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ELLEN KUSHNER & BELLAMY BACH

Mockery

The room looks as though it has been ransacked. Papers, books, hardware, ale bottles are strewn across every surface; piles of miscellaneous debris litter the floor where drawers have been upended in Hale's search for a number-two lead or a newspaper clipping he could have sworn he put there once... Draped over one canvas is a pair of dirty socks.

Hale kicks papers out of his way, clearing a path to the other end of the room. Tall, narrow windows let in gray light and a breeze to disturb the dustballs in the corners. A cat with pale pink striping, one of the elfish breeds, is asleep on a pile of laundry on top of a priceless Stickley chair. "Sorry," Hale mumbles around the stem of his pipe, gesturing vaguely around him. "Ought to clean up around here... one of these days..."

The student looks around the room with an expression of equal parts horror and awe. "This is where... you paint?" he breathes.

"Well, like I said earlier, I don't paint so much now—or at least not the kind of paintings you're interested in. Those were done years ago, of course—at the Mock Avenue Studio."

The student nods gravely. It is all a history lesson to him. He picks his way carefully to the long, windowless wall where Hale has tacked up a random collection of pencil drawings, etchings, oil studies, and takeout-restaurant menus, stopping in front of the single piece on the wall from the Mock Avenue period. Naturally. No one is interested in what Hale is doing now. Hale glances toward the unfinished canvas on his easel, painted in the abstract elvin style, and sighs. There are days when even he isn't much interested in it.

The Mock Avenue painting is of a halfling girl, hunched over and smoking a cigarette. Linny had posed for it. It is a preliminary study for a much larger painting that also includes Bear, standing behind her, holding that old shotgun of Billy Buttons' that never did actually shoot. Now the larger painting hangs in a famous collection somewhere out in the World, where Hale has never been. The price he received for the canvas completed the renovations on his house. The study the student is admiring isn't very good, in Hale's opinion; he keeps it up on the wall because... well, because it is Linny.

The storage room behind the studio is filled with such work—thirty-year-old drawings and paintings and cartoons, gathering dust. It drives Hale's dealer to distraction that he hoards this old work, when it is so much in demand beyond the Borderlands. Hale parts with a piece only when he needs the cash. It seems somehow indecent that Worlders take seriously work that he has never taken seriously himself—or that he can make so much money off the faces of old friends.

The boy gasps as he steps into the storage room. Just like a Worlder, soft, every emotion written right across his face. He reminds Hale, embarrassingly, of himself—when he'd first come from the suburbs across the Mad River to take Soho by storm.

"Like I said," Hale mutters, "It would be a tedious task to catalogue all this junk..."

"I don't mind." The boy reverently fingers a sketch scribbled on the back of a poster announcing a gig at the Dancing Ferret. "Mr. Hale, I've planned and saved for two years to come up here," he says as though the Borderlands are Outer Mongolia—which perhaps, to a Worlder, they are, "and it would be an honor to—"

"It's your funeral," Hale interrupts, silently cursing his dealer for persuading him to do this. The boy ought to be out painting himself, raising hell like he and Ash and Bear had at that age—not here burying himself in Hale's vanished youth. Yet he'd wanted so much to come, had written all those goddamn earnest letters. "Look," Hale says, taking pity on the kid, "I'll be in the next room if you need any help. At least it's all labeled. If you look on the back of the canvases, you'll find the dates they were painted, the places, the names of the people in them—if I knew them. This was kind of diary for me, you understand. Like you Worlders keep snapshots in photo albums, just to remember things by. I never thought of it as, well, *art*."

The kid—now what *is* his name?—is pulling canvases out of the racks, oblivious to the dust smudging what is probably his best suit. His dark face is flushed with excitement as he kneels before a large canvas and peers closely at it, pushing the dreadlocks out of his eyes. Hale pauses in the doorway. He remembers painting this one as if it were yesterday. Ho Street, by daylight, looking derelict and dangerous, a couple of runaways lounging on the stoop of an ancient, graffiti-covered building. The kids, who couldn't have been more than nine or ten, had been happy to pose for the picture while eating the remains of Hale's lunch, and had written their names on the back of the canvas-board in childish block print. The gods only knew what had become of these two, how they had survived. Or *if* they had.

The student pulls out a second canvas, and a third, paintings filled with thirty-year-old memories staring out at Hale with oil-painted eyes, the old Soho street scene brought back to life. Perhaps that is why the Worlders like them, calling Hale a punk Norman Rockwell. They are the only visual record anyone has, in this half-elvin city where cameras do not work, of a time and place long gone.

Oh, Soho is still here; still, oddly enough, considered the underbelly of Bordertown. The clubs are still here: old Farrel Din books the best bands at the Dancing Ferret, the bouncers at the Factory still discourage the silver-haired from entering. The Mock Avenue Bell Tower clock still chimes the time, incorrectly. Some things never change. But Soho has. When Hale first wandered its streets, the buildings had been long abandoned and ignored by the rest of Bordertown, left to squatters and runaways and junkies and gang members both elvin and human—in the days when those distinctions really mattered. Back then, the coppers rarely journeyed south of the Old Wall. Back then the kids and crazies claimed the Old City as their own. When you walked down Ho Street, you felt like anything could happen. And more often than not, it did.

When Hale started making money, when the first unbelievable voucher had come from his first dealer, the crooked one, he'd been told he was crazy to use it to reconstruct a sagging, roofless townhouse on a decrepit Soho street with a third-floor view of the river. He didn't care. He loved these streets, the crumbling brick, the graffiti, the glitter, the flash. Now the entire block is restored, the neighborhood around it turned fashionable with "artistic" little shops and trendy boutiques painted in that nauseating fashion that is supposed to make them look quaintly 20th Century. Now the artists and musicians and street punks that had brought him to Soho, had been his friends, are gone as real estate investors claim the last of the abandoned buildings they used to call home. Now the Mock Avenue Church is a goddamn elvin hair-braiding salon.

"*The Mock Avenue Church*," the student reads aloud, "*Ash Bieucannon, on the roof*. Ash Bieucannon! He looks... like he's about my age," he adds wonderingly.

"Younger, I expect. We all were," Hale comments, feeling very much just then like the Old Man.

The student stares at the painting of Ash: a pretty elvin boy leaning against a rooftop gargoyle, a nine-pack of bitter ale beside him, a distant view of the Mad River behind him. "I must have known that. But it's just. . . *facts*, you know? I mean, you're *famous*, Mr. Hale. It's weird to think of you as ever being young." He blushes then. "I mean—"

Hale winces but waves away the *faux pas*. "I know what you mean. But I *was* young then—just a kid, just having fun and painting pictures of all my pals. You see this boy?"

Hale points out another canvas, Ash and Bear and Rob-bin and Billy Buttons lazing in the sun on the stoop in front of Gutierrez's "store."

"That's Robbin Pearl. Oh yes, he was part of our Studio too. And the others—Ash again, and Billy Buttons, you wouldn't have heard of him. And Bear, Mat Bear—you wouldn't have heard of him either, but you *should* have. He was the best of us, I think."

Hale grows silent. It still hurts to think of Bear—as though Hale were silent partner to an elaborate Cosmic Hoax that has allowed the rest of them fame when Bear achieved none.

The boy hauls another stack of canvases into the light. Here is a painting of José Gutierrez, the amazing tattooed José, and one of the ugly bloke who ran the Bloods for a while, after Steel died—Hale can't remember the name. And that little human girl Ash picked up—Chans was it?

Years later she'd become some kind of power up in the City Council and the Bordertown bourgeoisie had been appalled when Hale's nude drawings of her had surfaced in a Chrystoble Street gallery. . . . The old streets, the bikes, the Bloods festooned in scraps of leather and the Horn Dancers in their motley rags, the kids elvin and human trying to make a life for themselves in an abandoned slum on the Border of Elfland. . . . too many memories crowded onto these canvases. No wonder he'd locked them away. Too many familiar faces staring back at him. And too many of them are Linny's.

"*Linnea Garnett*, " the boy reads aloud. "*Early morning, down by the river*. "He turns, excited, to Hale. "This isn't. . . is this *the* Linnea Garnett? Linnea Dark Garnett? All these paintings you've labeled 'Linny'?"

Linny. Bordertown's claim to fame.

Hale nods, his eyes caught by the cornflower-blue eyes of the painting, half obscured by a thatch of hennaed hair, and that familiar expression that had exasperated him so thirty years ago.

"I had no idea *she* was ever a punk. My god. Wasn't her father some sort of elvin lord?"

Was she still using that line?

"Did you really know Linnea Dark Garnett?" the boy is asking.

"Yes. I knew her," he says shortly.

Hale takes the canvas from the boy's hands and stacks it against the others, turning the blue eyes to the wall.

The Mock Avenue Church was not imposing. Sandwiched between shopfronts with peeling paint and broken glass, it had a single wooden door arched to a sharp point, nailed shut. From the street the building looked sturdy, its massive, age-blackened stones solid—but this front was like the false facade of a Worlder's movie set, with open air behind where the roof had caved in, exposing the central

chambers to vandals and the weather. Grass grew between the mosaic tiles of the floor and over the tumbled gravestones of the inner courtyard. Only the Bell Tower still stood intact, and the small chapel beneath it. The bells still rang to announce the hour—except when Bear forgot to recharge the spell.

Hale climbed Gutierrez's fire escape up to the existing portion of the parsonage roof, where he could enter the tower through a third-story window reserved for this purpose. The sun was unseasonably warm, beating down on the asphalt of the rooftop, but the wind was brisk with a warning of winter approaching. The smell of the river was strong, the wind coming from the east. Were it blowing from the north or the west, it would carry the smell of the realm beyond the Border, a smell like wildflowers and brandy, to hover teasingly above the garbage-strewn streets of the Old City.

As Hale climbed through the window, there was another smell, of something burning. Smoke billowed from the central stairs.

Hale dropped his package, thinking of Ash or Bear caught in the flames, of precious canvases burning. In the chapel below he found Robbin stirring something in a frying pan, unconcerned as smoke filled the room up to the second-floor balcony.

"What the hell are you doing?" Hale threw open the portals beneath stained-glass windows, and the ginger cat squeezed through to escape out to the alley. The wind carried in the smell of the river, blew papers across the floor, and chased smoke up to the rafters. Robbin lifted the smoke-blackened pan off the flames, stirring its crackling contents like an old witch crouched over her brew. *Double, double, toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble.*

As the smoke began to clear and his heartbeat to return to normal, Hale realized there were others in the studio. Bear had rolled himself into a blanket and was asleep beneath a trestle table, snoring. The little elvin girl Ash had been growing bored with was stretched out on the model's platform near his easel, wrapped in the overlarge folds of his brocade robe, playing solitaire with a deck of those baffling elfish cards.

Ash was across the room with Robbin, sitting cross-legged like a potentate on the ancient army footlocker they'd bought off of José, and at his feet was what must be his latest: a tall elvin girl, her silver hair dyed red, eating chunks of a sour-apple off the tip of a switchblade.

"Now we grind it into a powder," Robbin lectured Ash and the tall girl. He tilted the contents of the pan into a mortar—another find from José's "store"—and began to grind it with precise movements, elegant twists of a pale elvin wrist. He had carefully rolled back the sleeves of his immaculate antique Oxford shirt. A silver band held silver hair, streaked with black, out of his eyes.

Hale stalked over to the Magic Fire, boot heels loud on the tiled floor. "What the hell are you doing?" he repeated.

"Wait and see," Ash answered mysteriously; but Robin, always ready to pontificate, explained.

"It's *abed peca'aryn*," he said, savoring the elvin word. "Dragon's Milk to you."

Hale whistled. The drug, which was traditionally mixed with whiskey and cream, was once a staple in aristocratic elvin homes; now highly illegal, it was also highly expensive, and difficult to come by this side of the Border.

"What High Council lord did you roll for this?" he asked, only half joking.

"We traded with José for it," Robbin said smugly. "Silly little human... he didn't realize what he had."

"Aw, he did so," Ash said. "He just didn't want the stuff on his hands. As if the coppers give a shit what kind of drugs float around down here—"

"What exactly," Hale interrupted, "did you trade José?"

Hale didn't have to wait for Robbin's answer; the sudden flush on Ash's face told all. Cursing, he brushed past Ash to the ladder they'd built up to the balcony that run along three sides of the chapel. Here, beneath a huge round window depicting the Quest for the Holy Grail, he'd set up a worktable, a couch, and a couple of easels. The unsuccessful abstract he'd been wrestling with for weeks glimmered against the window's rosy light. The little sketch he'd drawn the other night—of the lead singer for the Guttertramps on stage at the Factory—was laid out on his worktable, its corners held flat with push-pins. The painting he'd made from that sketch was gone.

"You swine!" he shouted down to the floor below. "You goddamn pointy-eared swine! Leave my goddamn paintings alone!"

"Calm down, young Romeo," Ash drawled. "Or was it Juliet up on the balcony? Never mind. Stop flapping your arms and spitting fire and come down here. It was only one painting. No harm done."

"No harm done? What do you mean no harm done?" Hale shouted, rounding the balcony toward Ash.

"Look, it was just that picture of the Guttertramps chick—José has a crush on her. I didn't give him any of your *good* paintings, the abstract ones. José wouldn't know what to do with a real work of art if an elvin masterpiece was handed to him on a silver platter."

"That's not the point! First you trade my clothes, my goddamn favorite jacket! Then you hock my spell box and I have to pay a goddamn wizard whenever I need my bike revved up. Now every time I turn around something else is goddamn gone!"

Hale took the last steps of the ladder in a leap that landed him behind the other boy and, in a sudden move, twisted Ash's arms behind him, hauling him to his feet.

"You cut this out," Hale said pleasantly, "or I'll shave off all that pretty silver hair while you sleep and sell it to the hair-braiders up in Traders' Heaven."

Ash shifted his weight, and Hale allowed himself to be thrown over the boy's hip, bringing Ash crashing to the ground with him. The two rolled, grappling, laughing, across the floor, knocking hard into the trestle table and sending a porcelain cup flying. Bear woke with a grunt as it smashed inches from his face.

Ash was taller, but Hale had the advantage of solid human weight, making it an even match. Bear, however, combined elvin height with a burly, muscular physique—and was cranky when he woke. He grabbed two fistfuls of clothing and hauled both boys to their feet.

"Decorum, gentlemen, decorum. There are ladies present."

The little elvin model giggled at this, but the red-haired girl merely glanced disdainfully at the lot of them, and then returned to her sour-apple.

Breathing hard, Ash shook plaster dust from the billowing sleeves of his white linen shirt and out of the long silver hair of which he was inordinately vain. He extended a hand, encased in the black fingerless gloves he habitually wore, toward Hale. "Aw shit, Hale," he said. "Forgive?"

Hale licked his lower lip and tasted blood. He smiled at his friend. "No."

"But I promise: I'll never do it again, Blood's Oath."

"Liar. You just remember, Ash-me-boy-o..." Hale tugged at a lock of his own hair, an undistinguished human brown, and made cutting motions with his fingers.

Ash laughed, but there was a flash of uneasy speculation in his eyes.

Bear yawned and shrugged into the paint-stained shirt he'd been using as a pillow, rolling up the sleeves to expose the heart tattooed on his left forearm. His hair, dyed black, stood up in sleep-tangled spikes about his face, and his chin was covered with silver stubble. He looked more like a Scandal District thug than an artist; when he spoke, his soft voice contrasted oddly with his bulk. "What's going on around here? What day is this? Is this Tuesday?"

"Thursday," Robbin informed him. Bear shook his head and sighed. "We were going to wake you anyway, albeit a little more gently. I've found a recipe for Dragon's Milk and it's almost ready." Robbin stirred the brownish powder at the bottom of the mortar.

"No," the red-haired girl spoke up. Her voice was low and husky, startling Hale with its unusualness. "It's still too coarse. It won't dissolve."

Robbin looked down his nose at the girl, arching an eyebrow.

"I've seen it before," she said, answering the look.

"You have?" Ash asked her. "Where?"

But the girl cut another slice of sour-apple and did not volunteer any more information.

