never a good thing if you want to stay in it for the long run. Doesn’t matter how flirty she is with me. Except then she rests her head on my shoulder and I think *the hell with it*. I put an arm around her and lean down to where her lips are lifting toward mine, and then headlights flash on the walls and we hear the tires of a car crunching on the dirt and stones of the driveway.

She sits up, though she doesn’t move away from me.

“Perfect timing,” she says ruefully.

I start to move my arm away, but she lifts a hand to hold it in place.

“Come to the Good Faeries’ Ball with me tomorrow,” she says, “and I’ll let you take me to the Bad Faeries’ Ball on Saturday night. And no,” she adds as I hesitate, “you don’t have to wear a costume. You can be my mortal consort.”

“I’ll be there,” I tell her.

The kitchen door opens and I stand up to meet her mother.

Alana Hill gives me a glimpse of the beauty that Juliana’s going to grow into. She’s a tall, striking woman with a spill of long reddish-gold hair that hangs almost to her waist in a waterfall of curls. After the introductions have been made, she holds on to my hand and studies me for longer and with a more penetrating seriousness than her husband did.

“Mom,” Juliana says.

Her mother finally lets go of my hand. I can’t tell if I passed muster or not, but at least she smiles.

“Come on,” Tom says. “I’ll give you a lift home. And thanks again for helping me out.”

“Can I come?” Juliana asks.

“Of course,” Alana says.

Juliana takes my arm.

* * *

Uncle Herbert’s building isn’t much to look at, but I already know that the Hills are pretty casual when it comes to this sort of thing. They’re not going to judge me on where I live. Tom pulls the station wagon over to the curb.

“Look the other way, Dad,” Juliana says, then leans over and kisses me. “So, see you tomorrow?”

She sits back in her seat before I have a chance to react.

I nod. “Soon as I get off work. Thanks for the lift, Mr. Hill.”

“Just ‘Tom’ is fine.”

“Then thanks for the lift, Just Tom.”

Tom smiles and Juliana giggles as I get out of the car.

After they pull away, I stand there outside Uncle Herbert’s apartment building, watching until the taillights disappear. When I go inside, I feel like

I’m walking on a cloud.

Uncle Herbert is still up, which means he trusted me enough to go off on my own but he was still worried. He smiles at what I’m guessing is the goofy look on my face.

“You’re looking happy,” he says.

“Yeah, I—I just never had such a good buzz before that didn’t come out of a pipe or a bottle.”

“Funny how that works, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, Joey. Do you think you’re the only person in this family that ever had a problem with booze?”

“Are you saying—?”

He waves the question off and pushes himself out of the chair.

“We can trade war stories some other time,” he says. “Right now I’m going to bed.”

I do the same. We’ve got a long day ahead of us tomorrow. But I lie in bed for a time, just grinning at the ceiling. When I do fall asleep, instead of dreaming about being back in juvie, I dream about people who not only walk around with faerie wings but can fly, too.

* * *

As soon as we get finished up with the job on Saturday, I go home and take a shower. Afterward I’m standing there in my jeans looking at the half dozen T-shirts I own when Uncle Herbert comes in. Maybe Juliana won’t be able to see what I’m wearing in any kind of detail, but I still want to look good when I’m with her.

Uncle Herbert tosses a long-sleeved shirt onto the bed.

“I think this’ll fit you,” he says.

I hold it up. It’s a soft, thick white cotton with a Kikimi pattern embroidered above the pockets in rusts and pale greens and browns. The colors of the desert.

“I can’t take your shirt,” I say.

“It’s just a loan. But if you’re going to be seeing much of this girl, you might want to take a few dollars that you’ve got saved up for that truck of yours and buy a couple of nice shirts.”

“Thanks. I will.”

“How’re you getting there?”

“The bus goes right by the hotel,” I tell him.

I didn’t want to ask him for a lift.

He nods, then hands me the keys to his truck.

“I’ve found,” he says, “that a girl likes a guy to have his own transportation.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

It’s not just the fact that he’s loaning me the truck. It’s that he trusts me enough to not screw things up.

He grips my shoulder and gives it a squeeze.

“You’ve been doing so well since you got here,” he says, “that Tía Luba thinks I’m bullshitting when she calls to see how you are. You’ve earned a few perks, Joey.”

I’m not much of a touchy-feely guy, but I give Uncle Herbert a hug.

* * *

I find Juliana sitting on the edge of a seat in the lobby when I come into the hotel—she has to, just to make room for her wings. They’ve got to be three feet long, sparkling gossamer wings that lift above her head. Her hair is piled high, showing off her slender neck and the little pointed tips on the ends of her ears, and instead of sunglasses she’s wearing one of her dad’s masks—a green wave of leather with the tiniest of eyeholes.

Alana went all out with Juliana’s dress. It’s the color of a deep forest, with a tight bodice that’s just brocade and lace. There’s more skirt flooding down from her waist than I’ve ever seen on a girl.

“You look gorgeous,” I say when I reach her chair.

She jumps to her feet and throws her arms around my neck.

“You came!” she breathes in my ear.

“You didn’t think I would?”

She kisses my neck, then lets her arms drop. She tucks her hand into the crook of my arm.

“I didn’t know what to think,” she says, “since we’re just getting to know each other.”

“Which I hope will be a long, fruitful journey.”

I don’t know why those fancy words popped into my head. I’m acting so weird I hardly know myself, but she squeezes my arm and rests her head against my shoulder for a moment. Then she gives me a tug.

“Come on,” she says. “You have to come see the faeries and describe them all to me.”

* * *

It’s chaos in the hotel’s lobby and halls. Every which way you turn, there are faeries and goblins and I-don’t-know-what-alls, and people taking pictures of them and each other. It’s one thing to be checking out this kind of a scene from the back corridors where the crew and I are bringing in the tables and chairs, but a whole other thing to be right in the middle of it all. It’s wall-to-wall people. The ones with wings sometimes have to turn sideways just to get through the crowd.

I do my best to describe them to Juliana. I think she gets a kick out of me stumbling over my descriptions, but come on, really. What can I do? After a while you just run out of words.

But some stand out. A couple of scarecrows with straw sticking out of their hats and sleeves make me smile. A mermaid with blue hair. A totally wild woman, green body paint on every bit of skin showing, shrieking in a mad, cackling voice. A gnome with a tall red conical hat. A man dressed like a crow walking on stilts that lift him a few feet above the rest of the crowd.

But mostly it’s faeries.

Faeries. Faeries. Faeries.

Baby faeries and old ones. Fat ones and skinny ones.

I think some of the bad ones are here a night early because there are more than a few girls and women wearing seriously sexy outfits. But here’s the thing. No matter whether the people are going for a dark look or the vaguely S&M look or taking the flower faerie route, everybody just seems genuinely nice. They’re respectful and appreciative of each other. Maybe away from a gathering like this, they go in for the usual petty crap that everybody seems to, but they appear to have left it behind when they came here. And while I get what Juliana means about her disability being like a

third person in the room, people seem happy for her to be here, even if they're wearing sympathy in their eyes at the same time.

I'm one of only a few people not in costume, but they're pretty welcoming to me as well.

When we get to the big room where the bands will play, there's already piped-in music and people dancing. I see Alana and Tom across the room and give them a wave.

"Your parents are here," I say.

"What are they wearing?"

"Well, your dad looks like a tree and your mom … well, she's kind of got the leafy look going on, too, but she looks way better than the Green Men."

"She's a dryad."

"Which is?"

"The spirit of a tree."

"That makes sense," I say. "You can tell she's got a spiritual thing going for her."

"What she has," Juliana says, "is a gift for reading character. She can tell a lot by just looking at someone, but if she has physical contact, they're laid out for her like she's reading a book."

I think about how long Alana was holding my hand yesterday.

"Great," I say.

"Oh, don't worry. She likes you. She said if she had to sum you up in two words, they'd be 'loyal' and 'kind.' She also said you could be dangerous, but never to me."

I don't know what to say to that.

"She's teaching me and Dad how to do it," she goes on, "but he's better than I am at it."

I smile, but she can't see it.

"So did you 'read' me yesterday?" I ask.

She nods and starts to blush.

"Oh, come on," I say. "What did you get?"

She mumbles something and I think I catch the words "soul mate." I don't push her, but I give her hand a squeeze.

It explains a lot. Her quick acceptance of me and the way I feel about her after knowing her for such a short time. I'm not sure what I think, or what I

believe. But I know what I feel. It makes me happy and nervous at the same time, and I can see she feels the same.

Uncle Herbert would say the little thunders are whispering to us.

When the first band comes on, they play music I've never heard before. It's somewhere between folk songs and European dance music. I like holding Juliana in my arms but we listen as much as we dance. At one point a couple of very athletic faeries do a fire dance using long orange and yellow ribbons as their flames. In the flickering light, with the music throbbing, you can almost believe the fire's real.

When the set's over, Juliana's parents join us and Alana goes with Juliana to the ladies' room.