With a sniff, Robbin went back to grinding. Hale regarded the girl curiously. Either she was an aristocrat or a liar; young girls from the streets of Elftown, where Ash usually picked up his feminine company, weren't likely to be familiar with the properties of "the drink of lords."

Yet this girl wasn't the Elftown type. In bikers' leathers and a black Danceland t-shirt identical to Hale's—the sleeves torn off to reveal slim, muscular white shoulders—she looked like a young boy, sprawled comfortably on the floor and handling the switchblade with familiar ease. Her henna-dyed hair was cut short as Bear's, exposing the arch of elvin ears; the bangs, worn longer than the rest, fell over one eye like an eye patch. No, not Ash's usual type at all.

When the powder passed the girl's inspection, Robbin stirred it into a jug of cream, turning the liquid an unattractive shade of gray. "You sure you got this right?" Hale asked him. "What is this stuff anyway?"

"Herbs. Wormwood. The seeds of the *peca* plant—which only grows in the Elflands—roasted and burned. Catnip. Ginger—"

"Catnip?"

"Well, yes—elves are susceptible to it too. Ginger. Sugar. And the shavings of a peony root. I'm not making this up, Hale; I found the recipe in an old cookbook, printed before the *peca* trade was banned. It's addictive you know—worse than river water on humans. It rots the brain."

Hale glanced warily at the gray stuff in the pitcher.

"Then why are you making it?" he wanted to know.

"Don't worry, Romeo," Ash answered for Robbin, "we're not likely to lay our hands on this stuff again."

How could we possibly become addicted? I've always wanted to try Dragon's Milk, just once. It's so... romantic. All the great elvin poets lived on the stuff; that's why they all died young. My teachers used to say their muse burned so brightly that it burned them right out—but actually they were junkies, like half the lords and ladies on Dragon's Tooth Hill."

"You don't have to try it, Hale," Robbin added with that superior smile that grated on Hale's nerves. What had Robbin got to feel so superior about? When in his entire life had this Tooth-bred snob ever done anything dangerous?

"I didn't say I wouldn't try," Hale said quickly. "As long as you're sure you're not going to get it wrong and poison us all."

"Now that's my boy-o," Ash said approvingly; "I told Robbin you would want to try it too. Druinna, get us some cups, will you?"

The girl in the robe pouted at being ordered about, but she fetched the cups from the table and brought them to Ash, who had spread a shawl of elvin-red silk over the footlocker like a tablecloth.

"Are you going to paint anymore today Ash?" she asked, putting her hand on his sleeve. "I'm getting cold. And I'm, like, not into drugs, you know? I ought to get home. My mom would kill me if she knew I was here."

Ash patted her hand like she was a small child or a puppy. "That's okay, kid. Run along then."

She darted a glance at the new girl, then smiled up at Ash uncertainly. "I have these free passes to the Wheat Sheaf tonight," she began, but he shook his head, cutting her off.

"Not tonight, Druinna."

She shrugged. As she collected her clothes, her unhappiness was evident in the stoop of her shoulders, the bowed head of silver curls. Hale found himself feeling sorry for her, although he thought she was a silly little twit and had found her presence over the last weeks annoying. But she was no worse than any of Ash's other ladies. Someone ought to have warned her about Ash. Someone ought to warn this new girl too. But as Hale glanced her way, saw her watching Druinna with a similar pitying gaze, Hale realized that the new girl could probably take care of herself just fine.

"Come back tomorrow," Ash called as Druinna slipped through the doorway toward the stairs. "I'll need you to pose again." Then he turned to the others, the elvin girl forgotten, and produced a bottle of good Worldly brandy. Hale sighed, wondering which of his belongings went to pay for that. His cowboy boots, maybe? His paintbrushes?

Robbin poured each cup half full of brandy, then topped them off with the doctored cream, measuring fussily. The little porcelain cups felt too delicate to handle and looked absurd in Bear's huge, paint-stained hands. Ash lifted his up and pronounced a toast.

"To fame and fortune!" he said, as he always did. "Or vice versa."

"To *art*," Bear corrected him.

"And poetry," the new girl added.

Hale sniffed at the concoction. It had an acrid smell. He took a cautious sip—and it was all he could do not to spit it out again. For god's sake, Robbin *was* going to poison them.

"I think you fucked something up," he muttered, wiping the taste from his mouth with the back of his hand; but Ash and Robbin were making appreciative murmurs and Bear had downed his in a single gulp and the girl was sipping delicately, an unreadable expression on her face. Was this some kind of joke? Let's put one over on the human kid? He wouldn't put it past them.

Hale tried another taste. No. The stuff was definitely foul.

"Don't you like it?" Robbin asked smoothly, watching Hale's reaction. "Hmm, I suspected as much. Doesn't work on humans," and the mildly contemptuous way he said the word made Hale's eyes narrow.

"No," Hale spat out, "but it probably works just fine on cats, proving, of course, that they are a superior race. Why don't you just call Frodo in and give him my share, rather than wasting it on me?"

And he was up and out of the room, something tight twisting in his chest. Damn, damn, damn. Hale climbed the stairs two at a time and the litany echoed the climb. Damn. He knew he was overreacting. But this always happened. Just when he started feeling good, like maybe he belonged somewhere, something came along to make it clear he didn't. It didn't matter how good a painter he was, or could become; it didn't matter that the boisterous male camaraderie of the Studio felt like the thing he'd been looking for practically since the day he was born. It didn't matter that he'd saved Ash's goddamn life or brought most of the groceries that kept the other boys—including rich-kid Robbin—alive. What really mattered, when you came right down to it, was that he was not an elf. And at times like these, even a girl, even a goddamn stranger, belonged more than he did—because he didn't have goddamn silver hair.

He pushed open the door to the roof in a shower of crumbling plaster. The wind raised goosebumps on his arms—but he was not going back downstairs to fetch his jacket. He crossed the roof to its southeastern edge and sat, his feet dangling high above Mock Avenue. The sun wanned him and a leering gargoyle sheltered him from the wind. Hale wiped tears from his eyes, feeling like an asshole, and scowled at the distant river. Somewhere out there was the magicless World, a place he had absolutely no desire to go. This was where he belonged. On these streets, in this place. So why did he feel he still had to prove it?

The ginger cat climbed over the crest of the roof, avoiding the patches where the shingles had caved in. He sidled over to Hale, taking a proprietary interest in Hale's sun-warmed lap, and with a great deal of kneading, pricking Hale's flesh with alley-cat claws, he made a nest of the boy's army fatigues and settled down for a nap. Hale ran his fingers through Frodo's bristly fur, over the lumps and scars of old cat fights. He felt the rumble of Frodo's motor low and steady beneath his palm.

"Catnip," Hale muttered. Then he shook his head and began to laugh.

"Are you stoned, Romeo?"

Hale jumped, and Frodo protested the sudden movement with a well-placed claw. He hadn't heard Ash coming up behind him. The boy was alone. "No," Hale answered him, shielding his eyes from the sun as he squinted up at Ash.

Hale wasn't stoned, but Ash was. His eyes were dark, his steps unsteady, and he had a foolish grin spread across his alabaster face. As he lurched toward the roof edge, Hale took hold of his shirttail and ordered him to sit, worried that Ash would stumble right over. Ash's bones popped as he sat down; he leaned against Hale's bent knee with a sigh. He had brought half a cup of Dragon's Milk with him.

On the street below, José was arguing with members of the Pack over a pile of elvin junk stacked on the sidewalk—stolen probably. Sammy Tucker, the Pack's leader, was ignoring the dispute entirely, sitting astride his modified Yamaha, reading a book. The argument grew heated, voices drifting up to the roof,

and a Packer with feathers braided into her long dark hair began loading the junk back into a sack. She flipped a finger at Gutierrez as the Pack roared away on bikes so stripped down it was a wonder spells held them together at all. José shook his head and then climbed the stairs of his stoop. He was wearing Hale's faded denim jacket, embroidered with the words "Hell's Angels" on the back, which Ash had traded for the brocade robe. Hale thought that was a terrific name for a band—but if they'd every played Soho, it must have been before his time.

Ash reached over to pat the ginger cat, singing what lyrics he could remember of an elfish pop song, offkey, humming the parts he couldn't. He must have been really high; Ash knew he couldn't sing.

"So Where's your girlfriend?" Hale asked him, and Ash stopped the serenade to take a hit of Dragon's Milk. He sipped it slowly and sighed with pleasure.

"My girlfriend? You mean Linny. Told her to go," he said and he took another sip. "She didn't though," he added. "She's still down there, with Robbin and Bear."

"Who is she?"

"Just some girl; thinks she's a poet. Picked her up at... hell, I don't remember. Somewhere. She gave me a ride home on her bike; she's got this sleek, mean mother-fucking machine. Nice kid. *Real* nice bike. What'd I say her name was? Linny."

Hale relaxed, pleased that this girl was no more important than any of the others, pleased that Ash would still rather spend time with him—though until that moment he hadn't realized this had worried him. Perhaps because this girl seemed different from the others. The kind of girl, Hale mused, you could get all wrapped up in. He shook his head, dismissing the thought. A gust of wind blew silver hair across his cheek, and he pushed it out of his eyes.

Ash was so loose and relaxed from the drug he was practically oozing into the asphalt. He couldn't remember the third verse to the song he was trying to sing.

"I thought this catnip concoction was supposed to inspire you to write great poetry or paint some masterpiece," Hale commented snidely. "All that fuss over the stuff, and all it seems to inspire you to do is sing pop tunes. Terrific."

"I *am* inspired," Ash said dreamily. "I think I'll be a rock star. Free booze at the Ferret, little girls from the Tooth... ah, that's the life for me."

"You're not exactly slaving it now, boy-o."

"But I want fame and fortune. What's the point of painting all day if nobody outside the Studio except crazy José ever sees it? Or writing poetry that nobody reads, or playing music in rat-infested clubs for a bunch of head-bangers and junkies and runaways? Have you ever been to the galleries on the Promenade near Dragon's Claw Bridge? Where they serve champagne to the patrons and treat elvin artists like royalty? Man, I'm sick of day-old donuts and a John that doesn't flush."

"Come off it, Ash. Nobody forced you to leave the Elflands. Your problems is you've read too many books about artists starving in garrets; you thought it would be *fun* to live in a slum. It never occurred to you that you might get hungry, or cold, or have your throat torn out for the silver on your wrists. Admit it—you left your parents' fancy house because you thought poverty would be *romantic*, didn't you?"

"Hell no; I left my parents' house to get laid! Becoming an artist was an afterthought. Girls love it. Just you wait and see, Hale."

Yeah, sometimes it worked that way. Hale spent a lot of time on the streets and in the clubs, sketching compulsively as he had done since he was a child—as if by pinning it down, he could keep time from slipping away. And sometimes some girl would be intrigued and follow him back to Mock Avenue. Where invariably she'd fall for Ash. Every goddamn time.

Hale dipped his finger into Ash's teacup, then held it under Frodo's nose. Frodo opened his eyes, sniffed then licked the milk off the boy's finger with a sandpaper tongue. Ash lay back flat on the asphalt, eyes closed, the sun raising a flush on his pale cheeks.

Down below, a motorcycle circled the block, slowed, and stopped by the steps of the Mock Avenue Church. The girl with the feathers had come back, alone. She carried a lumpy bundle cradled in one arm. She glanced around cautiously, locked her bike with a two-penny spell, and disappeared behind the doorway of Gutierrez's place.

When she was gone, the alley kids came out—pint-sized punks with painted faces and oiled, spiky hair. They clustered around the solitary bike, admiring the paint job and surreptitiously testing the spell lock and chains. Hale rattled asphalt pebbles onto the street below and the children scattered, melting back into the cracks and shadows from which they came.

Hale didn't like the alley kids. They looked too young to be really dangerous—but looks were deceiving, particularly in Bordertown. It was children who had gotten Ash the night Hale found him in a Ho Street alley, fresh from the Elflands, his white throat cut from ear to ear. Only a True Blood could have survived such an attack—and not even then, had much more of that blood seeped away between the cobblestones. Yet it was not just because it was Hale who found him that the bond was so tight between elf and human. It was because Hale upheld the fiction that it was Rats that got hold of Ash that night, or maybe some renegade members of the Pack. Not little kids, barely nine or ten years old.

Beside Hale, Ash smiled, lost in drug-induced dreams. Behind them the Bell Tower clock chimed the time, two o'clock—which meant it was a quarter to noon. Fifteen minutes, not enough. Not even if he broke every speed limit in the city. He hadn't intended to stop at the Studio; he certainly hadn't intended to stay. But he couldn't just leave Ash on the roof all alone. And the others down below were probably just as stoned.

"Ash, Ash," he said, nudging the older boy, pulling him upright. "Get up now. Let's go back down. I have to go away now. Stop smiling, you fool, and get up. Get up!"

Ash looked at Hale through crossed, dilated eyes. He allowed Hale to help him to stand, but the moment Hale let go, he sank down again. "Twenty thousand volts is not enough, to... to..." He looked up. "Shit Hale, how does the song go? Twenty thousand volts... aw..." He began to rise, clutching at the gargoyle, perilously close to the roof's edge.

Hale put a steadying arm around Ash's waist. The boy felt curiously light, insubstantial, as if the drug was making a ghost out of him. "Come on, Ash," Hale muttered as he coaxed the boy to the stairs. "Think art, not rock'n'roll. I don't think your elvin poets would approve."

"No, it *is* poetry," Ash insisted. "I just never realized it before. Listen, Hale: 'Once I burned for your touch, now every look is too much...'"

"Yeah, yeah. Everything sounds profound when you're stoned, Ash. Come on, now, take a step. Careful down the stairs—there's the missing one. Thadda-boy. Watch out for the cat... aw shit, Ash." Hale sighed. "Come on, man. I've got to get going."

"Why? Where do you go, my Romeo? When you disappear. A cold-water fiat in the Scandal District?"

An alcoholic mother hidden in the tenements of Water Street? The trailer parks down past Hell's Gate—is that where you go? Why such a secret? There's nothing wrong with a tragic past. It's so... romantic."

"And you're so... disgusting. Ash, I'm going to put you to bed. Come on, unlace your shoes, there you go. Now the other one. Phew. Christ. Don't you ever wash these sneakers? Now lie down. Stop grinning. Just lie down there; here, take the pillow. By the time you sleep this off. I'll be back." Hale pushed the pillow under the silver head.

At the far end of the chapel Robbin was staring off into space. Bear was back beneath the trestle table, snoring with his mouth open. The tall girl sat on top of it, writing something in a leather-bound book. Feeling Hale's gaze, she looked up and met his eyes. She put her pen down and crossed over to the mattress where Ash lay.

Ash was humming softly to himself, mixing the New Blood Review tune with a Bach Brandenburg Concerto. Linny squatted down on her heels, placed her hand against Ash's flushed cheek. The scar was vivid across the white skin of his throat. The elvin boy moved suddenly, taking her wrist in his gloved hand, pulling her down beside him. Hale crossed his arms over his chest, staring down at the two of them.

"Catnip," he muttered, and stalked out of the room.

Hale ate his dinner in silence. He didn't want it. The Mad River Mix-quick stuck in his throat and the potatoes sat in his stomach like a lump of clay. But to refuse it would add insult to injury, considering he'd nearly missed the meal altogether, arriving home as his mother began to clear the leftovers from the table. Too bad he couldn't just save this stuff for Ash. Ash was always hungry. Hale snuck what groceries he could out of the house and down to Soho, but it was never enough.

Hale's father sat at the end of the table, silent now himself after the explosion that could probably have been heard halfway across the flatlands. He was buried behind yesterday's edition of the *Church Times*, smoking a cigarette and stretching out the last minutes of the meal before he went back to his beat across the river. The jacket of his Silver Suit hung on the back of his chair, the copper card pinned above the left breast. Hale's mother was bustling about the kitchen, whistling cheerfully, oblivious to the tension, doing five things at once—as usual. She was washing up the dinner dishes, whipping up a batch of Troll Bridge cookies, jotting perky reminders to herself on the chalkboard next to the sink: "Note: less salt in the Mix-quick mix!!!" "Note: Sissy's piano lesson two P.M.. *sharp*!!!" "Note: Inspirational message for the *Church Times* due Friday. Message of Hope? Feed the Little Children? Discuss with the Group!!!" The dishes made a loud clatter as she scrubbed them and stacked them on the drainboard to dry. Hale chewed and chewed the overly salty stew. He concentrated on each bite, on chewing and swallowing. He thought that if he didn't concentrate real hard, he would probably scream.