"I'm glad you could make it," Tom says. "I've never seen Juliana as happy as she is tonight."

I guess this is the concerned-dad talk.

"I know it seems to be going really fast," I tell him. "It seems like that to me, too. But I really like her."

"I can see that from how you look at her. But what I like better is how you look out for her—because I see that as well."

"I try. But she's pretty independent."

It's a little weird talking to a guy in a mask of leaves where all you can see are his eyes.

"Tell me about it," he says.

When the next band starts to play, he claims his daughter for a dance, so I partner with Alana.

"You've got strong, artistic hands," she says. "Do you play music or paint?"

"I do some wood carving."

She smiles. "I envy you. I've never been able to do three-dimensional work myself."

"I'm not that good. I've just been figuring it out as I go along."

"Well, if you've ever wanted to try your hand at leatherwork, Tom's been looking for an apprentice for ages."

I just look at her.

"I know," she says. She pretends to be embarrassed and raises an eyebrow. "Step too far?"

I find myself wondering what it would be like to have parents that love you as much as the Hills love their daughter. My mother passed when I was twelve, and the aunts took us kids in; no one knows what happened to my father. One day he just left the house and he never came back. He could be dead, or in jail, or living a whole other life somewhere. I'll never know.

But I do know that I feel like I'm in over my head. All of this is happening fast, but at the same time it doesn't seem to be happening fast enough. Mostly I have trouble believing that it's real.

"I'd have to ask my uncle," I say.

"Well, think about it," she says.

My next dance is with Juliana and I tell her what her mother said.

"Wow," she says. "Didn't see that coming. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Making masks sounds a lot better than hauling around tables and chairs."

"Dad's workshop is at the house," she says, "and the way I hear it, apprentices usually live in their teacher's home."

She doesn't have to say any more. I can fill in the blanks.

"I'm getting tired," she tells me when the dance ends. "I'm not used to being around so many people for so long."

"What do you want to do?" I ask, willing to follow her lead.

"How did you get here?"

"Uncle Herbert lent me his truck."

"How about coming back to the house for a while? I'll play you romantic songs on my ukulele."

"Really? You play music?"

She pokes me in the chest. "Don't sound so surprised."

"I'm not. I'm delighted."

She grins. "So let's find my parents and tell them where we're going."

* * *

Juliana does play her ukulele for me, and not only is she good on it, the instrument's got a lot more going for it than I'd have ever thought. In her hands it has a sweet, bell-like sound to match the bell-like tones in her voice.

We talk some, too, and drink an herbal tea that tastes like cinnamon and nutmeg.

But mostly we neck on the sofa until Juliana takes my hand and puts it on her breast.

“Want to see my room?” she asks, like she did last night.

I have to clear my throat.

“What about your parents?” I say.

“They’ll be hours still.”

She squeals when I pick her up, but then wraps her arms around my neck as I carry her through the house to her room.

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Uncle Herbert says that sometimes things are exactly what they seem to be. Since that's how I want it to be with the Hills, that's what I choose to believe.

I get how everything's happening so fast. I do. But I'm almost eighteen now. I wasted so many years in a drunken and stoned haze that I need things to move fast just so I can catch up with what I missed—all the things that normal kids get to do. But it's not like I step right into the middle of a whirlwind. Connecting with Juliana and her parents happens quickly, but the day-to-day relationship moves at a much more reasonable pace.

Still, before I agree to anything, I make sure that Uncle Herbert has a chance to meet the Hills. I owe him and Tía Luba for giving me the break I would never have had if I'd stayed in the desert.

A couple of nights after FaerieCon ends, we have dinner at the Hills' house. I help Alana prepare the meal as Juliana sits on a stool chatting with us, while Tom and Uncle Herbert are out on the porch with the dogs, getting to know each other. I don't have any worries about them getting along. Since Uncle Herbert was a medicine man back on the rez and Tom's got that whole Green Man thing going, they have plenty to talk about.

When Uncle Herbert starts talking over dinner about growing up on the rez, telling funny stories about his brothers and their adventures, I know he likes our hosts as much as I do. But I don't get to know what he's really thinking until it's just the two of us in the cab of his truck and we're driving home.

"Well," he says, "that Juliana's a fine-looking young lady all right. It's not hard to see what caught your eye with her."

"It's not just that."

"Are you sure? You've only known her for a few days and here you are, already set on working for her daddy."

"It's hard to explain."

"Try me."

I look out the windshield and try to find the words.

“She’s everything you said and more,” I tell him. “She’s smart and serious and funny and sexy. Anybody’d want to be with her.”

“Even with her being almost blind?”

“I don’t even think about it—I mean, not as a negative. It makes me want to look out for her, yeah, but it’s only a small part of who she is.”

I keep staring out the windshield, hoping to pull what I want to say out of the darkness and the lights going by. Uncle Herbert waits patiently.

“Maybe this is going to sound selfish,” I finally say, “but beyond everything I like about her that’s obvious, I also really like who I am when I’m with her. I’m not an addict or a recovering drunk. I’m not an ex-con. I’m not the guy just looking for someone to say the wrong thing so we can fight. I’m—I’m someone I never thought I’d get the chance to be: an ordinary guy. A *happy* ordinary guy.”

“Do you think you make her feel better about herself?”

“I don’t know. God, I hope so. But she’s got so much going for her—that’s the thing that worries me, I guess. What does she need from me?”

Uncle Herbert chuckles. “You don’t see the way she looks at you?”

“What do you mean? She can’t actually see me.”

“I’m not talking about that kind of seeing. I’m talking about how whenever the two of you are in the same room, her spirit starts to glow. You can almost see the light spilling out of her. She’s always turned in your direction, or leaning toward you like a flower following the sun.”

“I don’t know about that kind of thing.”

“That’s why I’m the medicine man and you’re not.”

“I guess.” I shoot him a quick glance. “You can really see that kind of thing?”

“Sure. I see all kinds of things. Like I see that there’s something sad in that house, too—mostly I get it from Alana. I couldn’t tell what it is, and it’s not polite to go digging for that kind of thing when you’re a guest and no one asks you.”

I nod, but I’m still thinking about what he had to say about Juliana.

“You really think Juliana feels that way?”

He gives me another chuckle. “Why don’t you ask her?”

“She—she told me we were soul mates.”

“I can see that.” We drive for another few blocks before he adds, “That feeling you were talking about—how you feel you’re a better person when you’re with her? That’s not selfish, Joey. That’s what makes a couple strong.”

I think about that the rest of the way home.

When we get out of the truck, I lean on the hood and look up at what I can see of the stars.

“I guess I’ll call Tía Luba in the morning,” I say. “See if she thinks it’s okay.”

Uncle Herbert leans on the hood beside me.

“You don’t have to ask anyone for permission,” he says.

“But—”

“Luba sent you here and I took you in because we wanted you to have a chance at a better life. But you had to choose to come. Just like you have to choose what you’re going to do with your life. If I thought you were making a bad choice, I’d try to talk you out of it, but I wouldn’t *make* you do anything.”

I turn to look at him.

“So,” I say. “Do you think it’s a good choice to work with Tom and live there with them?”

Uncle Herbert grins. “With that girl? With a chance to have a real career instead of moving around dollies stacked with tables and chairs? Hell, yes.”

* * *

We have a few years together. Amazing years.

There are lots of high points, but it’s the little things that stick with you. The sweet routine of the day-to-day.

Family breakfasts. That’s nothing I’ve had a lot of experience with—not unless you include a lot of drama and shouting, and usually several beers.

Juliana takes university classes online. She works with voice-activated computer lessons and Braille textbooks.

While she does her lessons, I study with Tom in his workshop, learning his craft from the bottom up. Turns out I have a real aptitude for it—Tom says—and I have to admit that it all comes easy to me. I start with the faerie and Green Man masks that are his specialty, but he soon has me working on

things from my own imagination. When we start selling them later, mine don't do very well at the faerie festivals, except for the bird masks—raven and owl, hawk and eagle—but there seems to be a huge market for them at the Renaissance Faires.

I dig deep into my memories of childhood stories to find the images I'm looking for. I get Uncle Herbert to tell me the ones I can't remember. Corn mothers. Deer dancers. Cactus spirits. When I do Green Man masks, the trees that come when I shape the leather are sycamore and mesquite, palo verde and aspens. I decorate them with Kikimi beadwork and feathers, strips of colored cloth—whatever works.

We have family lunches and suppers, too. Tom, Alana, and I take turns putting them together. But it can get complicated for me, who's only ever really cooked for myself and Uncle Herbert, because there are almost always guests at those meals. The Hills know pretty much everybody in their community, it seems, and people tend to drop in throughout the day.

Unless there's something planned—like a music night when the visitor is a musician—evenings are when we go our own ways. Needless to say, I spend mine with Juliana. Sometimes we go visit Uncle Herbert, but mostly we find things to do around the house or walk through the neighborhood with the dogs.

At first I'm afraid that she's going to get bored with me, but that's never the case. It's sure not the case with me. More is never enough.