When he had finished everything on his plate and dutifully eaten three of the cookies his mother insisted were his favorites although he had not liked them since he was three, he was excused from the table. He escaped through the back door, feeling like a prisoner receiving a pardon. His father did not speak to him, or even look up as he left, slamming the door behind him.

The house was large and pink. Behind it and to either side were identical stucco houses, painted turquoise and mauve and lime green. The hedges masking the foundation had been clipped into precise rectangular shapes; the flowerbeds that edged the walk were symmetrically planted with alternating pink and white puffball blooms. In the yard next door, a boy who had been Hale's classmate before he'd been booted out of his third and final school was playing fetch with a pink French poodle. The boy was

wearing his school sweater, the class insignia embroidered on the breast pocket, over a pair of spotless white trousers; his broad, pleasant face was marred by the black eye that had earned Hale his latest expulsion. Hale looked down at his dirty fatigues, his ripped, skintight t-shirt, his scuffed jackboots, and sighed.

The door opened behind him. He tensed; but it was only Sissy; he could smell her distinctive scent: *eau de bubble gum*. She stood behind him for a moment, her shadow covering him; then she sat down on the step beside him, chin in her hands, elbows on her knees. "Good going, asshole."

Hale grinned. For a ten-year-old, she had a hell of a mouth. "It wasn't intentional, you know," Hale said conversationally.

She snorted. "It's an accident you come to Sunday dinner dressed like Old City scum and give Ma a heart attack? She had two ladies from the church group here, Hale; you missed them by, like, two seconds." She sounded like she was pissed, but Hale knew her better than that. She loved it when he got into trouble; at ten, she already found life dull in the 'burbs. Sissy narrowed her eyes and poked him in the ribs. "Where d'ya get the clothes?" she wanted to know.

Hale shrugged. He'd had his other clothes in the package he'd dropped when he thought the Studio was burning down; he'd been halfway home again, stalled in traffic on the Riverside Bridge, before he remembered.

Sissy slid her hand into his pants' pocket—nosy little brat—and pulled out the elvin bracelets and studs he'd taken off in a vain attempt to look less disreputable. She slid the bracelets onto one thin wrist, snapped the studs around the other. In her soccer-uniform shirt and her jeans with the holes in the knees, her bony, scabbed kneecaps peeking through and Ash's studs heavy on her wrist, she looked so damn cute Hale had a sudden mad urge to scoop her up and run away with her—to raise her right, before the 'burbs hammered all of the juice out of her. But what the hell would he do with her at the Mock Avenue Studio?

Lost in his thoughts, he didn't realize she was speaking to him until she smacked him, hard, a left punch to his bare shoulder. Her expression was her usual scowl, but her eyes were wide with concern—and fear?

"What's going to happen now?" she was asking. "With you and Daddy, Hale? He's pretty mad."

Hale ran his fingers through his carefully slicked-back hair, making it all stand on end again. "I dunno, squirt."

"You'll tell me when you do know? Do you *promise* Hale?" Her small hand was at the back of his knee, gripping him tight.

"Yeah, sure, Sissy. Look, it's no big deal. This'll blow over too," he said, but she wasn't buying it. She scowled at him even more fiercely, snapped her gum, and punched him again for no apparent reason before she disappeared back into the house.

The ultimatum was simple enough. His parents didn't want to throw good money after bad buying him a spot in another school where he'd just get into yet another fight... and that was a relief, because he wouldn't have gone away. They wanted him to get a job. They had it all worked out; they had probably made a list on his Ma's chalkboard: "Note: decide what to do with Hale!!!"

They had graciously offered him a choice of what his future was to be. His father could pull some strings, send him for training as a Silver Suit. Or he could work with his mother on the Church Council paper, "put his god-given talent to use" illustrating inspirational articles and Ma's recipe column and editorials

debating whether elves have Christian souls... wouldn't that make him real popular down in Soho?

Hell. He liked his family; he never meant to disappoint them. So why, when he was home for more than an hour at a time, did he feel like he was going to puke, or scream?

Sissy was asleep when he tapped on her door. It was late, near midnight. He'd been pacing for hours in the room right above hers and it was amazing he hadn't kept her up with the noise, jackboots thumping on the shaggy carpeting of the floor. Maybe he had. Maybe this pose of childhood innocence, arms curled around her stuffed cat, Mr. Potato-head, was feigned. She woke suspiciously quickly when Hale called her name.

She sat up, brushing tangled brown hair out of her eyes.

She was wearing a flannel nightgown—and Ash's studded bracelet.

"What's up, asshole?"

"I promised I'd let you know what's gonna happen..."

How was he going to tell the kid he was leaving?

"You're leaving," she said. It was not a question. Was he this quick when he was ten? She was always a step ahead of him. He ran a hand through her baby-soft hair.

She pushed his hand away and slid out of the bed. Beneath the nightgown she wore her jeans and sneakers. From the depths of her closet she produced a backpack, already packed; she slung it over her shoulder, carrying Mr. Potato-head in her arms. "I'm coming too," she announced matter-of-factly.

Hale stared at her. "Sissy... Squirt... You can't..." he fumbled. What the hell would Ash say, or Robin, if he brought his baby sister to Soho?

She put the backpack down on the floor, looked up at him gravely through raggedly cut bangs. "Hale, are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Trouble?"

"Dad thinks you've gone and joined one of the gangs. He says you've been seen down in Soho. Are you a Packer, Hale?" she asked solemnly, pronouncing the word carefully like she'd read it in a book.

Hale laughed, and shook his head. He patted the mattress beside him and she sat warily on its edge. "It's worse than that, Squirt." She looked at him, her eyes troubled. "Don't tell anybody, but"—he shifted his eyes right and left, then lowered his voice theatrically—"I'm an artist."

She gave him another one of her left hooks; he was developing quite a bruise on that arm. "Cut it out, asshole. I'm serious."

"So am I, Squirt. Honest to god. I'm going down to Soho to learn to be a painter. Look, I'll still visit you—"

"Is that what you're doing? *Painting*? Why haven't you told Dad? He's worried sick, Hale. He thinks you're taking drugs, or gonna get yourself killed by some big, mean Blood."

Hale poked a finger into the hole in Sissy's jeans. "I can't tell Dad, Squirt. He'd *rather* think I ran with a gang. *He* did, when he was young. Sure, what did you think Dragon's Fire was—a soccer team? Lots of coppers did. It's a hell of a lot easier for him to tell his copper friends that I've run off to the Old City to

bash in elvin heads than to tell them the truth—that I've run off to be an artist, for crissake. That I share a painting studio with a bunch of elvin guys."

"You *do*?" Sissy was taken aback for once. "Oh *Hale*... Mother says they don't even have *souls*."

"Sis, if you ever saw the way they paint, you'd know they have souls—maybe even finer than you and me. I want to learn to paint like that, even if it takes me a million years."

Sissy was silent for a long time. Her teeth nibbled at her lower lip and she held on tightly to Mr. Potato-head. Finally, she turned to him and said, "Will they like me, Hale? Your elvin friends? Even though I'm human?"

He stood then, his arms crossed over his chest, regarding her sternly. "Of course they would. But I can't take you with me, Squirt. For god's sake, you're only ten years old!"

"I'm as tough as you."

"Huh. I don't doubt it. But I can't show up with my kid sister in tow! You're a goddamn child! You're a girl," he added, exasperated—like maybe she hadn't noticed.

Sissy looked like she'd been slapped. Her cheeks flushed bright red, hurt covered over with anger. "Fine, swell," she hissed. "Just go away and leave me behind. Go on, Hale. I'll probably die of boredom... but don't you worry about me. Just go off and have fun with your new friends."

"Sissy." He tried to touch her, but she flinched away. "Look, kid, it would just be impossible—"

"Shut up!" she cried.

Down the hallway, a light was snapped on. He heard voices coming from his parents' room. Shit. Oh shit. He had to go. Now.

"Sissy..."

"Go away, Hale. Just leave me alone."

He heard footsteps in the hall.

"Sissy?" his mother called. "Are you all right?"

Sissy glared at him. "Go out the window, asshole. Can't you do anything right?" She pushed him in that direction and turned to the door. "Everything's fine, Ma."

He glanced back at her as he slid out the window, trampling the begonias. She was sitting in her bed, sneakers covered by the quilt, elvin bracelets covered by her nightgown's sleeve. "Asshole," she muttered, clutching Mr. Potato-head and scowling at the walls of the empty room.

—And then it was night in Soho. That was the next thing Linny knew. Black night, without any comforting home lights. And she was lying half on, half off a mattress on the floor, sprawled across another sleeping body that seemed to glow white in the dark.

She tensed, the way she always did when people came too close. *This* was too damn close by half. Slowly and stiffly she eased her body off and away from the other's. And, rising groggily to her feet, she remembered where she was, and why.

The Mock Avenue Studio. Where Ash Bieucannon had brought her to show her his art, after that wild conversation they'd had in the cafe. They'd found *some pecca*, made Dragon's Milk, just the way she'd always read about it. More talk; she'd looked at the work of his studio mates, felt as the drug kicked in that she was seeing through to their souls. Then Ash had come back and she had discovered some profound truth lurking in the scar on his neck, which now made no sense at all. Then she fell asleep.

But wait—she must still be stoned. The universe, or her particular corner of it, was arranging a cosmic metaphor, just for the pleasure of Linnea Garnett, poet: at the moment her own memories came clear to her, the entire room burst into light. Every crack and filthy corner of the chapel was mercilessly illuminated; but so was its intricate stone carving and jewel-like canvases, glowing with color and half-formed life.

Ash, the elf on the mattress with the scar, rolled over and groaned. Up in the rafters, a newcomer gave a triumphant cackle.

"Arise and shine, my beauties!" he called, the bringer of elvin light. "It is I, Billy Buttons, the artists' friend"—he began shimmying down a side ladder—"although you wouldn't know it from the way you shits treat me. Dragon's Milk, I hear, and guzzled it all like the swine you truly are. Some for Ash, and some for Bear, and some for Bonny Robbin; and even some for Human Hale, But never a drop for me." He prodded Ash with a booted toe. "How 'bout it, how's that for poetry?"

"You *bastard!*" Ash sprang up. His eyes were blazing with fury. Buttons stood his ground, although Linny was not sure she would have. "I've *lost* it!" Ash cried, his hands reaching to nothing. "I was there—I had it—and now I've lost it. Oh, for the love of blood, somebody give me some paper!"

Buttons took Ash's thin shoulders in his broad hands. "Easy, guy. Bear!" he called. "Robbin-a-Bobbin! Are you all just as lost as your buddy here?"

There was no answer. Billy Buttons seemed to notice her for the first time, although Linny had a feeling he never missed anything. "What about you?" he leered. "Ash must have drawn your tits from seventeen different angles already; what are you sticking around for?"

Linny met his silver eyes. "Gang bang. I want Bear to immortalize my hands, and Robbin to do a little study of my ears. As for my face... we'll save it for that human guy who hangs around: humans are good at eyes, they say they're the windows of the soul. What's your specialty?"

Billy Buttons just grinned at her. His pale hair hung long and stringy, white with a buttercup tint. His long nose had been broken so many times it almost looked human, and his teeth were amazingly crooked.

Linny knew what that grin meant. She'd passed the test, defended herself with her words against his. Still she didn't want to stop. The words kept coming: "As for my tits, if you think Ash could find his own *dick* in that state..."

Billy Buttons chuckled; and that was another victory. She couldn't believe how good it felt. The words were power. They flowed in her like blood, like mother's milk, like desire. All those years of pretending they weren't there, because the other girls might call you an elfie bitch, even though you tried to hide your ears with your hair and darken your skin with makeup to look the same as all the others... Well, she could do something about her looks, but not about her thoughts. And her thoughts were full of words. But the words that hurt people, words that made them laugh and words that called attention to you and your wit and mastery; those words were for the boys alone. Girls used their bodies and their eyes, and their loud, high-pitched laughter. The only power words they had were "yes" and "no." She'd tried hanging out with the boys in school, because they at least felt right to her with their insults and their wisecracks. They weren't too thrilled, though. They knew that girls were supposed to be beautiful, or

"cute," whatever that meant. Girls were there to admire *their* words. Even when the boys put up with her for her cleverness, Linny knew she stood out like a pig in a church. And standing out, as her mother told her over and over, was not good here at the fancy school in the nice human suburb we worked so hard to get you into.

But now Billy Buttons chuckled and Ash put his arm around her neck and said, "Well, if I can't find it, let's say you find it for me—"

And the words kept coming to her: "Yeah, sure, Ash; then what would I do with it?"

Billy Buttons drew back in mock surprise. "Don't you *know*?"

"Nah, Billy Boy," Ash said, delighted to be the center of attention, "she don't know. Why don't you tell her?"

Billy guffawed, and flung one arm around Ash and one around Linny, so that they made a circle, all linked together by arms around necks. "Hey, Ash, I like this chick. What's she do? Another artiste?"

Even now—*Don't ask HIM, ask ME*—"I'm a poet," Linny said.

"Whew!" Billy drew his arm away as though she were too hot to touch. She liked that. "What kind of poet?"

Linny looked Billy Buttons in the face again. Their eyes were on a level. She knew he was seeing the deep blue in hers, a little too dark for elvinkind. But so what? These days, in these lands, not everybody was pure, pure, pure. He didn't have to know from where, or how much.

"An elvin poet," she said.

Later Robbin and Bear wandered in together. They wouldn't say where they'd been, but Robbin draped himself in a picturesque pose on the old footlocker, and stayed there, smiling smugly at nothing, and Bear took an old canvas and began painting over it with ferocious sweeping strokes.

Ash got out the rest of the brandy, and Billy produced some coltsfoot cigarettes from one of his numerous pockets; and they all got to talking about where they'd come from and where they were going.

Linny wondered how much of what they said was really true. She had a feeling that the ones who said the least had the most to tell. Ash made a big deal about how useless he'd felt growing up in Elfland, without getting specific. None of the emigres ever gave out details. It was as though Elfland itself wouldn't translate, as if the language for it didn't make sense on this side of the Border. But he went on at great length about the gang of toughs who'd cut his throat for him his first night in Soho.

"Humans," he said, "maybe even the Pack, out to do a little elf bashing. And too stupid to realize they'd dealt me a wound I'd recover from." He absently traced the line of his scar. "I don't know, it was too dark to see."

"Elves," Linny suggested. If he didn't like her disagreeing with him, it was too damn bad. "Elves who knew what they were doing: wanted to rough someone up without murdering them."

"Not the Bloods," stated Billy Buttons with authority. "That's not their way." Something about the way everyone was quiet for a moment after he made this simple declaration told Linny all she needed to know about Billy Buttons' background.

"Could have died," Bear grunted from his corner easel. No one had thought he was listening, but he was. "Hale saved you."

"He did. A fine man, Hale."

"Your pet human," Robbin sneered. "Did he really help you, Ash, *peca'aryni*, or do you just keep him around to be eccentric?"

Billy laughed. "A little of both, huh, Ash?"

"Hale's all right," Bear said laconically; but Linny heard more warmth in that than in Ash's heated defense.

"Can it, Rob, you fucking Dragon's Tooth snob! You're beginning to sound like my purebred Elfland mother, you know that?"

So, Linny thought, that put young Robbin in his place. He was a True Blood, all right; but Ash's Elfland origins outclassed him. She filed it away with the rest of her survival tips for the Studio—supposing they let her stick around, supposing they didn't turn next minute and politely ask when she was leaving.