At night there are visits between our rooms. I'm sure her parents are aware of it, but no one says anything. There aren't even knowing looks in the morning.

One of the big things I learn is that Juliana can only get easily around the house if things stay the same. So while there's clutter on tables and the tops of cabinets, all the routes between and through rooms are kept clear. Nothing gets in the way, not even temporarily.

* * *

But that's only one routine. We have another on the road, because it turns out there are faerie gatherings all the time. Some are just for a weekend; others run a couple of weeks or even months. Unlike the one where I met

the Hills, most of them are outdoors. The Faerie Festivals are the most fun, but the Ren Faires are more lucrative.

Being away from the familiarity of home makes it a little harder on Juliana. It's the only time I see her use her white cane. But we all look after her. I also think she's a bit too touchy on the subject of how people feel about her because everywhere we go, there's lots of care and genuine affection. Though to be fair to her, there are also people who are overbearing. Some even talk louder around her as though she can't hear well, either.

At times like that, Juliana gets annoyed—I can always tell—and later she'll talk about going to Bordertown and getting her sight fixed, like it's a real place and that could actually happen. I don't interrupt her rants because everybody needs a chance to vent. And, you know, at the Faerie Festivals I hear about Bordertown as much as I do about Faerieland, so it's not like she's the only one who believes in it.

While I still don't do costumes, when we're at the fairs I trade in my jeans and Ts for brown pants and the puffy-sleeved white shirts that Alana makes for me. At faerie events, I go as Juliana's human consort. At the Ren Faires, I'm just Tom's apprentice.

That first year along the East Coast—New England, New York State, New Jersey—is a real wake-up call as to how different my life is now. I get into it, but it takes some getting used to. By the time the next year rolls around and we head out west, I'm an old hand at it.

I'm looking forward to being on my home turf. Mostly because Juliana and I have a big surprise planned.

* * *

We get married at the Arizona Renaissance Festival. It runs weekends in February and March, and it's a wild scene. The people are all dressed up in Renaissance costumes and there's jousting, feasts, the arts and crafts fair where we set up, and a whole bunch of stages that are busy throughout the weekend.

I use some of the money I've saved up to fly Uncle Herbert down. Tía Luba and a couple of her and Uncle Herbert's sisters come up from the rez. My dad? I wouldn't have known where to send an invitation.

But Tía Luba refuses to dwell on the fact that I have only aunts and an uncle at the wedding, and she does a good job of making me forget about it, too. I can tell she likes Tom and she adores Juliana. But her meeting with Alana is a little odd.

The two of them walk up to each other and hold gazes. Then Tía Luba enfolds Alana in a tight embrace as though she's comforting her. They stand together like that for a long moment. When they finally step apart, their eyes are glistening.

I've never seen anything like it before. Tía Luba just isn't given to public affection—and certainly not with strangers.

I'm standing with Uncle Herbert and turn to him.

"What's up with that?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I don't know. Some kind of spirit business."

I give him a puzzled look.

"Yeah," I say, "but Tía Luba is Kikimi, while Alana's spirits are faeries.…"

"Spirits are just spirits," he says. "They don't care about the color of our skin. Just that we give them our respect."

I look at the two women. There's no sign of the sorrow I saw a moment ago. Alana is smiling and greeting my other aunts. Even the rare twitch of Tía Luba's lips is almost a smile.

An hour or so later, just before the ceremony, Tía Luba surprises me so much I forget to ask about what she and Alana shared.

"I never saw you on this road you're on, nephew," she tells me. "I just knew you could be more than you were. But now … all of this. You have embraced life and I am so proud of you."

* * *

I tell you it's really something, saying our vows to each other as we stand in the Wedding Chapel in front of all our friends, with Uncle Herbert and my aunts beside me, and Tom and Alana beside Juliana. There's always some crossover between the faerie events and the Ren Faires, but today we have a full contingent from both groups—some people have even come from the other side of the country. There's a full hedge of Tom's Green Men, a flood of faeries, and then a bunch of the Ren Faire folk.

“Could we be any happier?” Juliana whispers in my ear at the end of the ceremony.

“Hard to imagine.”

She grins. “Let’s try.”

After that, the party moves to the ranch of a friend of Tom’s outside Florence Junction, and there are still people dancing a couple of hours before the sun comes up.

* * *

When you’re around anything long enough, I suppose it just gets in your blood, because it comes to the point where I can sit around with the Hills and their friends and talk about faeries and spirits and I’m just as interested as any of them. I think about the guys back in the Kikimi County Young Offenders Correction Facility and what they’d say if they could see me now. I realize I don’t care.

One of my favorite visitors—to either the house or the campground at one of the fairs—is Seamus Moore, an Irishman who, at seventy-four, is the oldest of Tom’s Green Men hedge. He’s a wiry little man with blue eyes like sapphires and a shock of white hair. He has a voice that could carry across a battlefield, and he’s full of songs and stories and tunes from the Celtic faerie traditions.

I first met him at the Hills’ house, and I totally dug these long, rambling stories he had, but then he pulled a weird set of bagpipes from this long wooden box. He told us the story of how a boy learned “The Faeries’ Hornpipe” from the faeries themselves. “And now,” he said, “I’ll play you that very tune.”

I’d never heard or seen anything like it. Seamus strapped himself into the instrument—bellows under one arm, bag under the other, wooden pipes seeming to stick every which way—and played this gorgeous music that sounded as though three people were playing.

“What the hell are those things?” I asked when the tune was done.

“Uilleann pipes,” he said.

“But where did they come from?”

“Now it’s funny you should ask,” he said, “because there’s a story in that.”

Tom laughed. “With you there’s a story in everything!”

“And wouldn’t it be a sorry world if there wasn’t?”

Magic seems not only possible but probable whenever Seamus is around. He’s at the wedding, and he’s at the party after, still going strong when so many younger participants have finally dragged themselves off to bed. Finally the only people who are still awake are Seamus, Juliana and me, the Hills, Uncle Herbert, and Nikki and Steve Hutchings, who came down from Portland for the wedding.

There’s a fire pit behind the stables that Tom’s friend has let us use. As we sat around its coals, with the dawn beginning to pink the horizon, Seamus told a new bunch of stories that I’d never heard before, and I’d heard a lot of them.

“Where do you get all your stories?” I ask him.

“Well, now,” he says. “I’ve lived one or two, and some I got from others who did the same, but most I heard during the years I wandered in the Perilous Realm.”

“Faerieland,” Juliana whispers helpfully in my ear.

“You’ve been to Faerieland?” I say, when what’s really going through my head is *Faerieland actually exists?*

Because the thing about Seamus is he makes you believe. You may have second and third thoughts once you’re out of his company, but when he’s telling stories or playing his music, you can almost feel something *other* sitting right there in the periphery of your vision, listening along with you.

“Many times,” he says. “There used to be a city that straddled the border between the two realms, our world and the world of Faerie—a rare place that made the crossing easy if you were welcome to visit. If you weren’t and somehow you made your way across …” He shakes his head. “You never got the chance to make that mistake again.”

“A city …,” I say, thinking about the place that Juliana talks about.

He nods. “I say it used to be, but perhaps it still exists. I only know that these past thirteen years, any passage to it from these fields we know is no longer possible.”

“You’re talking about Bordertown,” Steve says.

Seamus nods again. “But the Way there from our side of the world is no more. Or perhaps the city itself is gone.” His eyes get a faraway look. “I’d always thought I’d make one more trip.…”

That bright blue gaze of his settles on me, and he shrugs.

“But,” he says, “it was not to be.”

Except with Juliana, when people have mentioned Bordertown over the past few years, I’ve thought of it in the same way as Ys, Brocéliande, Avalon, Lyonesse, and all the other places that figure in faerie lore—or the lost mysteries associated with the old Pueblo people in the mountains near the rez. They’re good for stories, but not places anyone could actually go. Or if they could, once upon a time, they can’t anymore.

Bordertown’s supposedly more contemporary, but it’s no more a reality than any of the others. Except …

Tomorrow morning I’ll probably feel the same way. But right now I believe. It’s hard not to at this moment in the morning, with Seamus’s steady gaze meeting mine and the echoes of his music still ringing in my ears.

“I’ve been to the Realm in dreams,” Juliana says in a soft voice beside me.

I know those dreams. She whispers them to me in the morning when we wake up. The best part is always that she can see in those dreams.

“Ah, Faerieland,” Seamus says. “The Realm of Faerie itself. No mortal can walk there, though I, too, have dreamed of it. The Border is the closest we can ever get … or at least it was.”

His pipes groan as he fills up his bag, right elbow working the bellows.

“Have I ever told you the story of the left-handed fiddler and the goblin?” he asks.

We all shake our heads.

“It’s a good story that gave us an even better tune,” he says, “and what better way to finish off a night as grand and blessed as this?”

Then off he goes, and we all follow his words into the morning.

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It seems so small a thing, so *pointless.* Just a misstep on some concrete stairs.

But it changes everything.