She didn't want to go. Ever since she'd come in the door—well, the window—the Studio had been humming in her blood a song of welcome. She felt as if the building recognized her. It was almost too perfect to be real: the art, the clutter, the books and brushes and bleached animal skulls, the piles of dirty, paint-stained rags that would have given her parents fits, the gorgeous collection of old chipped jars full of more kinds of weird tea than she'd ever seen in her life... The old church was a nest for the only people she'd ever met who saw things the way she did, who cared about what she cared about with the same terrible passion. She didn't expect them to see that, really: they probably met people like her every day. And just because they didn't treat her like a girl didn't mean they had to treat her like a friend. Which was too bad; because she knew she belonged there. They lived art, breathed art, ate art, slept art, just like she did. They were pictures, she was words. She realized now how little difference it made, why it was all called "The Arts." She wanted to stay here forever, making messes and drinking and arguing...

Besides, she had nowhere to go.

Robbin drew stiffly away from Ash, fussed with his silver cuff links. Even Linny could tell he was furious, trying to hide it the way elves do. "So, I'm a snob? And I suppose you grew up eating the dirt of Elfland."

Ash had the grace to smile. It was an extraordinary moment. Linny wondered if he could pull it off every time he got someone mad at him. She suspected he could. It was a concept not entirely foreign to elvin philosophy—victory through yielding—although it was not a popular one.

"A hit." Ash was still smiling sunnily at Robbin. "Game, and match." He put his hands on Robbin's shoulders. "Oh, Rob... two noble gentlemen who have drunk Dragon's Milk together shouldn't quarrel over something so trivial." Trivial like Hale, Linny thought, amused. Robbin shrugged, smiled dismissively; it was clear peace had been made. She admired Ash's game of manipulation; but some imp in her that was full of power tonight made her call it.

"And Bear and I, not being noble gentlemen, are exempt from the general comradeship?" If she was going to lose them all, she wanted to do it in a big way, on her own terms.

But Ash rose to the occasion. "Bear is Bear. He needs no title. And he never quarrels." Ash considered his moon-white fingernails. "Although he occasionally decks someone. On provocation. As for you... we know nothing about you, besides the fact that you own a great bike, have strong opinions on epic poetry, and write in a notebook you won't let anyone else see." He started walking around her, examining her

like a specimen. Linny tried to look bored. "Good clothes," Ash observed. "Healthy skin, elfin-pale; elfin-eared. Red hair, probably dyed. Educated. The wrong accent for Elfland, though. Therefore, unless you were stolen by humans as a baby and brought up in the World, a Bordertown elf from an affluent family."

Linny shrugged. "Amazing, Holmes," she muttered.

"Huh?" said Ash.

"Nothing. You forgot to point out that I read too much. The bike was a Name Day present from my father. He doesn't cross over much, but when he does he likes to make a splash."

"Tragic." Billy Buttons wiped imaginary tears from his eyes. "The child of a broken home."

But the others were trying to hide the fact that they were impressed. And why not? She'd practically come out and told them that her father was a very important resident of Elfland, either a trader or a lord, someone who could cross back and forth with ease. She could practically see the wheels turning in Ash's head: a noble with a wife in Elfland, sneaking off to visit his mistress and illegitimate daughter in Bordertown...

"Yeah," she said, "real tragic. But it's like you were saying before, Ash, you know? None of it seems real. I mean, you can't write great poetry sitting in a pretty bedroom with framed Lillet prints in it. You know: *The Horns of Elfland, The Lovers' Farewell* ..."

"*Message from Home*," Robbin finished in disgust. "I couldn't write a *laundry* list in a room with a Lillet in it. All that sticky sentiment, those tired images... Did you know Lillet designed unicorn t-shirts before he became famous?"

"Oh, come on, Robbin," Ash said. "Your parents are collectors. You know what an original Lillet is worth these days; don't tell me you didn't have one hanging on the wall when you were a kid. Or was it bold new statements of Bordertown chic like those Fern collages? Frodo the cat could barf up more meaningful work! Come on, Rob," Ash urged winningly, "what were your earliest inspirations? What makes even this dump look better than Dragon's Tooth Hill?"

Proud Robbin was actually laughing. "It was the dining room," he groaned. "They actually got him to paint the walls. Pure Lillet, the whole thing. It was like eating dinner inside a dog's stomach." He buried his face in his delicate fingers in mock horror.

"Hey..." Ash turned a comforting caress into a yank of Robbin's braid. "It's okay, lad. All that's behind you now. You never have to look at another Lillet again. No more Lillet... no more Lillet..."

"No more Lillet..." Robbin took up the chant like a spell. Billy Buttons was rapping out a drumbeat on a pile of boxes, and Bear's bass rumbling voice joined them against the sweep of his brushstrokes.

"No more Lillet," Linny joined in. "No more Lillet... There never was a Lillet... We are the knaves of Elfland, We are the fools of Bordertown. Where we pass, Carnival riots. Where we stand, Soho shakes. Nothing we set our hand to is not achieved, and what we curse is nine times blighted. We ravish the old, we are the new. We are born tonight, we are with you now!"

Linny found that her hands were clenched in fists on her knees, and her body swayed to the beat of her chant. She stopped, opened her hands.

"Ha!" Billy and Ash and Robbin chorused. Their shout rang with approval. Linny looked at them, trying to pretend she knew what had happened.

"A rant!" cried Ash, slapping his knee. "I haven't heard one of those since... since my tutor..." His eyes misted over with memory of Elfland.

"I didn't know anyone still wrote those," Robbin said. "One of the classic elvin poetry forms; we had it crammed down our throats at school." He looked hard at Linny, as though reassessing her to discover if she were an old classmate in disguise. "Not bad. Do you write a lot of them?"

"I told you I was a poet," she said primly.

She had never written a rant before. Because, she thought, she'd never had anything to rant about. She'd never belonged anywhere: not with the boys, not with the girls, not with the nice people her parents wanted her to associate with, not with the toughs who were so stupid you could drive trucks between their ears.

Ash was standing over her, beaming with delight. "But this, this is your greatest work! 'The Mock Avenue Rant.' *'Where we pass, Carnival riots. Where we stand, Soho shakes. ...'*"

"*We are the fools of Bordertown,*" Bear came forward, wiping paint off his hands with a rag. "I like that."

Ash picked up Linny's leather notebook from the table where she'd left it. She would have killed anyone else who touched it, but now she felt that it was time. No one else had ever seen the contents of that notebook. It wasn't so much that she was afraid of being judged as she was afraid of being misunderstood. But if she hadn't been saving it for this precise moment, what had she been saving it for?

Ash was leafing through her notebook, looking at her poems. From time to time he nodded. Linny took her switchblade out and began shaving little bits of wood off the end of a bench. Ash's criticism became audible. "Yes," he murmured. "Yes, good. Oh, good!" Unbidden came the thought that it was as though her book were making love to him. She quashed it.

"Yes!" Ash looked up at her, his finger still holding a place in the book. "This is fantastic. You've really got something here."

"I thought you hated epics," Linny said, remembering the conversation between them at Taco Hell that had started all this.

"Yeah." Ash shook his head with a crooked smile. "I thought so too. Because they seemed so dead to me. But what you've got here"—he waved the notebook—"is real, this is alive—"

"It's the old elvin forms," she said, made suddenly shy by his praise. "I just wanted to see what I could do with them..."

And no mention of the hours she'd spent reading the old romances, dreaming of life beyond the Border and the prince who would carry her off to it... until she realized one day that he just wasn't coming.

No elvin prince was on his way to 299 Middleton Street to carry Linnea Dark Garnett off to the moonlit country; and so she'd stood in front of the mirror one afternoon, hacking off the long, flowing hair that had always hidden her ears, revealing now her strong, boyish jawline, high forehead... she even gave herself sideburns.

And when she'd done, someone stared back from the mirror who could have been anyone, anything. Tall, raw-boned, with broad shoulders and heavy, capable hands... and on the face in the mirror now there was an amused, sardonic smile that had never been seen there before.

Linny pulled together a few things, and left her parents' house on her brother's motorcycle...

"Well, you've done it!" Ash pulled her back to the present. He sounded so positive. Must be nice to always be sure of yourself, no room for doubt.

Robbin was reading over Ash's shoulder now, his fine eyebrows raised. He nodded. "Impressive."

Bear seemed content to take their word for it.

"You know"—Ash tapped the leather notebook—"there are some very powerful images in here. I could do something with this... that one about the battle at the end of time, for instance." He went to the canvas he'd been working on. Druienna wrapped in a shawl that looked at once like a cocoon and a spider's web. Linny thought it was a nasty image: all you could see was the girl's head, her face half obscured by hair. The rest of her was just curves and bones jutting against the enveloping cloth.

Ash looked at the painting on the easel for a moment, and shrugged. He took out a jar of gesso and began painting over the canvas. Stroke by stroke, Drui and her shawl disappeared, until the artist had before him a plain field of snow; the white sheet of a bed that hadn't been slept in.

"Don't look over my shoulder now." He gestured fussily at Linny with his brush. "Wait until it's further along."

"Well," she said, standing there feeling helpless. They were all busy now: Ash painting, Robbin scraping at the pot he'd roasted the *peca* in, Bear cleaning his brushes; even Billy Buttons was investigating a broken window.

"You gotta go?" Ash asked her.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Where you staying?"

She risked it. "Nowhere particular."

"Oh." For much too long, Ash seemed to be thinking, the tip of his paintbrush between his teeth. "Hey, Bear!" Ash called across the studio. "You still got that old sleeping bag Charis left here?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Lin needs someplace to crash. That okay with you, Robbin?"

"I don't see why not."

Was it really that simple? Linny let out the breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. "I'll get the bag," she said casually; "just tell me where it is."

"Hey, hold on!" Ash said. Her breath stopped again. "What's your hurry to go to bed? We've got hours of work ahead of us!"

Relief made her strong. "What do you want me to do," she asked cockily, "pose for one of the warriors?"

"Aw, no. You just finish that poem about the bike rider. I have another great idea for that one."

"What's the rush?" she demanded, picking up her notebook anyway.

"New stuff for the Ferret show!" Ash said enigmatically. She waited for him to explain. Mistaking her silence for disinterest, he said nonchalantly, "It's nothing special, really. We thought it was time Mock Avenue Studio got a chance to show our work, so Rob talked Farrel Din into letting us hang some paintings in one of his side rooms. It'll be open to the public, so to speak, in the afternoons when the club isn't being used anyway."

"Hey!" Bear shouted from his side of the room. "What do you mean, it's nothing special? This is *it*, our first show as a group."

"Oh, yeah!" Ash scowled. "And who's going to come and see it? The cognoscenti of Soho: a bunch of derelicts and drugged-out kids, and maybe if we're lucky, a few of the Bloods: big art collectors."

"That"—Robbin drifted over with an air of infinite weariness—"is why we're holding it at the Ferret, Ash. Remember? I seem to recall someone who looked a lot like you saying that the Dancing Ferret already had a lot of credibility around the Tooth: it's the hot club for kids to dance in, even rich kids, and their parents know about it. You happened to be right. And what about all your emigre friends, the ones who weren't crazy enough to slum it in Soho? Some of them are doing all right in B-town. You said they'd come to the opening."

"Sure." Ash looked more cheerful. "And Hale is doing us a great poster. Humans are good at design. That, at least, will be a collector's item."

"Sounds great," Linny said. "When is it?"

"Couple of months," said Ash. "So get to work!"

She ensconced herself cross-legged on the table. All around her work was going on. Now she was working too. She felt like something inside her was breaking, and it made her want to cry. Except that what was breaking up was a great sheet of ice, an entire river that had been frozen all her life. She'd never believed there was such a thing as crying for joy. Now she found it was because tears were the quickest and easiest way her body had of releasing all the tension of sudden happiness.

But she wouldn't cry. She would write; and later she would go somewhere dark that had a loud band, and dance it all out.

She didn't know what time it was when a loud thump above their heads heralded a new arrival at the window entrance.

"Who's that?" Bear called up loudly. Linny realized with a chill that it could be anyone.

"Me. Hale."

Linny recognized the human boy from the afternoon, the one who'd hated the Dragon's Milk as much as she did, but not had the sense to hide it. He was carrying a pack. In the arbitrary light of the studio, he looked gawky and angular and drawn, as though he hadn't slept in a long time.

Ash rushed forward to see him. "Hale! It's not like you to honor us at this hour. Did you have a fight with your rich mistress, or did your drunken mother kick you out?"

Hale smiled faintly. "Women. They're nothing but trouble." Then his eye fell on Linny. Yeah, she thought, and up yours too, fella. "Who's this?" he asked bluntly, as though her being there at night made her a different person from the one he'd met that morning.

"This is Linny," Robbin said. "She's a poet, like Ash, only better. She's staying in the Studio for a while."

Bear, where did you say that sleeping bag was?"

"Hale, are you sure you're okay?" Ash looked at the boy with concern. "You're not hurt or anything, are you? Hale, are you *stoned*?"

"Ash, are you an *asshole*?" Hale parodied. "Nah, I'm fine. It's just that... I thought maybe... I was wondering if it'd be okay if I moved in here."

"You mean for *good*?" Robbin demanded.

"No, I mean until my herpes clears up!" Hale snapped. He passed a grimy hand across his face. "No, I mean... look, if you guys think there's a problem..."

Bear said, "What kind of problem? There's plenty of room."

"Sure, no problem," Ash agreed. "Unless you're planning on bringing chicks in here at strange hours." Linny looked sharply at him, but Ash seemed oblivious to the implications of what he'd just said. "Or unless you snore."

"He can't snore louder than Bear," Robbin said. "It isn't physically possible."

"I keep telling you," Bear answered him, "it's the acoustics of this place. Picks up sound. If we just laid down some cheap carpeting—"

"Not on my gorgeous antique Christian tile floor!" Ash squawked.

Linny sat back and considered Hale. She remembered the tender way he'd laid Ash down on the mattress only that afternoon, like a kid with a pet, a girl with her favorite doll. Hale thought Ash was his personal property. She saw the way he was looking at the tall elf even now; as if he were a hungry dog, and Ash held all the biscuits. She looked away.

One by one the members of the Mock Avenue Studio settled down to work, to sleep, to play. Billy and Bear went out to check out some new music. Linny sat on the trestle table, a cigarette in one hand, a pen in the other, writing about the motorbike that ran faster than elvin steeds, that carried its rider through perils undreamt of on the other side of the Border. At last, the room was quiet. Linny could feel the presence of the others. It enfolded her like a warm, comfortable blanket, the kind of blanket you read under with a will-o'-wisp when your parents have put out the lamp.

When eventually she looked up, there was one other light left in the enormous room. His back to the wall across from her, Hale was sitting sketching her.

Hale never spoke to her if he could help it. As the days passed and it became clear that she wasn't going away, he kept on pretending that she didn't exist. If he wanted to know something, like whether it was her jacket on the chair, he'd ask someone else, even if she was in the room.

At first it made Linny mad. Then she decided there was no point in both of them being pissed off. So she started paying attention to Hale—a lot. She'd ask him what he thought of an article in *Nightlife*. She'd ask him where he got his canvas. It made him wildly uncomfortable. He'd answer as briefly as he could. She thought that was funny as hell.

None of the others in the Studio had any trouble dealing with her. But then, she thought if Ash brought home a three-fanged demon and said it tap-danced, they'd play soft-shoe for it. When they were all together, drinking or planning the show at the Ferret, she took a nasty pleasure in directing most of her

remarks to Hale. Let him try to pretend she didn't exist!

She stood behind him one day, watching him paint a landscape. It was abstract, didn't look like anywhere she'd ever been or Hale'd ever seen. It was something Robbin did superlatively well; from Hale it was... unconvincing.

"Get out of my light," Hale said. "You're in my fucking light."

Linny swung herself up on the railing of the balcony next to him and lit a cigarette. "Hale," she said, "what do you do all those other sketches for, if you're not going to put them in the show?"

He frowned at his palette. "What sketches?"

"You know what sketches. The ones you do in the clubs. The ones you do by the river. Of the kids, the artists, the punks." *Of me.*

"That's not art," he said with a fine scorn borrowed from Robbin. "That's craft work. It's picture-taking. It doesn't say anything."