I don't even see it happen. Tom and I are loading the van while Alana and Juliana are inside the hotel packing things up. Except for whatever reason, Juliana comes out to where we are, white cane in hand. On her way down the stairs outside the hotel, halfway between the hotel door and where the van is parked by the curb, she misses the bottom step and falls backward, cracking her head on the top step.

She never regains consciousness.

* * *

"We'll be together forever," she said to me last May.

We were in the camping area of the Spoutwood Faerie Festival, lying on the grass and staring up at the stars. There were a *lot* of stars, but there are always a lot of stars when you can get out of the city.

"Even when we die," she went on. "Whichever one of us goes first will be waiting for the other."

"I don't like talking about stuff like that."

"What? Romance?"

"No, dying."

She gave me a gentle nudge with her elbow.

"It's just another journey," she said. "Don't the Kikimi believe that?"

"Yeah. It's just … I don't know."

I could feel her smile when she cuddled up to me, face pressed against my neck.

"You're not sure you do," she said.

Her breath was warm on my skin.

"I don't know."

“Well, *I* believe,” she said.

* * *

I don’t know how I get through the funeral. I can’t go to the wake. I sit outside the hall the Hills rented, off to one side on a bench under some trees, not seeing anything.

At one point Uncle Herbert sits with me for a while. He puts his hand on my shoulder but he doesn’t say anything. Tía Luba called last night but I couldn’t talk to her, either.

Whichever one of us goes first will be waiting for the other.

I want to hit something. Or someone. Instead I go to a bar down the street. I order a double whiskey. I sit staring at the amber liquid for a long time before I put some money on the bar and leave the whiskey behind, untouched.

* * *

Sometime later the Hills find me sitting in a park not far from the hall, staring at the ground. I have no idea what time it is, just that it’s dark. I don’t know how they found me. They sit on either side of me. For a long time we don’t speak.

“I knew her life would be short,” Alana finally says. “I didn’t know how or why, but I knew. It’s the curse of this gift of mine. Sometimes you don’t want to see things, but you do all the same. And some things you can’t change. But if Juliana’s life was going to be short, I wanted what time she had to be happy. You made her happy, Joey.”

I get a picture in my head of the first time she and Tía Luba met. Tía Luba saw it, too.

“Why did no one tell me?” I say.

“To what purpose?” Alana asks. “Could you have loved her any more than you did? Could you have treated her any better?”

I shake my head. “But now she’s gone. I didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

Tom nods. “But she’s waiting for us in the Summer Country. That’s what I believe.”

“The Summer Country,” I say. “That’s part of Faerieland, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s beyond Faerieland.”

“So how do you get there?”

“It’s not a place the living can visit,” Alana says.

Our conversation seems to unfold in some faraway place.

“I don’t feel like I’m living anymore,” I tell them.

“You won’t feel like that forever,” Alana says.

She doesn’t understand. None of them do. Without Juliana, the world’s gone gray. Without her, there’s just no point to anything.

* * *

I let them comfort me. I let them take me back to the hall. It’s almost empty now. The only ones left are the Hills’ closest friends.

“Go ahead,” I say. “Talk to them. I’ll be okay.”

I stand at the back of the hall. I’m thinking of leaving again, but then I see Seamus and I remember sitting around the coals of the campfire on the morning after Juliana and I were married. The stories. What he said.

He looks up, the gleam in those bright blue eyes of his dimmed by the loss we all share. I sit beside him.

“I’m an old man,” he says. “It doesn’t seem right that I’m still here and she’s gone.”

I nod. “I’d trade places with her in a heartbeat.”

“I know,” he says. “I felt the same way when my Emma passed on.”

“Don’t tell me it’s going to get better.”

He shakes his head. “I won’t. Because it doesn’t. The loss is always there. The hole in the world where once she was. Mine, and now yours.”

We fall silent. I look across the hall to where the remaining people are gathered in small groups, speaking softly.

“I have to go to her,” I tell Seamus. “I have to find her. Like in the old stories where the guy goes down into the underworld and brings his true love back.”

“And if she doesn’t want to come back?” he asks. “Your people speak of the wheel of life, how it turns as it must, not how we’d will it. What if she has accepted the turning of her wheel?”

“Then I’d stay with her.”

Seamus nods. “I don’t think it a worthwhile endeavor, but I understand how you feel the need of it.”

“Is it possible?”

“They say anything is possible—somewhere.”

“I thought … if I could get to Bordertown, then I’d be close to the Faerie Realm. And the Summer Country … it lies past it, doesn’t it?”

Seamus is quiet for a long moment.

“In the old days,” he finally says, “you would have been a perfect candidate for entry into Bordertown. It always welcomed those who had nothing left for them here in the fields we know. But there’s no way back to Bordertown—not that I’ve been able to find in thirteen years.”

“But if I could get there …”

“You would get no further. The Truebloods of the Realm are very strict about who can cross and who can’t. The Realm is closed to mortals, and no one can pass through Elfhaeme Gate.”

“I have to try.”

“I know you do. And I wouldn’t hold you from going. But something is blocking the Way. Or maybe the city just doesn’t exist anymore. It isn’t mine to say.”

“I don’t understand. How can a city be destroyed and it’s not on the news?”

“I didn’t say it was destroyed. It’s … sometimes I think it’s more an idea than a place—though it was certainly real for many of us at one time.

“Bordertown has always been a paradox. You can get there if you really need to be there—or you can’t. You can stumble into it by chance—or you don’t. It could be right there”—he points at a mirror on the side of the hall—“just past our reflection. Or it isn’t. The truth is, the city’s always followed its own rules, and they can change with a shift in the wind.”

“So what do I do?”

He gives me a long, serious study.

“Here’s what I think,” he says. “The old wisdom tells us that ancient power spots and sacred sites are gateways. I believe that the true openings lie inside us. In our own hearts, minds, and lives.

“Perhaps all you need to do is set out on a journey in search of it, believing that when the journey ends you will be there. Not perhaps. Not maybe. Leave no room for doubt. Go with the understanding that the path

you take will bring you there. And if it feels like you need a ritual, then make one up. But don't make it easy. Easy doesn't earn you anything."

"Just like that."

Seamus gives me a sad smile. "It's never 'just like that,' Joey. Even you know that much."

* * *

After my conversation with Seamus, I don't talk to anyone about it. I go back to Baltimore with the Hills and Uncle Herbert. I go back to the rambling house, to the room I shared with my wife. Just before dawn, I pack a knapsack and leave a note on the kitchen table:

> *I'm sorry. I have to do this. Don't look for me to come back because I don't know if I will.*
>
> *—Joey*

I'm waiting outside the bank when it opens. I close my account, stash the money in a bag under my shirt, and then set off.

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Where do you go when you've got a destination in mind but no idea how to get to it?

I do what I did when I was a kid. I ride the rails. It was tough enough when I was a kid because things had already changed from the old days when hoboes crossed the country on the freights. Things have changed even more now, but it's not impossible. And there's no better way to travel unnoticed.

I don't want to be noticed.

I feel it's important to just disappear, like it's the first part of the ritual I have to make up. I don't see the other pieces yet, but this first one feels right.

I eat off the land—fishing, setting snares before I go to sleep—or from fast-food outlets. I clean up in public restrooms. I take a few bad spills coming off the trains. Sprain my arm once. Dislocate my shoulder. That's a bitch to reset, pushing myself up against a pole until the damn thing finally pops back into place.

I manage to avoid the security guards in the freight yards. I'm not always so lucky with the other guys on the road. But I grew up fighting and it's not something you forget. After a while word gets around and the would-be toughs stay out of the way of the crazy Indian.

Most people I meet on the rails don't want to fight. Most of them don't even want to talk. That's fine with me, too, because I've got nothing to say.

The loss is always there, Seamus said. *The hole in the world where once she was.*

That doesn't begin to describe the emptiness I feel.

I ride the rails.

I start carving acorns out of found pieces of wood. When one is done, I toss it from whatever train I'm on.

Seven months go by.

* * *

I'm on another train, sitting cross-legged in front of the empty boxcar's door, watching the landscape. It's desert country again. Badlands. New Mexico, maybe. It doesn't matter. It's just one more place where I am and she's not.

I finish the acorn I've been carving. I hold it up to my eye for a long moment, studying the smoothness of the nut, the tough texture of the cap with its little stem. I toss the carving out the open door, snap my jackknife closed, and stow it back in my pocket.

"Didn't like that one?" a voice says from behind me.

I turn and look for who spoke. I find him sitting in the shadows, an old man with a bedroll under his butt. He's got a battered tweed cap on his head, and he's bundled up in a greatcoat. I can see how you might want something like that when the sun goes down, but right now it's got to be in the high eighties. He has to be melting in that thing.

"I didn't see you there," I tell him.

The old man smiles. "I get that a lot. Maybe I should change my name to Surprise."

"It's as good as any other, I suppose."

"Think I'll stick with Rudy. What's yours?"