"Oh, yeah? And what does *Ms* say?" She gestured at the blobs of blue and green.

He whirled around, and she saw how white his knuckles were on the palette. "I don't know, Linny," he said furiously. "You tell me. What does it say to you? Lay a few of those precious words on me."

For the first time, he was looking her straight in the eyes. His eyes were green, with bright gold flecks. Then she saw that they were bright with pain, not with anger at all. *Windows of the soul.* What had she been trying to do all this time—get him to notice her? By making him angry? Linny felt a gut-wrenching surge of self-disgust. She was no better than those girls at school, trailing after boys and giggling... They wanted attention too. Wasn't it enough for her that she had the friendship of the others? Hale wasn't even elvin. Why waste her time?

"Hey," she said, "I'm sorry. It's a great painting, Hale, really."

But he threw down his brush, spattering the floor and his boots with misty green. "It's a shit painting! Give me a break, Linny, don't dish that crap out to me. This painting doesn't say anything to you except 'Poor bastard.'" He mixed a blob of paint into a tin cup of oily stuff and began painting with rough, angry strokes across the canvas. With amazement, she saw a face taking shape there. He added shadows, hollowing the cheeks, tracing the curve of bone with a tint of white... it was her own face, gazing out from a fantasy background of misty hills... but the face was transparent, as if the viewer were being allowed to look behind her eyes to see what she was imagining.

The frightening thing was that it was true. It was what she saw, when she was dreaming her dreams of Elfland.

Linny sat frozen, her cigarette burning down to ash. If she moved, she felt she would crack. He shouldn't know her that well. No one should. How had she given it away?

Hale didn't even notice her. All his attention was on his work; it was as though she didn't exist again. This time she was grateful. She stubbed out the cigarette, slipped off the railing and climbed out of the Studio. Her bike was nearly out of power, and she didn't have the money to recharge the spell box. She got on it anyway, and took it as far as it would go, out along the river, past the trailer parks and into the dangerous Borderland.

She had to walk it home in the dark from the Troll Bridge.

It was barely a month until the show. There were enough paintings and drawings lying in the corners of the chapel, stacked in careless piles in the unused portion of the balcony, to fill the walls of the Dancing Ferret three times over, but this, Robbin explained disdainfully, was old work—at least several months old, not good enough now. So in the weeks before the opening, the show was created from scratch, brand-new works that would contain the soul of Bordertown within the magic-tinged, ever-shifting colorfield paintings that were the tradition of the Elflands: Ash's canvases dripping with romance, hinting at the contours of the little Elftown girls who had posed for them; Robbin's landscape-inspired abstracts of the open Borderlands; Bear's huge paintings that suggested no imagery at all, just bursts of color with a driving energy like rock'n'roll. Even Hale painted several new canvases in traditional High-Elvin style—or tried to. Hard as he worked, his paintings simply didn't resonate as the others' did. Perhaps it just wasn't in his blood. His landscape portrait of Linnny had disappeared; painted over, she hoped.

Billy Buttons did not paint. He flattered and criticized, posed and pouted, scavenged props, found mysterious tubes of free paint, cheese sandwiches, glass for the frames, always hustling, always on the move, always in the way. He did not live at the studio as the others did, but had a squat of his own somewhere in the west end, with a girl no one was ever allowed to meet.

They lived catch-as-catch-can. They took items scavenged from garbage cans on the Tooth to trade in Josh's store for old canvases to scrape the paint off and paint over. Hale made a little money designing posters for the clubs; got them free passes, free beers—there were days when dinner was the popcorn at Danceland. Bear pulled down a gig every so often—once known from Ho Street to Hell as the hottest bass player to hit the clubs, he'd given up that little bit of fame to concentrate on a more lasting art. When money came in, they'd blow it on extravagant meals, expensive coffee and cheap champagne; the next day they'd be back to day-old pastries from the back door of the bakery on Water Street, rationing tea like it was holy water, inventing outrageous recipes for Ginger Cat Soup.

"I'm hungry," Ash said suddenly one afternoon, tossing his brush up in the air and catching it with a flourish. "I wish we had more of that *peca*. That was good shit."

"Ha," said Hale. "All you did was try to sing and fall asleep."

"You think," Ash retorted. "You wouldn't believe what I saw on that stuff. If BB hadn't snapped me out of it—I had a whole poem perfectly formed, meter and verse—"

"Try catnip," Hale snapped.

Linnny, sitting silent on her table, raised her eyebrows. It wasn't like Hale to lash out at Ash that way.

"Here." Robbin tossed a bundle of newsprint to Ash. "Eat this."

Ash stared at the paper. "It'll give me the shits."

Billy Buttons came over to look. "Fuckin' *Nightlife*. Turner's thirtieth annual review of the bright young artists..."

"... who are the same bright young artists he was raving about thirty years ago," Robbin finished. "Lord. I used to read this when I was a kid. Same names then as now. I always thought I'd be in there someday."

"No way," said Hale. "Not while you paint and show in Soho."

"Well how the hell are we supposed to get our paintings into the Promenade galleries when we can't even get reviewed in fucking *Nightlife*?" Ash demanded.

"That's not the point," Linny said. She too had grown up on *Nightlife*, and remembered when it represented all that was avant-garde, daring, and artistic, all that she now knew to be old and tired. "Everything that's happening in art these days is happening in Soho, not uptown, right? It's not just us, it's music and theater and comics and dance... And nobody knows about it. There's kids out there—"

Hale suddenly looked as if he'd been struck. "Yeah," he said. "Kids. Not the slummers; kids whose parents keep them at home, nice kids with nice parents who don't know—"

"—who don't know anything about what's going on," Robbin continued. Finishing each other's sentences was something the Studio did when it was really clicking.

Ash stood there looking like he'd just received a divine revelation. Before he even said anything, Linny knew what it would be: "Let's found our own paper!"

"No," Linny said. "Same problem: who'd read it? Just more Soho people."

"So what?" Ash turned on her. "At least it's a start! And who's to say that in a few years—"

"No," Linny repeated. "That's not the point." Something about the way she said it alerted Billy Buttons, who was looking at her with a fixed, vulpine intensity. "Go on, Linnet," he said.

"We infiltrate," she announced.

She came forward and took Ash's copy of the paper. "Look." She rattled the pages. "Type. Drawings. Cheap paper. They can do it. We can do it. And who's to know the difference—until they read the reviews of Squatter's Theater, of *Stick Wizard* comics... and Alf Turner's rave preview of the Mock Avenue Studio show at the Dancing Ferret?"

"You... fiend!" Ash's fair faced glowed with delight.

"Let me get this straight," said Robbin, fiddling with his silver hairclasp. "We do an exact copy of *Nightlife* but with Soho arts reviews—including a big plug for our show—and somehow we manage to substitute our paper for the real thing all over the city?"

"Oh, yes." Billy Buttons chuckled richly. "Oh yes we do. Who do you think distributes *Nightlife*?"

They thought about it. Ragamuffins did: the alley kids of Soho, those fierce little children with their war paint and spiky hair.

"The Bloods have an 'arrangement' with those kids," Buttons said, smiling evilly. "I think we can work something out there... I definitely think so."

"There's one thing no one's bothered to consider," Hale said pugnaciously, "and that's the small matter of how you're going to get this thing actually printed. Or do the Bloods have an 'arrangement' with the Third Street Printers' Guild too?"

Ash laid one finger along the side of his nose. "Now, now; you just let your own Nuncle Ash take care of that. I happen to know where there's a printing press lying unused not one hundred yards away from where we sit!"

It caused the sensation Ash intended.

"Yeah," Hale said sourly; "but does it work?"

Ash brushed his objections away with butterfly hands in the air. "Don't be a doubter, Hale! It'll work by

the time we need it to."

"Then we can do it," Linny said blissfully. "We can really do it."

"Sure," said Ash with finality. "Linny, you and I will write the articles—and anyone else who wants to, of course. Bear can copy the picture style—he's good at doing that realistic crap when he has to—and you too, Hale, of course: you're great at that, you can copy all the ads."

Linny watched Hale stiffen. Ash could be so dumb, sometimes. "And what," the human boy asked carefully, "makes you think I want to waste my time on a dip-shit project like this?"

"Are you kidding?!" Ash demanded. "This is going to make our fortune! It's the one thing I can think of that'll get our show publicity all over B-town! By the time people realize it's a hoax, *Mock Avenue Studio* will be burned in their brains. They won't be able to go on ignoring us after this. Linny's a genius." Hale shrugged. Ash came up to him, put a slender hand on his muscular shoulder. "Anyhow, it's going to be fun. Those ads don't have to be *exact* copies. Don't you want to draw the Fairfield Soap Girl in a garter belt and push-up bra?" Hale tried and failed to repress a smirk.

And somehow large sheets of paper appeared, and all over the floor people were spreading them out and sketching *mock-Nightlife* layouts, page by page; and Linny was compiling the list of articles in her notebook, and she and Bear were arguing about whether the Ferret or Danceland ought to have been voted best dance club in the Annual Poll...

And in the years after, when she had gotten all the fame that Ash ever wanted, all the worship Robbin craved and the recognition that Bear never had, Linnea Dark Garnett was to remember that as the best afternoon of her life.

Hale smelled the armpit of his favorite shirt with the mutating fish on it. No way. But his t-shirts were almost as bad. What did people do when they didn't have a mom to make the dirty clothes magically disappear? He put on the least offensive shirt and tried not to inhale. Maybe he could find something new at José's.

He stumbled down from the balcony, barking his shin on the ladder again. The room was cold and drafty, the tiles chilly beneath the boy's bare feet. There was a thin, rusty trickle of water from the tap of what used to be the Ladies' Room beneath the chapel; Hale splashed water on his face and over his head, slicked back his hair. He dried himself on the single grimy towel, and scowled at himself in the mirror above the sink, startled by how much the expression resembled Sissy's. He'd gotten thinner, developing shadows beneath his cheekbones and under the scar from the fight at his last private school. He fingered his beardless chin and sighed. When the hell was he going to stop looking like a kid?

Hale brushed his teeth with his finger, sourly remembering all the things he hadn't thought to bring with him from home. Sissy was right; he couldn't do anything without screwing it up. But he couldn't go back there; not now, perhaps not ever. His dad was a copper—if he'd wanted Hale to come home, he would have tracked him down before now.

Upstairs in the chapel, pale morning light set the stained-glass windows glowing, casting rainbow colors on age-stained white walls, falling on the dust and soot thick on the windowsills. Top Cat, the scrawny torn with the seven-fingered left paw, sat in a sunny patch cleaning plaster dust from his black fur while above him a benevolent angel smiled placidly. Robbin sat before his easel, pulled close to the heat of the Magic Fire, mixing turpentine into a tub of green-gray paint. Whether he'd gotten up early or been up since the night before was impossible to tell; he was immaculately dressed, as always, as though for afternoon tea on Dragon's Tooth Hill. He glanced up at Hale with disinterest, and then away again. Hale

had seen him look at girls that way, dismissing them. Unimportant.

The jars of coffee and black tea were empty. The pot on the Magic Fire contained one of those elvin herbal brews that Hale had never grown used to. He poured some into a paint-spattered mug anyway, letting the warmth of the pottery thaw his frozen fingers. They had only been squatting in the church since spring; what were they going to do when winter came?

Yet he'd rather wake up cold and hungry here than to the breakfast table at home—his father angry, Sissy trying to disappear into her chair, his mother somewhere far off in the ozone. In the 'burbs the commuters would be hustling now and the traffic would be loud on the Riverside Bridge. In Soho the days started quietly, revving up slowly for the nights to come.

Hale gazed around the vast, empty room. Ash's mattress was piled with clothing and blankets; the bogus newspaper was all laid out on the floor. At the far end of the chapel wet clothes were hanging over a rafter beam. He could hear the water dripping onto the tiles below. The corner Linny had claimed was the only part of the studio besides Robbin's that was tidy. She kept her books in a little pile, her meager wardrobe in a little pile—if she'd owned anything else, she'd probably keep that in a goddamn little pile too.

"Where is everybody?" Hale asked Robbin, though what he really meant was: where is Ash?

"Upstairs. In the tower," the other boy answered without looking up. Beneath his paintbrush, shifting colors echoed the shimmer of the Elfland Border. A blotch of color indicated the city, nestled beside it in the Hills. Hale looked over his shoulder and suppressed a sigh, envying Robbin his smooth technique. The trick to elvin art was for the painter to put his own perceptions into the shifting imagery, and this was Robbin all over: beautiful, precise, and a little cold.

Hale borrowed a pair of socks left draped over a pile of books, laced up his jackboots, stole Ash's overcoat from the hook on the balcony post. As he climbed the treacherous, circular stairs up the Bell Tower he was careful to avoid the missing steps and the places where the treads were in danger of giving in. The walls of the stairwell were covered with Ash's poetry, Billy's cartoons, and old graffiti. **THE BELL TOWER GHOST WAS HERE. DANTE LOVES BEATRICE, BEWARE THE BLOODS**—crossed out and emended to **BEWARE THE JABBERWOCK, MY SON**. Hale was breathing hard and had a kink behind his bad knee by the time he reached the top.

At the head of the stairs was a circular room, with ropes in the center leading to the bells above. Open windows were cut into the stone on three sides; on the fourth side, looking north to Elfland, they'd been bricked up, protecting good churchgoers from the unholy view. Ash sat on an eastern window ledge facing the rising sun and the Mad River valley. Bear leaned against the other side of the windowsill, a mug of the herbal concoction cradled in his broad hands. Between them was the elvin girl. Hale froze halfway through the door. Then, before they noticed him, he turned and went back down the stairs.

Dammit, the girl was always there. At night, when he went to his bed on the balcony, laughing with Ash and Robbin below. In the morning when he awoke, when a guy needed a quiet moment alone with his friends. She was always there, with that exasperating smile, with the cornflower-blue eyes that caught his own and challenged them every time.

Frodo accosted him coming back down the stairs, appearing through the gap of a missing tread to dance at his feet and demand breakfast. Hale draped the cat over his shoulder, wincing as the claws dug through the wool into his flesh. As they reached the third-story window, he saw a grinning face peering through the glass.

"Hale, my man!" Billy Buttons said, squatting on the parsonage roof outside. "Just the person I was

looking for! Come with me and I'll buy you a cup of tea—hell, a cup of coffee! Got some business to attend to down at the Hard Luck Cafe."

Normally Hale would be suspicious of Billy's generosity, but right now all he wanted to do was to get out of Mock Avenue. "Yeah, sure," he said, climbing onto the roof, bringing Frodo with him attached to his coat like a fur collar. He'd go anywhere this hour of the morning on the promise of a cup of good human coffee.

Buttons was looking even seedier than usual. His raincoat was too large for him, rolled up at the sleeves and hanging below his knees, wrinkled as though he'd just pulled it from some laundry bin. His eyes were rimmed with red, his hair hung in yellow tangles beneath an old broad-brimmed hat, and he held a toothpick between his clenched teeth. He extended a hand in a peeling red leather glove, helping Hale make the jump between the fire escape and the sidewalk. Frodo scrambled down the back of Hale's coat, disappeared through a busted window leading into José's store.

Mock Avenue, like the rest of Soho, was quiet at this time of day. José's place was chained and spell-locked up while he slept off the effects of yesterday's profits. Madame Sydni, the card reader, sat in her parlor window, smiling at the boys as they passed by. A bum lay on the porch of a gutted townhouse—elvin or human, it was impossible to tell through the mass of gray-white hair. Elvin, probably, for this was Blood territory—the east end of Soho, over to the river wall.

Mock Avenue followed a winding course that cut across the streets of Soho, past Carnival south of the Dancing Ferret; past Gateway, the drag-racing strip; north and west until it ran into Ho. On the corner of Ho was the Oberon Building, an immense structure, boarded up, that took up an entire city block. Once it was a ballroom or some such thing; now it was runaway central, the place they all ended up, sooner or later.

On Ho Street there was a little more early-morning action: a couple of kids trying to bum some change, some Packers cruising on low-slung bikes, eyeing the two of them suspiciously. Hale was clearly human, his brown hair slicked back behind round ears; but with his yellow hair, his hat slouched low, there was no telling what Billy Buttons might be.

The Hard Luck Café was clear on the other end of Ho, across the street from Danceland near the turf ruled by the human Pack. Ho Street was neutral territory, where the gangs held to a truce. But Hale wouldn't care to be caught south of it this far down if he was wearing red leather or had silver in his hair.

The building had once been a bank, its history evident in the stamped tin ceiling and the marble of its walls and floor. Someone had taken it over before vandals could strip and ruin it; the cafe had been operating out of the ground floor for as long as anyone could remember. It was a place you could come on a cold winter's night, nursing a penny's worth of tea from dusk until dawn. Danceland, across the street, had been around almost as long.

Buttons chose a table in a back corner, positioning himself so that he could keep an eye on the door. He ordered coffee for them both from a little human girl, her fuchsia-colored pony tail bobbing above her shoulders. She chewed her gum with her mouth wide open, popping it loudly as she turned back to the bar. The smell reminded Hale painfully of Sissy. He scowled at the girl as she put his coffee down in front of him.

"So what's going on?" he asked Billy Buttons, but all Billy would say was, "Wait and see." Hale pulled out his ubiquitous sketchbook to pass the time. They didn't have to wait for long.

A tall, ugly Blood came in through the double doors, drawing attention with his height and the conspicuous red leather he wore from head to toe. He sauntered back to their corner, shook a cigarette

out of a crumpled pack, and lit it, staring down at Billy, without sparing even a glance for Hale. He had a scar like lightning across his forearm and wore three ruby studs on the lobe of a pointed ear.

"Nice you could come," said Billy with a crooked smile. "Coffee? Tea? A draft of bitter ale?"

The elf waved away the offer, dragged another chair over, scraping it across the marble floor. "Let's get down to business, Buttons. You have something we want. I want to know what *you* want."

"Well now, it's simple, really—"

"Money? Drugs? Chocolate? Protection?"

"Cooperation. What we're proposing is a little joint venture, between the lads I represent"—he nodded toward Hale—"and the Bloods."

The elf looked at Hale finally, and down at the sketch he'd made on his white pad. "Humans?" he said, as if the word was sour.

Billy leaned back in his chair, playing with his toothpick, enjoying himself. "Don't be too quick to throw around insults, my fine buck. Some of my best friends are human. Including my mother."

The Blood's pale eyes narrowed. He scratched his shaved silver skull. "Buttons, we got no feud with you. Just tell us what you want. Give me a straight answer for once in your goddamn life."

Billy outlined his plan, explaining the bogus edition of *Nightlife* to a thug who had never read an arts review in his life. "Distribution, that's where you come in. You get the papers to the alley brats, and they'll hawk it all over the city. They'll never know it's not the real one; never met an alley kid yet who could read."

The elf looked skeptical. He tapped his ashes onto the floor. "Why us? Why not do this yourselves?" He looked back and forth between Buttons and Hale. Hale continued sketching and tried to look cool, as though it was every day he sat making deals with gang leaders in Ho Street cafes. Lordy lord, what would his father think? Hale pushed the thought away.

"You've got the manpower," Billy explained. "And the alley brats come from your turf. Besides, I thought the Bloods would want to have a piece of this—tweak the noses of all them rich True Bloods looking down at us from the Hill..."

A slow smile spread across the big Blood's face. He was not a smart man, Hale realized with surprise. Little Sissy could run circles around this guy.

"All right," the fellow said. "Now I know what you want. When do we get what we want?"

"When the job is done. Blood's Oath."

"Blood's Oath," the other repeated. "Buttons, you have a deal." The big elf rose, drew lazily on his cigarette. "I don't know what an elvin oath is worth to a halfie. But if you fuck with us, remember: you're dead meat in Bordertown."

All of the humor left Billy's face then. "I ran with the Bloods once," he said softly, and the way he said it made the coffee in Hale's stomach roll. "My dear young man, don't question my honor again."

The Blood stared at him for a moment, then inclined his head—a rare gesture of respect from full blood to halfie. The color returned slowly to Billy Buttons' cheeks as the ugly elf turned and walked out the

door.

"Well, well, me deario, wasn't that entertaining? Drink up now, Hale, mustn't let good coffee get cold."

Hale had a thousand questions, but as he put his pad away he only asked one.

"What is it the Bloods want, anyway?" Buttons paused. "Something that I haven't got," he said.

José's store had once been a pharmacy. Some of the fixtures were still there: the Formica-topped counter, yellowed with age, tall cabinets from which the glass had been scavenged long ago, empty display cases for toothpaste, condoms, deodorant soaps. The sign outside still said REXALL DRUGS, and every once in a while some semiconscious kid would wander in looking for fairy-dust.

The shelves lining the walls of the front room were crammed with odds and ends of junk both elvin and human: dishes, books, broken appliances, mismatched shoes, odd bits of carving from over the Border, strange elvin gadgets whose uses were near impossible to determine. The second room was filled with old clothes and draperies—the velvets, the sequins, the lace and vintage spandex that were all the rage for nights out on the town. Kids came to find fashions from times past to wear into the clubs, and to trade goods they'd found in trash bins or stolen from the fancy houses on the Hill. José had started the store when he and his old lady first came to Bordertown, cutting a deal with the Bloods for this tiny piece of their turf. Then his old lady ran off with a True Blood, and now José ruled over his kingdom of junk alone.

José was a small man, even for a human, and compact, the muscles of his arms covered from shoulder to wrist with intricate tattoos. For each one he had a different story about life beyond the Borderlands, in cities that sounded imaginary, far away in the human World.

The store was open when Hale and Billy turned back down Mock Avenue. José was reading the latest issue of *Stick Wizard*; Frodo and T.C. were sleeping off breakfast, having made a nest in a pile of Elfland brocades. There was a nine-pack of bitter ale on the counter beside them—José's hangover recipe.

"Mr. Gutierrez, how are you this fine autumn morning?" Billy began.

"Get out, get out," José interrupted him, bristling. "I know that tone of voice—it always means trouble. Hale, do me a favor, will you, and remove this personage from my store?"

"Now José, don't be too hasty," Billy protested. "I have a perfectly legitimate business proposition here."

"Legitimate, my ass. I might as well make a deal with Frodo the cat as deal with you; he'll pay me just as fast. Get out of here, Buttons, before I forget I'm a man with high blood pressure and throw you out myself!"

"Hey, okay, my man. If that's the way you want it. But I came here to do *you* a favor. If you don't want it, hey, no skin off my—"

"What favor?" José asked suspiciously.

Billy pulled out a silver knife and began to clean his fingernails. "Oh, concerning a little hot item you just might want to get rid of. A red-hot item; 'explosive' you could even say."

José crossed his arms over his chest, chewing on the ends of his black mustache. "What exactly do you know about this, kid?" he asked.

Buttons smiled, crooked teeth showing. "That you've got it. That the Bloods want it. And that the Pack wants it back."

"Dammit, Buttons," Gutierrez exploded. "Where do you get your information? How do you always know exactly what's going on?" He sighed. "Sometimes," he said, "I think you know what I had for breakfast two hours before I wake up and decide." Gutierrez pulled a quilted bundle from under his Formica counter. Beneath the wrappings lay a sawed-off shotgun—deadly, too unpredictable to be truly useful in a place like Bordertown. The last time the Bloods had gotten hold of a gun it had worked, surprisingly, just fine—worked so well it killed one of their own.

"A woman running with the Pack brought it over to me. She was desperate for bucks, wanted to go back home to the World. Stole it right from under Sammy Tucker's nose—and like a prize ass I bought it, just to get it off her hands. What am I going to do with it? The Pack and the Bloods are gonna know I got it. No matter who I trade it to, somebody's gonna be sorely pissed at old José."

"You could give it to the coppers," Hale suggested. He didn't much care for the thought of some thug like the one from this morning being out on the streets with a gun.

"And have them on my tail? They've got ways of tracing things that makes my head spin..."

"You could give it to me," Buttons said, staring at his nails. "Give it to me, your problem is solved, simple as that. One, two, three."

José snorted. "Buttons, I trust you even less than I trust the gangs. Why the hell should I turn this over to you? What do you want it for, that's what I want to know."

"I want to give it to the Bloods. I promised them they could have it."

"*You* promised," José sputtered.

"Perhaps I was just a little hasty," Billy admitted. With a movement quick as lightning, he plucked the shotgun from the counter. "But I *did* give my word. So I think you really ought to reconsider, my deario. I'll give you fair trade for it. I suggest you name your price." He lowered the gun until it was aimed at José's stomach. He smiled cheerfully at the smaller man.

"Buttons..." José said warningly.

"You won't sell?" Billy said. "Then I'll lose my honor in front of all the Bloods. Guess there's only one thing left to do."

Billy reversed the gun's aim so that it pointed at himself. "Billy!" Hale shouted as he squeezed the trigger.

"It's not loaded, you asshole; calm down," José said, grabbing the gun back from the halfie boy. "But you couldn't have known that for sure, you young fool."

"No," said Billy, "but I did know that the firing pin is soldered shut. Yes, my dear; the Pack's famous gun is completely, utterly useless. They just want it back before the Bloods find out."

"It is?" José picked up the gun warily and examined it more closely. "I'll be goddamned. I'd barely touched the thing—these little mamas are a risky business so close to the Border. Only bought it off the girl so it wouldn't fall into worse hands..."

"So what do you say, *mi amigo* José, that we give this piece to the local Bloods and let Sammy Tucker know that his little gig is up?"

"Sure, sure. Take it, Buttons. I don't give a shit. This thing is goddamn useless—and I can't tell you how many nights I've lost sleep over it. Take it, with my blessings. Only remember... you just promised fair trade."

"And *you* just said it was useless, my man!"

"Useless is not the same as worthless, as you well know."

"Look, I just spent my last pennies buying Hale here a cup of coffee and—"

"Take this," Hale said, taking off Ash's overcoat. "It's warm; it's wool or something. Ash'll never miss it. And if he does, well, hey, no harm done."

"You're an evil man, Hale," Buttons said approvingly.

José took hold of the coat, inspected it with a critical eye. "It will do," he said finally, and hung it up in the second room. "Ash is down in the basement, by the way. He's looking over that old printing press of mine, the one I traded the car seats for."

Buttons led Hale through the store to the basement stairs, the shotgun riding across his slim shoulders. Below they found Ash and the elvin girl on their hands and knees on the concrete floor.

"Is this a new party game?" Buttons asked the two of them.

Ash sat back on his heels and pushed silver hair out of his eyes. His white cheeks and the knees of his black jeans were covered with dust. He clutched something like the pieces of a puzzle in the palm of his gloved hand.

"We're skunked, man," Ash said with a dejected sigh. "*Nightlife* is off. After all that work."

"What the hell do you mean it's off?" Billy Buttons asked irritably. After a morning of successful wheeling and dealing, he clearly felt he deserved more than this.

Ash rapped his knuckles against a decrepit piece of sagging machinery. "This is the letter press," he explained. "And this is the type, all over the floor. So far as we can tell, a good third of it is missing—carried off by literate mice, I guess. Or else it was never here to begin with. How the fuck can we print the thing up if we can't even find all the vowels?"

Linny was searching the corners of the room by the dull light of a will-o'-wisp hovering above her palm. She was wearing an old elvin velvet dress over her leather boots; probably something she'd found upstairs in the store. Hale had never seen her dressed halfway like a girl before; neither had Billy Buttons, from the way he was staring. The plain dark green set off the paleness of her skin, brought out the lights in her red hair. The skirt of the dress was getting covered with soot as she crawled across the floor collecting tiny metallic letters.

"This is it, Ash," she said. She looked over at their little pile. "We'll have to rewrite all the reviews so that they only use the letters T and S and R. We've got lots of R's—at least four or five. What do you think of the Rock Avenue Studio?"

She was trying to jolly Ash out of his sudden depression, but Hale could have told her it wasn't going to work. Ash's downs were as extravagant as his highs. The elvin boy drooped on the cold concrete floor, as though he had just lost all will to live.

Linny came over to him, put a hand on his shoulder. "Listen, Ash," she said, her voice low and husky,

"we'll figure something else out. Don't give up yet." But even she looked doubtful, with shadows of disappointment beneath her blue eyes. Ash smiled up at her, and Hale felt his stomach tighten.

"Look, Ash," Hale said suddenly. "I can get it printed up. I know a press... Only thing is, it's not in Soho."

"Where is it then?" Billy Buttons wanted to know.

"It's, umm, across the river."

Ash brightened at this new plan, but Billy was regarding Hale curiously.

"Your mysterious past reveals itself at last, eh Hale?"

"This has nothing to do with my past," Hale answered quickly. "You're not the only one with connections in this town."

"Connections..." Linny interrupted, looked comically from one boy to the other. "Who cares, as long as it works! He's got connections, and we've got a press! Come on, guys, let's get back to work! We've got a paper to put out: deadlines to meet, shows to review..."

Her arm was around Ash's shoulder. Hale caught himself staring at it, at them. He looked quickly away. But he could not block out the sound of Linny's laughter as she and Ash climbed the stairs. He never wanted to do her goddamn paper anyway. So why was he suddenly volunteering to do it now?

At the top of the stairs Linny stripped off the elvin dress; underneath it were her usual baggy trousers and a man's undershirt bleached as white as her skin. She handed the velvet dress to Gutierrez. "No thanks. I guess it's just not me after all." He gave Linny her leather jacket and she shrugged back into it with familiar ease. The jacket transformed her into a young boy again. She pulled her leather gloves from the pockets, and a pack of cigarettes.

Outside the day was cold and bright. Hale shivered in his thin fish shirt and quickly climbed the fire escape to the roof. In the chapel Bear was running paint through a spray gun onto a piece of masonite. When he saw them, he mumbled the spell to shut off the air pump and nodded toward the other end of the room. Drui was there, curled up on Ash's bed, reading the half-penny Scandal Sheet they sold on the streets in Elftown.

She wore nothing beneath Ash's brocade robe, waiting to pose. She jumped up and ran to the elvin boy as he came in the door behind Hale. "Ash!" Her eyes clouded as she spotted Linny behind him. "Ash?" she asked uncertainly. "Did you forget you told me to come back soon as I could? My mother found out, see... I'm sorry it's been so long."

"Oh, look kid," Ash said with no embarrassment. "I meant to send a message up to Traders' Heaven. I'm finished with that painting. You don't have to come down to sit for me anymore."

"Oh." Her mouth drooped just a little. "Well, can I see it, Ash—now that it's finished? Will it be in the show at the Ferret?"

"No. It didn't exactly turn out. So I painted over the canvas. It just wasn't what I wanted. Some paintings are like that—you try and try, but you just never get anything worth keeping."

"It looked pretty good to me," Druienna said quietly. "But hey, what would I know? I'm not an artist, am I?" She tossed back her silver curls, tried not to look hurt, almost succeeding.

Ash steered Linny over to the warmth of the Magic Fire, poured her a cup of the overbrewed herbal potion. She looked uncomfortable as he fussed over her, effectively dismissing little Druinna, suddenly turning Linny into his girl. For once, Linny seemed as if she didn't quite know what to say.

Druinna stood with Ash's robe clutched tightly around her. Then she began to gather her clothes, the frilly shirt, the spangled trousers, the high-heeled shoes that Hale could not imagine how she walked in. She'd come all the way down from Elftown for Ash in those goddamn stupid shoes.

"Wait, Druinna," Hale said to her suddenly. "Don't go yet. Do you want to come up to the balcony and sit awhile for me? I'd like to do some sketches, maybe even try a painting... if you've the time, that is," he added, smiling encouragingly. Druinna lifted her head and looked at Hale with the puppy-dog gaze she had previously reserved for Ash.

"Sure, I've got loads of time," she said to Hale, her gaze flickering across the room to Ash and Linny. She tossed back her curls and smiled brightly at the boy, his interest animating her, making her pretty once again.