You don't meet many talkers on the old hobo trails, and I'm not used to having conversations anymore. But we've got a ways to go before the train will slow down enough to jump off, and I've already carved my acorn for this ride.

"I'm Joey," I tell him.

"Nice to meet you, Joey. So you like to whittle?"

I shrug. "It passes the time."

"That's one way of looking at it. Another might be that it's a piece of a ritual."

"What?"

"Did you know that when you work magic, it shows? It puts a charge in the air. How strong the charge is depends on how close you are to finishing what you started."

"Who *are* you?"

“I already told you. My name’s Rudy. I’m like you. Just a guy riding the rails. And, like you—like every one of us living this life—I’ve got more to me than the homeless guy you see when you look my way. Come on. This can’t be anything new for you. You know none of us were born doing this. We came to it because we’ve got nothing else left. Or in your case, because it’s something you need to do to make something else happen.”

I glance out the open door, but we’re still going too fast for me to survive a jump.

“I don’t know what you think you see,” I begin, but he waves a hand to cut me off.

“And I don’t know,” he says, “what’s happened to you that makes you treat everybody as an enemy. But it doesn’t have to be that way. I’ve got knowledge. I’ve got skills. Maybe I can help you.”

“Why would you?”

He smiles and throws my words back at me.

“It passes the time. And really, what have you got to lose?”

Nothing, I realize. So I tell him. Not what brought me here. Not about the hole in my life that can’t ever be filled.

“I’m trying to find a place called Bordertown,” I say.

“Bordertown? Yeah, now there’s a place. It can fill up your spirit and it can break your heart—sometimes both at the same time. Being in Bordertown is like mainlining a drug. Go there once, and all you’ll ever want to do is get back. Problem is, sometimes it’s just not there anymore—or at least it isn’t for you.”

“But it is real?”

“Define ‘real.’ ”

“You know what I mean.”

“Man, how would I know what *you* mean? My real’s not necessarily the same as your real. Don’t look at me like that. I’m not just being cute. The thing is, we all live in the world that we see and expect. They don’t always match up—you understand what I’m saying?”

I shake my head.

“Let me put it this way,” he says. “You look out that door and you’re seeing New Mexico go by.”

“So?”

“So what if I told you I see Alaska? Or India? Or the heart of Moscow?”

“I’d think you were either yanking my chain—or you’re crazy.”

“Sure, that’s the easy way to look at it. But what if I’m *really* seeing a landscape you don’t?”

“That’s impossible.”

He nods. “Right. And if you keep your mind closed like that, you’ll never get to Bordertown. I mean, think about it. Is Bordertown, or even the Perilous Realm, any more probable?”

“I guess not.…”

I look out the door, trying to see something other than mesas and badlands. Mountains in the distance.

“I can’t see it,” I say. “I just see New Mexico.”

“Did I say it wasn’t New Mexico?”

“But—”

“I was making a point.”

“Okay,” I say. “I get it. And I’ve been trying to open my mind. But I’m just not seeing any differently than I ever did.”

“I think you’ve been doing pretty good. You can see me, can’t you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Come on, Joey. You’re a smart guy. You’re walking around under the blessings of a dozen or so Green Men. You were married to a Green Man’s daughter. You’ve been whittling acorns and tossing them out of trains from one side of the country to the other. Did you seriously not expect to call something to you?”

All I can do is stare at him. I never told him any of that stuff.

“Let me show you something,” he says.

He stands up, and what I thought was a bedroll is actually a pile of leaves. Now that he’s moved out of the shadows, I can see that his eyes are a mix of gold and green. His face is ruddy and round, with deep laugh lines. He comes to where I’m sitting by the door and waits expectantly until I stand up beside him. He puts his hands in the pockets of his greatcoat and pulls out two fistfuls of carved acorns. Smiling at me, he lets them fall from his hands to the track bed that’s speeding by below.

“Where did you … how …?”

I don’t have the words to finish my questions. All I can do is stare at his hands.

“I think I liked the earlier ones better,” he says. “You seem to have put more intent into them. Now you’re kind of doing it by rote, but it doesn’t really matter. They still fulfilled the boundaries of your ritual.”

“I …”

“Don’t talk,” he says. “Listen. Look at those beautiful mountains.”

We stand in the doorway watching the landscape continue to go by.

“You know it’s not going to be any easier in Bordertown, right?” he says after a few moments. “Being there’s not going to make things better, or help you to forget—unless you drink some of that Mad River water, and then you’re only going to find out why they call it that.”

“If I can get that far, then I can—”

He points out the door.

“Pay attention here,” he says. “Listen to the wind. Look at that mesa. Smell the clean air out there. Isn’t it so much better than the diesel fumes and the metal and wood and grease of this boxcar?”

“I guess.”

“Sure it is. Now here’s where you get off.”

I start to turn to him, but his hands are on my back and he pushes me out the boxcar door.

* * *

Rudy’s push sends me flailing into the air. I know I’m going to hit hard and badly.

Except the air seems to catch me. I’m floating. Bright sunshine all around me, the train wailing by.

And then it’s dark. When I touch the ground, I land like a leaf. There isn’t even an impact. I feel gravel under me, and I roll over to see a night sky above. It’s filled with constellations I don’t recognize.

The train, Rudy, New Mexico—they’re all gone.

When I sit up, I see I’m in a train yard. I don’t know where, but I can guess. In one direction I can see a fence, beyond it blocks of dark buildings. In the other direction it looks like a dump, cars and trash piled high.

I get up and start walking across the tracks to the fence. I was planning to climb over, but then I see someone’s already cut a hole in it that I can squeeze through. On the other side I find out why the buildings are dark.

The city's been abandoned—or at least this part of it has been. I can see lights in the far distance, so I start to walk through the deserted streets.

I'm almost to the lighted area when I hear wheels clattering. I see a white kid on a skateboard, rolling back and forth on a little patch of asphalt, which must've been a parking space back before everybody left this area and nature made its comeback. As I get closer, I don't see anything unusual about him. No elf ears. No big wings sprouting out of his back. He's maybe sixteen, with a rat's nest of hair, baggy pants, a Green Day *Dookie* T-shirt, and a pair of Nike Air Max. He stops goofing around with his skateboard when he sees me and waits for me to approach.

"Hey," I say. "Think you could direct me to a hostel or a flophouse?"

He laughs. "Just get here?"

"Yeah."

He waves his hand to take in the empty buildings that surround us.

"Take your pick," he says.

"I was hoping to clean up and get something to eat."

He pushes back his hoodie and gives me an interested look.

"You got any money?" he asks.

"Not much."

"Worldly money?" When he realizes I don't know what he means, he adds, "You know, from the World. Where you came from. The reason I ask is, it's not worth as much here. You got any coffee or chocolate?"

I nod. There's probably a half-pound of French roast and a handful of chocolate and granola bars in my knapsack.

"Then you're cool." He steps on his board and it jumps into his hand. "Buy me a meal and I'll show you the ropes."

"What's your name?"

He was starting to turn, but he looks back at me.

"That can be a loaded question here," he says. "Usually you wait until someone offers it to you. And," he goes on before I can say anything, "be careful handing out your own. Just give up something like a nickname."

"And that would be because?"

"Magic's unpredictable here, but that doesn't mean it's not potent in the right hands. Names are power. If someone has your full true name, they can make you do stuff that maybe you don't want to."

"Are you serious?"

“But if you need a tag, you can call me River.”

Full true names are power? I don’t really buy it. But to be safe, I just give him the shortened version of Joseph.

“I’m Joey,” I tell him.

“Come on, Joey. Let’s get you something to eat. Me, I’ll have a sandwich and a beer.”

“Yeah, right,” I say. “How old are you?”

He laughs. “You think anyone gives a shit about that? You’re in Bordertown now. We’ve got our own rules, and how old you are isn’t part of any of them.”

“I guess I’ve got a lot to learn.”

“You have no idea,” the kid tells me. “No idea at all.”

* * *

He’s right. I don’t. Bordertown’s shabbier than I expected, run-down and wearing at the edges, but it’s also got that makeshift cool that you’ll always find in a certain part of any city. The place where the oddball stores, restaurants, and clubs are all just a little hipper.

Most people look as human as you’d find anywhere, though they’ve got a more individual and varied fashion sense, which seems vaguely out-of-date. I was expecting something like a FaerieCon, with everybody dressed up in their faerie gear. And yeah, there’s a bit of that here, more velvet and lace and glitter than you’d see back home, but there’s also everything from a Victorian steampunk kind of look to a mash-up of a punk rock concert with a hippie festival.

But the elves. I get a real pang in my heart when I see my first honest-to-goodness one. Tall, slender, and pale, with the high, pointed ears and the silvery hair. I just think about how much Juliana would have loved to see one. To be here.

They don’t call themselves elves, or faerie, River informs me. They’re Truebloods, which, I’ve got to admit, sounds a bit too white supremacist for my taste. I didn’t imagine there’d be racism in Bordertown, but apparently there’s a real hierarchy here, starting with highborn and lowborn elves, then halflings, with humans at the bottom. Which would make a guy with my skin color at the bottom of the bottom.