"That's swell, Druinna. Terrific," he found himself babbling, all too aware of blue eyes following him as he crossed the chapel and up the balcony ladder behind the tiny elvin girl. He glanced down once, and Linny was indeed looking up at him. But this time, when he caught her eye, she smiled.

Bear was an expert lock-picker. No one cared to ask the burly, quiet elf how he had come by such a disreputable talent, but Hale was grateful for it now as they clustered shivering around the backdoor of the Church of Saintliness on Middletown Road, across the corner from his parents' house in the suburb of Pleasant Gardens. The night was cold, the air clear; overhead the stars of Elfland wheeled in patterns that would have mystified the astronomers of the World. From the open Borderlands beyond the housing tracts came the occasional howling of creatures with no names.

Billy Buttons had set the entire plan into motion; between Ash's enthusiasm and Billy's plots and deals the whole mad scheme had turned into reality. Somehow, from the seed of Linny's whimsy had grown this moment: fingers frozen into shards of ice, breaths held against the fear of sudden voices in the dark: *Hey you kids—what are you doing there?*

Around the bend, two blocks away, his parents lay sleeping, encased in pink stucco. He'd passed the house riding on the back of Bear's Harley and seen the light on in Sissy's room. It had given him a queasy feeling to have his two worlds collide—as though Sissy and Dad and Linny and Ash and Bear could not exist in the same world, side by side.

With a grunt, Bear jimmied the lock into opening, and the double doors swung into the dark of the church's back hall. Inside, there were no windows to let in starlight or moon. Hale prayed he'd remember the way to the press; he prayed at this hour there would be no one there. He wondered if the patron saint of the church still had any interest in listening to his prayers.

They left Ash guarding the door—watching for Bloods, coppers, watching over Bear and Linny's bikes parked behind the trash bins. Robbin and Billy were back in the city, making sure the real edition of *Nightlife* never reached its destination. Linny—the only one of the lot of them who could spell—would oversee the setting of type. Hale would run the press. Bear would break through any door that stood in their way.

Dressed in black, creeping down the darkened hallway, Hale felt like a terrorist on assignment, with copperplates in the pack on his back instead of international secrets or high-tech explosives. If it weren't for the tension eating at the pit of his stomach he might almost find this fun, like the spy games he used to

play with the neighborhood kids when he was young. Bear worked on the lock of the inner office door; Hale found himself holding his breath, listening for footsteps in the dark, and then the door clicked open and they passed through into the back rooms of the *Church Times*. All they needed now was to find the basement room that housed the *Times'* own press.

Hale had been in these back rooms more times than he cared to remember, running off his mother's popular cookbooks filled with bible quotes and bad recipes masked with aggressively perky names: "Turkey Delight," "Rumless Rumcake," "Dragon's Tooth Filling" ... for god's sake. Empty, the dark, ugly warren of modern rooms—so different from the old church on Mock Avenue—was unfamiliar and disorienting. Hale had the sudden sick feeling he had never been here before. That it was someone else's life.

"This way," Linny said, tugging at his arm. "I've got a hunch. Let's try these doors."

Elvin hunches must be magic, for the doors she chose led to the room with the press—a huge, gleaming monster machine that Hale had come to love. Nothing like the pathetic letterpress Ash had thought they could run a whole paper on. Like so much in Bordertown, the press was a haphazard mishmash of elvin spells and human technology, designed to override the problem that the principles of photography worked no better in Bordertown than the principles of firearms.

Hale flicked on the spell-lights, his nervousness forgotten. As he started up the machinery he felt happiness run jolting through his veins, like when a painting began to take shape under his brush—a better high than any fucking elf drug. He patted the machine's plate cylinder like he was greeting a friendly dog, put down his heavy pack, and turned to the others to explain what they were about to do. *Nightlife*, still affecting to be an "underground" paper after all these years, was produced on a press little better than this. Their edition would be crude, but not instantly recognizable as a counterfeit. Bear's eyes began to glaze over in the way typical to elves trying to cope with alien technology—but the elvin girl caught on surprisingly quickly, Hale's enthusiasm the spark that set fire to her own.

The clock was ticking off the hours until the time set for their rendezvous with the Bloods in the hour before dawn.

Hale and Linny set quickly to work. Bear—mystified by, and perhaps even a little frightened of, the loud machinery—retreated to scouting the hallways and watching the street for signs of coppers. By the time Hale realized he'd been left alone with Linny, he was too caught up in the rhythm of their work to care. It was as if the girl could read his mind; like Sissy, she was always a half-step ahead of him, always knew what he was going to need next—not only anticipated him, but offered up suggestions of her own. This was the way work should always be, a syncopated dance—not a fight and a struggle. Step by step the paper came together. They stood silent, tensed, as the machine fed newsprint between the cylinders, gobbling up the *Church Times'* supply of paper like some big hungry beast. Then the first pages rolled wet and gorgeous from the press.

Linny let out a whoop she couldn't contain. Hale grinned from ear to ear, hugging himself as though to hold in the overflow of delight. They leaned over the sheet together, reading the headline that jumped from the page:

SOHO: WHERE ART MEETS LIFE

"Saturday nights are a carnival all over Bordertown," Linny read aloud, "but especially in Soho. The streets boil with kids looking their best and wildest. The gangs live for this, and Soho owes a lot of

its dazzle to their weapons of war: clothes, hair, bands, bikes. Each gang wants to sport the best, the hottest, the newest of all of these, and that arms race makes the Soho streets blaze with eye candy.

"Not, of course, that a few kids don't get stupid on occasion, tune each other up, and break some heads. When you find that some tall elvin Blood looks better in one of the new ribbon coats than you do—well, the temptation to take it out on his aristocratic nose can be tough to resist. . . . Ha! I think Ash is right—we can't pretend the gangs don't exist or aren't a nuisance, but we can make them fashionable as hell!"

Above the article was one of Hale's engravings, the street scene on Ho at night, only a bit romanticized. The Page One Table of Contents listed a complete Soho tour guide: An overview of Squatters' Theater, staged at unpredictable intervals in the gutted ruins of Carnival Street. A rundown of the bars and cafes tucked in hidden corners of the Old City. A lesson in Soho fashion—how to avoid looking like you've just come down from the Hill. A guide to Soho nightlife, rating the dance clubs, the bands, even the gangs according to the spectacle they put on as they cruised Ho Street on a Saturday night. And, of course, a preview of the Mock Avenue Studio show, opening this week at the Dancing Ferret, touted with Ash's distinctive hyperbole as only the most brilliant grouping this side of the Border.

"What's this?" Linny asked, pointing to a line of type at the bottom of the page. It read: *Squirt, Life gets better when you get older, I promise. Love, Asshole.* "I thought we put the personals on page three. Is this some kind of a joke?"

"Yeah," Hale said, "just some kind of a joke." He hoped the kid would see it. But what were the chances of *Nightlife*—even this edition—getting into Sissy's hands?

Her head bent close to his, Linny looked at him sideways out of those extraordinary eyes, catching him with his mask of indifference down. "You're nicer when you're doing something you care about Hale." She was probably comparing this to his black moods when he painted, wrestling with those elvin abstracts that never did come out quite right. He scowled.

"And you're nicer when you're not sucking up to Ash," he retorted. The smile left her face. Instantly he regretted it. Words, they were her weapon; he would always be outdone by them. What had possessed him to ruin that flow of iron-hot energy that had passed between them over the last few hours? He didn't want that to go away. He didn't know how to make that stay. Now she was going to let him have it.

Surprisingly, Linny's smile returned. "Yeah," she said, "Ash takes a lot of stroking to keep him happy. Would you rather I sucked up to *you*?" She laughed, not nastily, but as if they were sharing a private joke.

Hale felt the sudden tension in him drain as suddenly away. He grinned uncertainly and turned back to the press.

Half an hour before the scheduled rendezvous the press run was done. All that remained was for the papers to be collated and bundled into stacks for distribution in the city. Hale went into the hallway to search for Bear to help with this task—and ran straight into Ash, white-faced and a little shrill.

"Coppers!" the boy said. "Driving slow past the back of the church!"

"Shee-it," Bear said softly, emerging from the shadows. "Just a little longer and Billy'll be here with his Bloods."

"Yeah. . . just a little longer and the coppers will find this place crawling with elves," Ash echoed.

Hale's stomach heaved. Why was it bad news always went straight to his stomach? Maybe it was just that thinking of coppers, of his father's face if they hauled him in, reminded him too painfully of all the arguments over the dinner table. Coppers. Dinners. It all made him want to puke.

As the three boys stared dumbfounded at each other, Linny took over.

"Okay you guys, pull up your flys and let's get cracking. Move the papers out the back door so when the Bloods come you can load up and take off. Don't worry about putting the pages together until you're safely back across the river. Ash, you take my bike when you go—but mind the gears, it sticks between first and second. Hale, you can ride with Bear again."

"But what about Silver Suits?" Ash said.

"What about *you*?" Hale wanted to know.

"I'm going to lead the coppers a merry little chase," she said jauntily, with more confidence than she could possibly feel. "An elvin girl, an elvin rant, a bit of hide and seek by the river-o." Linny grinned, her smile almost feral. "Not that I intend to get caught, you understand. I'll just lead them away while you get your asses out of here—and the paper. Don't you dare lose our beautiful paper!"

"I know the neighborhood," Hale pointed out. "I'll come with you."

"I can make it back to Soho by myself, Hale."

"Through *human* suburbs?"

"'You're not the only one with connections in this city,'" she quoted back at him. "I know what I'm doing."

Bear said mildly, "If you argue about this much longer, children, the coppers are going to come up the walk and knock at the door. Here's a cop-mobile coming up the street now."

"Go get the papers!" Linny pushed Hale and Ash in that direction. She sprinted down the hall, and climbed out a first floor window. As she crossed the broad front lawn, the sweep of a spell-light caught her. There was a startled cry, a moment of confusion, and then the coppers gave chase.

Hale bounded out the window after her, falling flat into the calla lily bed. A spell-light caught him full in the face. What if it was his father behind that bright beam?

"Hale, you asshole! If you're coming, come!"

Linny ran back to the window, hauled the dazed boy to his feet. "Goddammit, Hale, you never get anything right, do you?"

"I've been told that before," he gasped, and the two of them sprinted off into the night.

It was hard not to love the night. The damp earth, the smell of late blooming flowers, even the gutter mulch of dead leaves made a wonderful change from the constant stale stink of the old city's streets.

And Hale, running beside her, his feet pounding the pavement in the same rhythm as hers, like the steady beat of the printing press when they'd finally gotten it going together... Linny laughed with pure pleasure of the night.

"Christ!" Hale panted. "Suits coming right up the street!" It was true. The cop-mobile had circled the block and was heading straight for the two of them. In a moment, they'd have to freeze in the light of the

beam or be mown down. Hale froze.

"Don't be such a rabbit, Hale!" she said jovially. "We may be the hunted, but never the hare: we are foxes for cunning, stags for speed—"

"You are out of your mind," he accused, following her nevertheless across the suburban lawns—where the cop-mobiles, of course, couldn't follow them. The Suits would have to get out and run after them.

They did. Shouts of, "Hey, you kids!" and "Stop, in the name of the law!" Feet pounding behind them.

"Do as thou wilt shall be thine only law," Linnay crooned the arcane quotation, running. She forgot where she'd dug that one up. She couldn't even remember if it was elvin or human. Maybe she *was* out of her mind. She felt out of her mind. It was great.

"In here!" Hale dragged her by the wrist into an alleyway of shrubbery: the division between two backyards made by neighbors who loathed each other so much that they couldn't even share a hedge. The fleeing pair dived headfirst into the gap between the carefully manicured bushes.

"Hey!" a man's voice squawked under them.

"Eee!" a woman shrieked. "It's my husband! He's found us!"

"My wife!"

"Sorry, sorry," Hale muttered, disentangling himself from the amorous couple. Linnay was laughing so hard she could barely stand up. But she led the way out of the hedge.

The neighborhood was waking up with all the noise. Lights were going on all over. Behind them the coppers were running for the hedge, following the racket. It would buy Hale and her a few moments to gain some space. But it was important not to let the coppers lose them—not until she heard the roar of bikes and vans that meant *Nightlife* was safely on its way.

Hale hesitated for a moment in the shadows between houses. Then he whispered, "This way! I know somewhere we—"

"Wrong again, Hale," she said. "We go *this* way."

He didn't argue. "Where are we going?"

"Why, to school, where all good children go!"

The coppers finally caught sight of them again as they crossed the parking lot of an old shopping mall. It was filled with junk, now that cars were such a luxury. Some old holocaustic movement of the earth had set the entire ground tilting away from the building behind the lot. Linnay took them up against the building wall, letting the coppers across the lot play their lights on her. Suckers. She ran forward and set a pile of defunct rubber ties in motion. They bounced and rolled down toward the coppers, who were trying to weave their way through piles of junk to get their quarry. Hale stared at her. His face was elvin-silver in the moonlight, and his eyes were wild. He was really scared, Linnay realized. Something awful was going to happen if he got caught.

Didn't he realize that she was the hero tonight? They were going to win through adversity to triumph over the enemies of fun and art. Soho was running wild in Pleasant Gardens.

"Here." She shoved a tire into Hale's hands. "Roll 'em!" To his credit, he did. He put more force into it

than she did, and his aim was better. "Yow!" she shrieked with glee. "Knockout in one round!"

The coppers finally had the sense to shelter behind a pile of junk until their antagonists ran out of ammunition, which they shortly did.

"Our backs are to the wall," Hale said, literally, with gallant desperation. "Tell me, O Queen of the Night, how's a poor boy to get to school?"

"Hale." She clapped a hand on his shoulder. "To get anywhere in this world, you have to *climb*."

"That's what my dad says," he growled, boosting her up onto the first rung of the old fire escape above their heads.

"Your dad—uh—" she grunted as she lifted him after her, "is, in this case, right."

They made it to the roof. The shopping center was still in use, but hardly busy at this hour. Linny thought with regret of the chaos they could make with all the merchandise passing under their feet as they ran across the store roofs. No time. She had stopped listening for the roar of motors. The elves must have gotten well away by now. And there was something she had promised herself she would do before she went back to Mock Avenue. She hadn't known Hale would be with her... but what the hell.

The coppers rattled after them across the roofs of the shopping complex. "Whoopsey!" Linny jumped down from a high roof to a lower one. Hale followed, skidded on the tiles, yelled "Shit!" but righted himself and kept on.

They were coming to the end of the row of stores. The coppers had both skidded where Hale skidded, but it took them longer to get up.

Hale grinned ruefully at her. He thought they were trapped again.

"Having fun, Hale?" she asked cheerfully.

He grabbed her hand, drew it to his chest. "Linny, I—"

"Not now, Hale. Now we disappear." She took him forward one more step.

And they disappeared.

"What the hell?" Hale's voice was muffled by the gray fog all around them.

"Antiburglary spell," she answered. "Set on the jewelery store beneath us.—Well, not anymore."

Now they found themselves standing on a street of regulation Pleasant Gardens stucco houses. It was dark, and there was no sign of the coppers.

"It's a very expensive spell—and very illegal in this part of town," she explained. "That's why the Suits don't know about it. The jeweler carries emeralds and elphinstones direct from the Elflands, and the merchant's suppliers want to protect their client; so they do him a favor and let him have the spell cheap. Good thing it's working tonight."

"How do you know all that?"

He would ask her that. She chose to misinterpret. "I'm an elf, remember? We know these things."

But he was persistent. "No, I mean how did you know that spell was set on that store?"

She raised her left eyebrow, a trick she'd perfected years ago after weeks in front of a mirror. "That's for me to know and you to find out."

"What if the coppers step on the same spot?"

"Doesn't matter. The spell is completely random: it dumps you anywhere in a five-block radius, the theory being that you won't try that store again. Hale?" She surveyed the tidy rows of houses. "Do you have any idea where we are?"

He looked up and down the street. There was nothing to distinguish it from miles of others. "No. Wait—yes, I do. See that birdbath? We're on Remson Street, off Pierce."

She didn't question his answer, or its source. "Right."