River shrugs. “You can get all in a twist about it, or you can just let it go. So long as you stay out of the way of the Truebloods, and don’t piss off one of the gangs, no one’s going to care.”

Says the white kid.

He never asks me why I’ve come, and I don’t volunteer the information. I do tell him I’m interested in the Realm—they don’t call it Faerieland here—and he just laughs.

“No kidding?” he says. “You and every other newbie. But forget about ever getting over there. I mean, seriously. Forget about it. You might be thinking, ‘Hey, I made it to Bordertown, which is like a miracle all by itself. Getting into the Realm is just one more impossible thing I’m going to do.’ But it’s never going to happen. And if you try, you’ll just bring a world of hurt down on yourself.”

He doesn’t know about the world of hurt I carry around inside myself every day, but I just nod.

River hangs around with me until midmorning, which is when he realizes that the flow of free food and drinks has dried up.

“I’ve got to motor,” he says the third time he’s unsuccessfully tried to get me to buy him something. “I’ll catch you around.”

“Thanks for the tour,” I tell him.

He waves a hand, then disappears into the crowd, skateboard under his arm.

I spend the rest of the day getting the lay of the land, staying out of the areas River warned me about. I still get a kick out of seeing the Truebloods, though I can’t pretend that what they stand for doesn’t irritate me.

As the sun goes down, I sit on a low wall by the Mad River, whittling an acorn and considering what I’ve been told about the water flowing by below. I know the river has its source in the Realm. After everything I’ve seen, I’m more and more tempted to sneak onto one of the boats that ply their trade between here and the Realm. I had a good look at Elfhaeme Gate in the north end of the city earlier this afternoon. The damn thing’s huge and there’s no way I’m getting through it—not with how well it’s guarded. I also followed the Border wall out into the Nevernever, the wild lands outside the city limits. I hadn’t gotten very far when I thought I was having an acid flashback. Seriously. The landscape seemed to change underfoot whenever I turned in a new direction. Pastoral woodlands became a

wasteland more barren than anything in my home turf, which in turn became wheat fields, arctic tundra, redwoods, you name it. It felt like it was going to snow, then it was sunny, then it rained.

It gave me vertigo but I trudged on, following the shimmering curtain that divides the Realm from the World, wondering if there was some way through it. I stared at the Border for a long time. It was beautiful, but it made the vertigo so bad that I could barely stay upright. Trying to make my way through that shimmer is going to be a last resort. Especially when these boats seem like such an easy option.

The problem is, none of them appear to be going anywhere right now. The barges are all empty, with no place to hide. I have to wait until dockworkers start to load them in the morning.

With that decided, I stick the finished acorn in my pocket. I close up my jackknife, shoulder my knapsack, and head back to the part of Soho where I first met River. I'll get some shut-eye in one of the abandoned buildings like I did for a couple of hours last night. Have an early breakfast. Maybe find a place where I can grab a shower or at least wash up.

Walking down Ho Street feels like Mardi Gras in New Orleans. There are kids everywhere, music spilling out of the clubs, everyone having a good time. I get lots of friendly nods and invitations to join in the fun, but I just smile or say no thanks and walk on. 'Fun' is not a word that's in my vocabulary anymore. It's been seven months, but it still feels like yesterday when I was sitting in the ICU holding Juliana's hand as she drifted away.

I'm not alone in keeping my distance. I see kids in the shadows, skulking in the mouths of alleys or in the doorways of businesses that are closed for the night. They shrink back when they see me looking at them. Street kids. Some of them are younger than River. One pair of girls I'm sure can't be more than twelve or thirteen. I don't know their stories, but I'm guessing that actually being here in Bordertown turned out to be a whole lot different from what they thought it would be—and maybe not so different from whatever they were trying to escape in the World.

I turn off the party street and find a quieter avenue that's heading in the same direction. The buzz from Ho Street still reaches me here, so I almost don't hear the whimper in the alley as I pass its mouth. It's followed by the sound of rough laughter. I pause, and take a few steps back to peer down its length.

The light’s not good, but I can make out three guys clustered around a body on the ground. They’re taking turns kicking it. I reach into my pocket and pull out my jackknife. Then I step into the alley.

As I get closer, I see they’re tormenting a dog. It’s a midsized animal, short-haired, with a long face, big shoulders, and trim hips. There’s blood on its yellow fur. It keeps trying to crawl away but whenever it does, one of the guys gives it another kick.

Except they aren’t guys—they’re Truebloods. Tall and handsome, maybe, but with a cruel light in their eyes and knives in their hands. Now I know why the dog’s bleeding.

“The big thing to remember,” River told me this morning, “is you won’t get in over your head if you mind your own business. You especially don’t want to get on the wrong side of the Truebloods.”

Screw that.

I open my jackknife and snatch up the metal lid from a garbage can.

“Get away from the dog!” I call to them.

They start to turn in my direction, and I can see them smiling at the thought of some new entertainment. But I learned a long time ago that if there’s going to be trouble, you don’t stand around and talk about it, working up your courage. You just go for it.

I’m already in motion when I call out to them. By the time they turn around, I’m close enough to hit the front guy in the face with the garbage-can lid. I’m not ready to cut yet, but I aim the hilt of my knife at the head of the guy on my right. It never connects. He’s fast. They’re all fast. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen.

The guy on my left moves in and his blade punches me in the side, going in up to its hilt before he rips it out. The guy I missed ducks under my swing and he stabs me in the chest. The one I hit slaps aside the lid. I have the momentary satisfaction of seeing the blood spilling from his broken nose before he knifes me as well.

Fast.

So fast.

The jackknife drops from my fingers to clatter on the cobblestones. My mouth fills with the taste of copper.

They each get a couple more stabs in before I’m falling to the ground beside the dog. The one with the broken nose drops down, sleek as a

panther. His face is inches from my own.

“You think this was a game, human?”

He spits the words into my face. I’m trying to focus on him but my gaze is swimming. I know I should be in a world of pain, but I can’t seem to feel my body. I think he’s licking my blood from the blade of his knife, but that doesn’t make any sense.

“No one interferes with us. Too bad you had to die to learn that.”

He doesn’t look sorry at all. Then he’s standing again—so fast I don’t see him move. They kick me a few more times before I hear them leaving the alley.

I drag myself to a nearby wall. I’m bleeding out, but there’s nothing I can do. I’ve been cut too many times. I still don’t feel the pain. I pull the dog’s head onto my lap and stroke his bloody fur.

“Sorry, buddy,” I tell him. “I wish I’d gotten here sooner, but it probably would have ended just the same. Though maybe you could have had time to run off.”

I would have had your back, a voice says in my head.

“The hell …?”

I look down into the dog’s face. His big brown eyes are looking up into mine. I know it’s ridiculous, but it’s like the dog was talking to me.

Their generosity is legendary, the voice goes on, *but so is their cruelty.*

I look around. My vision’s been fading in and out, but there doesn’t seem to be anybody else here but the dog and me. I look back at him.

“Are you—are you talking to me?”

I think it’s just the two of us here, so I must be talking to you.

“Yeah, but dogs can’t—”

What makes you think dogs can’t talk?

“I didn’t—I mean, it never occurred to me one way or the other.”

Maybe the ones you knew didn’t have anything to say. Or maybe you just didn’t know how to hear them.

“I never thought about it. They were just always around on the rez.”

And yet without stopping to consider the consequences, you gave your life for me.

That brings me right back down to earth.

“So we’re dying …?”

I’m afraid so.

“I don’t feel any pain.”

Some of the Bloods coat their blades with poison to guarantee the death of their foe. But it has the side effect of numbing the pain.

“I can’t die. I mean, I’m not supposed to die. Not yet. I was supposed to rescue her first.”

Why don’t you tell me who she is and what you were rescuing her from?

“I wasn’t there for her when she fell,” I say.

Time is crawling by in slow motion. I don’t know if it’s from shock or something in the poison. But somehow I manage to tell him about Juliana and how she died.

What makes you think she wants to be rescued? he says when I’m done.

I remember Seamus asking me the same thing, but I still say, “What do you mean?”

Death is only a passage to another world. We leave this place and go to what you call the Summer Country, but eventually we leave it as well and go somewhere else. That is how it is forever. Your mate has finished the journey she had in this world. Why would she want to return to travel the same road again?

“She said we’d be together forever,” I say. “She said whichever one of us went first would be waiting for the other.”

And you doubt it?

“I—I don’t know what to think. It doesn’t matter. Nothing does now.”

I will tell you what always matters, the dog says. *Shining a light into the darkness. Standing up to injustice. Just as you did this evening. There aren’t so many willing to offer help as selflessly as you have.*

“Except we’re both dying.”

It doesn’t have to be that way.

“I don’t get it. And Juliana …”

No matter how long you live, she will always be waiting for you. You do believe her, don’t you?

“I still don’t get what you’re saying.”

Just as your friend pushed you from the train into Bordertown, I can push you back from death. Choose life and see what happens.

“But without her—”

She will be waiting for you. She promised. But go only when your work is finished.

“What work?”

The work of living, and showing others how to survive. They come here to this city because they have nothing left in the World to comfort them, but they don’t always find comfort here, either. You saw it yourself this evening. Bordertown can be a harsh mistress to the unwary. You can stay and be a strength for others, or give up and go to her. But ask yourself, will you be proud of your choice? Will she?

“So how do you push me back?” I ask.

There’s no reply for a long moment, and then I realize that the dog’s gone. He passed away between one breath and the next. I stroke his fur.

“Thanks for the company, buddy,” I say.

Either it’s gotten completely dark now or my vision’s gone. It’s really quiet, too. My tongue feels thick in my mouth. I’m falling. I’m in the alley, propped up against a wall, but at the same time I’m falling.

I try to find something to hold on to, but I can’t feel my fingers anymore.

Falling …

Something the dog told me …

Will you be proud of your choice? Will she?

And as soon as I remember, I think I hear it. I hear *her.* That familiar bell-like laugh. Delicate and intoxicating.

I reach for her with hands I can’t feel, stretching farther and farther until I can almost imagine her fingers closing around my own.

The soft laughter is all around me now, just like my Juliana, sweet and happy.

Choose life and see what happens.

I want to be with her so badly.

I remember walking down that party street. Everybody having fun, laughing and dancing and filled up with the music. But I also remember those kids I saw standing just beyond the noise and light. Came all this way but they’re still just as much on the outside as they were before they got here.

I think of the Truebloods, and the gangs River told me about, pushing their weight around.

If the dog hadn’t died, if I could still make the choice, I know what I’d choose.

I'd do what I could to make things right. That's what would make Juliana proud. That's the guy I'd want to be.

But it's too late.

The sweet laughter grows softer and I hear something else.

I can push you back from death.

I shift my position a little and something digs into my back. My jacket got twisted around when I pulled myself up to lean against the wall. What I'm feeling is the acorn I carved while watching the Mad River.

Choose, the dog told me.

I clutch the acorn tight and lift my free hand to my chest.

I open my eyes. My shirt's still all cut up and it's soaked with blood. But the wounds are gone.

I get up, cradle the dog's body in my arms, and go looking for a place to lay it in the ground.

I know that Juliana's waiting for me, but that's not going to be for a while.

I don't know what's going to happen next.

The start of something, I guess.

A new turn of the wheel, Uncle Herbert would say.

The promise of hope, Tom Hill would probably say.

Maybe I'll see if they have any Green Men in this place.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are deeply grateful to so many people for making this book possible, and for believing it was important to get everyone back to the Border—beginning with our agents, Barry Goldblatt and Christopher Schelling, and our editor at Random House, Mallory Loehr, a true believer, along with her invaluable colleagues Ellice Lee and Chelsea Eberly. Special thanks to Howard Gayton for convincing Terri it was time to head back to the Border!

Every Bordertown author, old and new, helped us to get here, and we got extra-good directions from Midori Snyder, who remembers the way so very well. Els Kushner is among the many authors who generously shared the characters they first created in previous volumes. The longtime fans of Bordertown kept us on track with their websites and enthusiasm, especially the folks at The Yellow Brick Road: A Borderlands Fan Site, Chris over at Hard Luck Café, and Tara O'Shea.

Patrick Nielsen Hayden of Tor Books and Teresa Nielsen Hayden provided generous support, including a yellowing road map that made all the difference.

From Virginia Lee, Marja Lee, and Alan Lee, we got crash space and a studio in Devon, and were well fed by Victoria Gayton there. Theo Black, Delia Sherman, and Howard Gayton were invaluable companions on the road.

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CHRISTOPHER BARZAK grew up in rural Ohio, went to university in the city of Youngstown, Ohio, and has lived in a Southern California beach town, the capital of Michigan, and the suburbs of Tokyo, where he taught English in junior high and elementary schools. His stories have appeared in many venues, including *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, Salon Fantastique, Interfictions,* and *Asimov's Science Fiction.* His first novel, *One for Sorrow*, won the Crawford Award for Best First Fantasy. His second book, *The Love We Share Without Knowing*, was selected for the James Tiptree Jr. Award Honor List and was a Nebula Award finalist for Best Novel. He is also the coeditor (with Delia Sherman) of *Interfictions 2.* His first trip to Bordertown was as a late teen in a dusty used-book store in a little village marketplace. When he went back the next day to look for more, the bookstore had disappeared. No kidding. He lives in Youngstown, Ohio, where he teaches creative writing at Youngstown State University.

HOLLY BLACK is the author of bestselling contemporary fantasy books for kids and teens. Her titles include The Spiderwick Chronicles (with Tony DiTerlizzi), The Modern Faerie Tale series, The Good Neighbors graphic novel trilogy (with Ted Naifeh), and her new Curse Workers series, which begins with *White Cat.* She has been a finalist for the Mythopoeic Award, a finalist for an Eisner Award, and the recipient of the Andre Norton Award. She currently lives in New England with her husband, Theo, in a house with a secret door.

STEVEN BRUST was born in 1955 and has been writing full-time since 1986. He has been reading about Bordertown since the stories first appeared, and has always wanted to play with the cool kids. His Bordertown story "When the Bow Breaks" (published in *The Essential Bordertown*) was chosen as a finalist for the Nebula Award. With Emma Bull, he wrote *Freedom & Necessity.* Brust is the author of eighteen books

set in Dragaera and several other stand-alone volumes. His Vlad Taltos series began with *Jhereg* and eleven books later gets to *Iorich*, with more to come.

EMMA BULL has lived in one of the World's access points to Bordertown (Bisbee, Arizona). She contributed to the anthologies *Bordertown* and *Life on the Border*, and her novel, *Finder*, is set in B-town as well. She's happily married, has two cats, and hangs out online at coffeeem.livejournal.com.

CASSANDRA CLARE (cassandraclare.com) is the author of the bestselling Mortal Instruments and Infernal Devices series. Her first book, *City of Bones*, was a finalist for the Locus Award for Best First Novel. She was born to American parents in Tehran, Iran, and spent much of her childhood traveling the world with her family, including one trek through the Himalayas as a toddler when she spent a month living in her father's backpack. Since her family moved around so much, she found familiarity in books and went everywhere with a book under her arm. She used to say the characters in books were her friends (thus causing other, real people to edge away). Getting to write a Bordertown story was like being reunited with childhood friends. Fantastic!

CHARLES de LINT is a full-time writer and musician who presently makes his home in Ottawa, Canada, with his wife, MaryAnn Harris. His most recent books are *The Painted Boy* and *The Very Best of Charles de Lint*. He has had stories in three previous Bordertown anthologies and couldn't be happier to have been able to visit the city again. For more information about his work, visit his website at charlesdelint.com. He's also on Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace.

CORY DOCTOROW (craphound.com) is a science fiction novelist, blogger, and technology activist, and coeditor of the popular weblog BoingBoing (boingboing.net). He cofounded the open-source peer-to-peer software company OpenCola. His novels are published by Tor Books and HarperCollins UK and simultaneously released on the Internet under Creative Commons licenses that encourage their reuse and sharing. They include the *New York Times* bestseller *Little Brother*, and *For the Win*, a

young adult novel about macroeconomics, video games, and the labor movement. On February 3, 2008, he became a father. The little girl is called Poesy Emmeline Fibonacci Nautilus Taylor Doctorow, and she is a marvel that puts all the works of technology and artifice to shame.

Born in 1984, **AMAL EL-MOHTAR** is a first-generation Lebanese Canadian, currently pursuing a PhD that focuses on representations of fairies in Romantic literature. She is the recipient of the 2009 Rhysling Award for best short poem, and her short fiction has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Shimmer*, and *Cabinet des Fées. The Honey Month*, a collection of spontaneous poetry and prose inspired by twenty-eight different kinds of honey, is available from Papaveria Press. She also coedits *Goblin Fruit*, an online quarterly dedicated to fantastical poetry, with Jessica P. Wick.

Amal found her entrance to Bordertown in an independent Ottawa bookstore called Perfect Books, where Patricia Caven pressed names into her palms like keys. Windling, de Lint, Bull, and Snyder unlocked doors to the music-ridden alleys she roams to this day. Having read her way in, she is deeply honored to have been asked to write her way out—but has no intention of leaving.

NEIL GAIMAN is the author of the novels *Neverwhere*, *Stardust*, *American Gods*, *Anansi Boys*, and *Good Omens* (with Terry Pratchett); the Sandman series of graphic novels; and the short-story collections *Smoke and Mirrors* and *Fragile Things.* He is also the author of books for readers of all ages, including the Newbery Medal–winning novel *The Graveyard Book*, *Coraline*, *Odd and the Frost Giants*, the short-story collection *M Is for Magic*, and picture books including *The Wolves in the Walls*, illustrated by Dave McKean; *The Dangerous Alphabet*, illustrated by Gris Grimly; and *Blueberry Girl* and *Instructions*, both illustrated by Charles Vess. Originally from England, he now lives in America. Visit him online at neilgaiman.com.

NALO HOPKINSON was born in Jamaica and has lived in Canada since 1977. She is a recipient of the World Fantasy Award and a two-time recipient of the Sunburst Award for Canadian Literature of the Fantastic. She's currently working on *T'aint*, a young adult fantasy novel, for

Margaret K. McElderry Books. Nalo remembers working at Toronto science fiction bookstore Bakka Books when *The Essential Bordertown* arrived, and the joy on the faces of the readers who showed up at the bookstore expressly to buy a copy. One of her earliest ambitions as a writer was to write a Bordertown story. Ambition achieved!

ALAYA DAWN JOHNSON is the author of *Moonshine*, a vampire novel set in the Lower East Side of 1920s New York City. She has also written *Racing the Dark* and *The Burning City*, the first two books of a young adult fantasy trilogy called The Spirit Binders. She came to Bordertown through the books of Emma Bull, Steven Brust, Charles de Lint, and others, which eventually led her to discover the magical world they had all shared. She grew up in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., and dreamed of life in a real city until she finally escaped to New York. She can be contacted via her website, alayadawnjohnson.com.

Once upon a time, **ANNETTE CURTIS KLAUSE** was a teenage runaway. She followed the music north to another country with her friends in a painted van, and had many adventures—some of them good, and some of them not so good. She came home safe and sound, and since those days has done much of her adventuring through the people in her imagination instead. You may have read those exploits in her novels *The Silver Kiss*, *Blood and Chocolate*, and *Freaks: Alive on the Inside!* She has never met a vampire, but they occasionally sneak into her stories anyway. Before she was ever published she was a big fan of the Bordertown stories and was a total squealing fangirl mess when her story was accepted for this anthology. Annette lives in Maryland with her husband and six cats, and works as a children's librarian.

ELLEN KUSHNER lives in Manhattan and travels a lot. Her most recent novel, *The Privilege of the Sword*, was nominated for a wildly diverse array of awards, including a New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age, the Nebula Award, the World Fantasy Award, and the James Tiptree Jr. Award (for work that best expands or explores our understanding of gender). Back when she finished writing her first novel, *Swordspoint*, her part-time roommate, rising young editor Terri Windling, asked Ellen if she'd be

interested in writing something for this new anthology she was creating, about a town full of elves, music, and motorcycles. Ellen went on to have stories in all of the original four Bordertown anthologies, and is thrilled to have been able to coedit a fifth one now—especially as it meant she and Terri were able to write another Bordertown story together. (Their first one was "Mockery," with Terri using the pen name Bellamy Bach.) More fact and fiction at ellenkushner.com.

PATRICIA A. MCKILLIP was born in Salem, Oregon, received an MA in English literature from San Jose State University in California, and has been a writer since then. Known primarily for her fantasy fiction, she has published novels for both adults and young adults, winning several World Fantasy Awards and Mythopoeic Awards. Among her YA novels are *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld* and the Riddle-Master trilogy. Her fantasy novels for adults include *Ombria in Shadow, Winter Rose*, and *The Bell at Sealey Head.* She has also written a number of short stories, both for adults and young adults, including a tale for *The Essential Bordertown.* Many of her stories have been gathered into a collection, *Harrowing the Dragon.* Her latest novel is *The Bards of Bone Plain.* She has written very little poetry in her life, but figured "what the hey." She was quite pleased to be invited back to Bordertown. She and her husband, poet David Lunde, live in Oregon.

DYLAN MECONIS is an artist and writer living in Portland, Oregon. She is the creator of the graphic novels *Bite Me!*, *Family Man*, and the forthcoming *Perseus & Andromeda*, along with many other eccentric projects both prose and pictorial. She previously collaborated with Sara Ryan on the short-story comic "Click." Find out about her more than quarter-century reign of terror at dylanmeconis.com.

TIM PRATT'S stories have appeared in the *Best American Short Stories*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and other nice places, and his work has won a Hugo Award (and lost Nebula, World Fantasy, Stoker, and Mythopoeic Awards). He is the author of two story collections and half a dozen novels, and works as a senior editor at *Locus.* He grew up in the rural South and now lives in the urban West with his wife, Heather Shaw, and

their son. He read the first Bordertown stories in his local library as a teenager and looks forward to passing those books (and this one) on to his own child. His website is timpratt.org.

SARA RYAN is the author of *Empress of the World*, an Oregon Book Award winner and an ALA-YALSA Best Book for Young Adults, and *The Rules for Hearts*, an Oregon Book Award winner and a Junior Library Guild selection. Her comics work ranges from *Hellboy* to Image's *Comic Book Tattoo* and the Eisner Award–nominated "Me and Edith Head." Her first graphic novel, *Bad Houses*, with art by Carla Speed McNeil, is forthcoming from the Vertigo imprint of DC Comics. She was an unaccountably late arrival to Bordertown; she blames too much time in the Dreaming and also with some Dykes to Watch Out For, when she might otherwise have been discovering it. But she's thrilled to have finally found the Way.

DELIA SHERMAN loves borders and in-between cultures. She comes by this honestly, having been born in Tokyo, and raised between New York City; Sulphur, Louisiana; and Brownwood, Texas, where her mother's family came from. Her short stories and poems have appeared in such anthologies as *Teeth*, *The Beastly Bride*, and fourteen volumes of *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror.* She's also the author of the New York Between fantasies *Changeling* and *The Magic Mirror of the Mermaid Queen.* She has coedited several anthologies, including *The Essential Bordertown* with Terri Windling. Delia is delighted to return to Bordertown, especially with a poem, the most magical of literary forms.

WILL SHETTERLY has written two novels about Wolfboy's early days in Bordertown, *Elsewhere* and *Nevernever.* He's also the author of *Dogland*, a semiautobiographical fantasy, and a few other books and stories. He lives in Tucson with his adored wife, Emma Bull, and two tyrannical cats, Toby and Barncat.

JANNI LEE SIMNER is the author of the postapocalyptic young adult fantasy *Bones of Faerie* and its sequel, *Faerie Winter*, as well as *Thief Eyes*, based on an Icelandic saga. She has also published four books for younger

readers and more than thirty short stories. Janni lives less than a hundred miles from the U.S./Mexico border, but in spite of decades spent looking for lampposts on foggy nights and turning left in Albuquerque, the World/Realm border continues to elude her. Visit her website at simner.com.

Born in the Pacific Northwest in 1979, **CATHERYNNE M. VALENTE** is the author of over a dozen works of fiction and poetry, including *Palimpsest, Deathless*, the Orphan's Tales series, and the crowd-funded phenomenon *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making.* She is the winner of the Tiptree Award, the Mythopoeic Award, the Rhysling Award, and the Million Writers Award. She was a finalist for the World Fantasy Award in 2007 and 2009, and the Lambda, Andre Norton, Locus, and Hugo awards in 2010. She lives on an island off the coast of Maine with her partner, two dogs, and an enormous cat.

TERRI WINDLING has been a guiding force in the development of fantasy literature for three decades, winning nine World Fantasy Awards, the Bram Stoker Award, and the 2010 Solstice Award for this work. She has been a fantasy editor at Ace and Tor Books, has published over thirty anthologies for young adult and adult readers, and is the founder of The Endicott Studio, an organization devoted to mythic arts. In 1986 she created the first Bordertown shared-world anthology, and went on to edit three more Bordertown anthologies (*Borderland, Life on the Border*, and *The Essential Bordertown*), as well as to oversee Bordertown novels by Will Shetterly and Emma Bull. Terri is delighted to be back on the Border with this volume! She has written several works of mythic fiction (including *The Wood Wife*, winner of the Mythopoeic Award, and the Old Oak Wood series for children, with pictures by Wendy Froud), and many essays on myth and folklore. She is also an artist whose paintings and collages have been exhibited across the U.S. and Europe (and can sometimes be found on etsy.com). A former New Yorker, she now lives with her husband and stepdaughter in a small village on the edge of Dartmoor in Devon, England. For more information, please visit terriwindling.com and endicott-studio.com.

JANE YOLEN, often called the Hans Christian Andersen of America, is the author of over three hundred books, including *Owl Moon* and *The Devil's Arithmetic.* Her books and stories have won an assortment of awards —two Nebulas, a World Fantasy Award, a Caldecott, the Golden Kite Award, three Mythopoeic Awards, two Christopher Awards, a nomination for the National Book Award, and the Jewish Book Award, among others. She is also the winner (for body of work) of the Kerlan Award, the World Fantasy Association Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Catholic Library Association's Regina Medal. Six colleges and universities have given her honorary doctorates. She was the editor of Will Shetterly's two young adult Bordertown novels, *Elsewhere* and *Nevernever*, which originally appeared in her Jane Yolen Books imprint for Harcourt Brace. If you need to know more about her, visit her website at janeyolen.com.

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