Linny began walking again. Hale followed her. "We're not all that far from the church," he said. "Do you want to go see if everything's all right?"

"No," she said, walking, her hand in her pocket. "I have an act of petty vandalism to commit."

The sign over the gate said, "Willowcrest Academy."

"Oh, shit," said Hale. "Do we hafta?"

"Come on, Hale."

They climbed the old brick wall, left there by the academy more for show than for defense; as Linny had always said, no one would want to get in there who didn't have to.

The school was a beautiful red-brick building that had probably always been a school. A shallow flight of stone steps led up to a wide door, painted pristine white. Its polished brass handle shone in the moonlight.

Linny took her hand out of her pocket. In it was a tube of fairy-dust. She raised her arm, like a wizard casting a spell. A fine spray of glittering dust shot out of the tube. In enormous curlicue graffiti letters, she scrawled across the front door of Willowcrest Academy:

THE MOCKERS

She stepped back a pace, two paces. It looked just great.

"Tell *me* I can't write poetry!" she muttered. She put the tube back in her pocket.

Hale had watched the whole performance with quiet intensity. "I know you," he said when she was done. "You're the girl who won the essay contest. 'My Hopes for the Future' or something."

"And you're the guy who got kicked out of school. Two bloody noses and a fractured wrist or something."

They stood looking at each other. The moon was growing pale in the sky; dawn was coming up over the Borderlands.

Hale smiled crookedly. "My, how you've grown."

"Yeah," she said. "Hard not to. You were a punk even then, Hale. You're lucky you didn't have to stay here. Some of us it takes a little longer to figure things out."

"I wish I'd known..."he said.

She wished he had too. She wished *someone* had. But it was all right now. No one else could have made the press work, then run that chase with her through the flats—not Bear, not Robbin, not even Ash.

Hale took her face in his hands, running his fingers over the planes and curves he'd traced so often on paper. She could feel his fingertips revelling in the texture of her skin. She closed her eyes, felt his light touch on her eyelids, his breath on her face...

"Hale," she said. "You kiss better than you paint."

He murmured into her cheek, "If that's an insult, I'm not listening. You should be more careful with those words, girl; they'll get you in trouble someday."

"All right," Linny said, resting her chin in his soft brown hair. "No more words."

Before they left the school, Hale wrestled the dust tube out of Linny's pocket.

he wrote on the door.

Hale felt so high it was a wonder to him that his body was still earthbound; any second now he would go soaring over the rooftops of Soho. High from work, high from joy, high from a night without food or sleep, high from running, high from Linny. Everything felt strange to him, like walking under water. All the colors were neon bright, with an afterglow when he turned his head. His body felt light, his breath was a fluttering in his chest. He'd never felt so good and so wired in his entire life.

So he didn't care that as they passed through Hell's Gate into Soho in the golden morning light she'd let go of his hand; or that she seemed to forget him as she climbed up Gutierrez's fire escape and into the Studio, making her grand entrance, the hero returned. He didn't care that she let Ash make a tremendous fuss over her—while simultaneously bitching about how True Bloods should never venture into the flatlands, he wouldn't do that again for love nor money... Every time Linny caught Hale's eye she grinned. For once it was their little secret that the elves weren't in on.

Ash had been waiting for them both in an agony of concern. The transportation of the paper had gone like clockwork; they'd collated the pages in the Mock Avenue chapel and then Billy and the Bloods had taken over the operation. Bear was now taking a nap on Hale's balcony. Robbin was carefully reading a copy of their paper, the cigarette in his hand the only indication he might have been worried about Hale and Linny too—Robbin only smoked when he was nervous. "Checking for spelling errors?" Linny asked him sweetly, peering at the paper over the elvin boy's shoulder.

Ash was saying, "...so then you dumped the coppers and went for a *walk*! Shit. We thought the Suits had gotten you for sure. We were going to give it another hour, then Bear wanted to go over the river with that gun of Buttons'."

Hale made the mistake of catching Linny's eye. They both burst out laughing.

"Shit," Ash repeated disgustedly, miffed that his concern was such a joke.

Linny winked at Hale, and tugged affectionately at Ash's silver hair. "Come on," she said, "let's go to one of those fancy-assed cafes on the Promenade, get some breakfast and watch people buying our paper."

"Using what for money?" Robbin asked, looking up from *Nightlife*.

"We'll borrow some from José," she said. "We can bring him something good back from the Hill."

"Aw," Hale told her with his newfound familiarity, "you just want to go picking through rich people's trash bins again!"

"Shut up, asshole." Linny punched him in the shoulder.

And so Ash was right, and Linny was right: the Mock Avenue Studio show at the Dancing Ferret, so well reviewed in the city's best hoax of the year, became the arts event of the week.

The fraudulence of their edition of *Nightlife* was quickly discovered, of course. (What became of the original issue no one knew—and the Bloods weren't telling.) But in this trade city between two worlds, itself built and sustained on cunning entrepreneurship, the substitution made instant folk heroes of its anonymous authors. And the bogus reviews brought people down to Soho to find out what was *really* going on. Already it was rumored that a Dragon's Tooth matron had asked Taco Hell to cater her next party. The *Nightlife* theater critic had supposedly been seen helplessly wandering up and down Carnival Street, waiting for the Squatters' Theater to spontaneously happen. And one hour into their own show's official opening, the Dancing Ferret was packed.

Ash was in his element, decked out in a satin smoking jacket, his hair a silver cloud around his face. He held a glass of champagne in one hand, graciously greeting his public, punk and nabob alike, as they strolled through the door of Farrell Din's club. The pudgy wizard who owned the place was nowhere to be seen. Ash held court here, master of all he surveyed.

There was little to connect this languid, elegant, high-elvin young man with the frantic boy panicking in the Church of Saintliness driveway—or the surly youth of only two hours ago, framing pictures at the last possible mo-moment, hanging pictures as the first patrons arrived, convinced beyond a doubt that no one would come. Druinna, restored to favor for the event, glowed on Ash's arm in a beaded dress of elvin red. Her eyes opened wider and wider as the luminaries of Bordertown paraded past, inclining their heads to Ash as if he were One of Them.

They had pulled it off, from start to finish. Billy Buttons was so smug there would be no living with him for a month. On the street, the word was that the Bloods had somehow gotten hold of the Pack's famous sawed-off shotgun. Some said they'd broken it; some that it had never worked at all. It didn't matter to the Pack. They were hot to get it back, and the Bloods were holding on to it. Hale could see this going on for years. It reminded him of birthday-party games.

Hale had washed his mutating-fish shirt for the occasion. He hung around the edges of the show morosely, not really wanting to talk to any of the people who came streaming in the door. For him, all the

fun had been in setting it up; now, in this crowd, he was just uncomfortable. He saw Gutierrez come in with a really stunning girl, fresh from the World by the look of her. She was wearing Hale's "Hell's Angels" jacket. Shit! Now he'd never get it back. The girl bumped into an immaculately tailored woman and swore loudly and fluently. Hale relaxed a fraction: this might be fun after all.

Robbin was wearing his usual studio clothes, which still managed to make everyone else's finery look tawdry. He was introducing elves to each other as if he were in his own living room. Billy Buttons was talking animatedly with a well-dressed crew of older elvin women in the corner. Hale wondered what sort of deal he was putting together now.

Bear and Linny had volunteered to go out and get more champagne—in fact, they had practically begged to go. It was clear to Hale that Linny, of all people, Miss Elvin Cool herself, was not enjoying the opening. She'd been snappish ever since the first strangers had started coming in. When Ash suggested that she hang around near the paintings based on her verses so he could find her more easily, she practically took his head off. The poems, she said, were already hanging on the wall next to the pictures; she didn't see why she had to join them.

The Ferret itself looked pathetic in the afternoon light without the glitter of fairy-dust, the driving rhythms of rock'n'roll. The elegant men and women descending from Dragon's Tooth Hill only pointed out the shabbiness of the building more painfully: the paint hanging in peeling strips from the ceiling, the floor stained from too many years of wine and beer. But against the drab, cracked walls, the paintings themselves shone like windows into Faerie: bright, vivid, jewellike visions of the artists' minds.

The patrons from the Hill and the Promenade all spoke in loud whispers, so that everyone could hear what they were saying. One elvin critic was heard to sniff, "It's a disgrace to the traditions of high-elvin art." Shortly after, Druinna managed to trip and spill most of a glass of champagne down the front of his pants. A human buyer cornered Robbin and complained that he had come to see Hale's paintings of Soho streetlife, like those sketches in the paper, not "this True Blood bilge."

Ash didn't care what they thought. He had his champagne, his attention, his circle of rich girls from the Hill all trying to catch his roving eye. Hale didn't care either—for him it was worth it all for the spectacle of Hill snobs and street scum standing side by side, passing canapes around on Dancing Ferret beer trays. He thought now that Ash should have gone ahead with Bear's joking suggestion to serve beer and popcorn for that authentic Soho feel. It would have made the show for these people. Hale's fingers itched to sketch. He'd never seen so many rich people before in his life. There was something about their faces, the way they stood, the way they moved...

There was a commotion at the door. Bear, his arms loaded with fresh champagne bottles, was trying to get through the crowd without dropping any. Right behind him came a tall girl in green velvet murmuring, "Excuse us... excuse us..." to everyone.

It was Linny. But not the Linny he'd seen an hour ago. Not any Linny he'd ever seen. She was wearing the traditional elvin dress from Gutierrez's store. If you knew what to look for, you could still see the dust marks around the knees. But, this time, you could also see that there was nothing else on beneath the dress. No boots, no biker's trousers. She wore delicate golden shoes with heels that made her taller still. Her short hair was gelled with gold glitter, and gold highlighted her eyes and cheekbones. Her lips were painted a rich, deep red, like the forbidden berries of Elfland.

Across the room, she saw Hale looking at her. He raised both eyebrows in admiration and mimed a wolf-whistle.

She looked right through him, as if he wasn't there. Then she drifted over to Ash, kissed his cheeks, and

took his arm.

They made a stunning couple. Hale found Bear and began on the champagne.

Linny felt Ash's arm tighten around her waist. He was half plowed already. His eyes were fixed on her in lustful admiration.

"Madam," he said gallantly, breathing champagne in her face. "You are the very Queen of Elfland. The *Punk* Queen of Elfland." The rich girl he'd been talking to shot Linny a dirty look and drifted away toward Robbin. "My dear Linny..." He stared drunkenly at her chest, breathing hard. She didn't say anything. "Your words have inspired my finest art; now your face will inspire my verse. Poetry. A woman who is both boy and lady, the male and female spirit trapped in every artist..."

Mercifully, an elf dressed in a very fancy World-made polyester suit tapped Ash's shoulder then. "Ah... Mr. Bieucannon, excuse me. I'm Riven Laeriel. I, ah, was interested in one of your 'verse paintings,' ah"—he consulted his notes, written on one of their carbon-copied show "catalogs"—"ah, yes, umm... *When She Comes* is the name of it, I think."

"Indeed," said Ash suavely. "As you know, the painting was inspired by the verse posted on the wall beside it. Allow me to present the poet to you."

He squeezed Linny's elbow, and she nodded at Laeriel, her eyes modestly lowered. "Linny!" Ash hissed in her ear. Laeriel must be important. "What's with you? *Say* something!"

But she didn't have to say anything. Laeriel took her hand. "Enchanted, Miss... ah..." She hadn't let them put her name on the poems, just her initials. She saw Laeriel desperately consulting his program and did not enlighten him. "Miss Ah, may I say that you have the true elvin beauty: classical features such as one seldom encounters these days; the stature one associates with the queens of yore—"

"Thank you," Linny murmured. Laeriel kept hold of her hand, tried to draw her away, but Ash's arm remained locked around her waist.

"Linny," Ash said, "is one of the most promising members of the Mock Avenue Studio."

"Oh?" The older elf's eyebrows lifted in cosmic interest. "Do you paint as well, Miss... ah?"

"Oh, no," said Linny. "I really don't have Ash's talent. He writes, too, you know."

"Indeed?" Laeriel didn't look nearly so interested. He tugged a little on her hand. "Miss, ah, Linny, I have a small art gallery on the Promenade..." This time, Ash let her go. "Just a few choice pieces, you understand," the dealer went on; "some Fern collages, a few early Lilllets..."

"Oh." Linny looked up at him. "I just *adore* Lillet! Especially those unicorns. There's something so... so... well, I'm just not sure how to say it."

Normally she couldn't have gotten through that speech without cracking up. But she wasn't normal now. The girl in the green velvet dress said things like that all the time. She didn't have the words.

"Oh," Laeriel gushed, "I know. I know. It's something indefinably... sad, perhaps. Wistful. Longing for another time. I sense a little of that in your poetry too."

"Do you?" she asked bashfully.

"Oh, yes." He had her backed up against a wall now, staring into her eyes, or trying to. "I see in you the spirit of one of the old bards. But instead of that, ah, modish thatch of copper, you wear a mane of silver curls... how I should love to see your hair grown out to its natural color! Palest buttercup, perhaps? Or true elvin gold?"

In fact, her hair really was red. She only hennaed it to give it body, and to be sure it looked dyed. She couldn't tell Laeriel that, though; it would break his heart to learn she wasn't a True Blood, just a halfie trying very hard. And she didn't want to break anyone's heart today. She didn't want to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing. She just wanted to fit in.

All of these people terrified her. She'd decked herself out in her usual t-shirt and leathers to come to the opening; it was what she felt most like herself in. She'd helped hang pictures, helped calm Ash down, run out for extra wire and paper cups. It was her and the studio guys, working together as always. Then the people started coming in. Soho punks who knew her, knew the studio, they were all right. But the sleek, well-bred patrons from the Hill, brought down here by Linny's own scheme, these struck a nerve in her that wouldn't stop ringing. This was the background Ash and Robbin came from, descendents of elves who really did drink Dragon's Milk, who lived the life she'd only pretended to. This was the aristocrat's life her parents had dreamed of for their kids, why her poor confused folks had worked so hard to move them to Pleasant Gardens, a human neighborhood that had only barely tolerated her parents' "mixed" marriage, and sent her to a good school so that she and her brother could climb up in the world...

In her leather and torn cotton, she'd suddenly felt grubby. Suddenly all her cleverness had seemed brittle, her poems silly, her toughness a shell that would crack at the slightest touch.

In the weird afternoon light of the Dancing Ferret, surrounded by people she didn't know, who didn't know her, she had felt the tough Linny slip away, deserting her like rats deserting a sinking ship. Oh sure, the Studio guys had accepted her—she'd proved herself to them already. But these new people streaming in to see the show... What was Linnea Garnett to them but a ragged punk girl who hung around artists?

I am as I am, and so will I be

But how that I am, none knoweth trulie

Linny had muttered the fragment of old, old poetry to herself as she grabbed Bear's arm and followed him out on the champagne run. She had always found the words comforting, but they did nothing for her now.

As they crossed Mock Avenue, Linny stopped. "Bear," she said, "I'm sorry, I've gotta go."

"What do you mean?" Bear protested. "I need you to help carry the champagne bottles."

"Oh," she said dully. "Yeah. Well, would you just wait a minute—wait two minutes—"

She bolted off in the direction of Gutierrez's store.

It was more than two minutes, and when she came back, stepping carefully in the golden shoes, she was transformed. Bear didn't ask her to carry any bottles.

This time, when she came into the Ferret behind Bear and the champagne, Linny felt all eyes on her. But this time it was all right, because it wasn't really her. It was a creation of glitter and green velvet she'd

made up specially for the occasion.

And here she was, transformed indeed, from all she had wanted to be to all everyone else had wanted for her. It was easy, really. She was surprised that a person of her intelligence had never figured out how easy it was before. Just nod and smile, be interested in what he's saying, don't get sarcastic, don't state any strong opinions. Easy.

She saw Ash heading their way, coming to claim her.

"Oh, Mr. Laeriel," Linny cooed, "I've got to come to your gallery sometime. Ash and I just love to walk along the Promenade..."

Change partners and dance. Ash's arm once again around her waist, pulling her close to him as he walked with airy unsteadiness over to a group of elegantly seedy-looking elves, dressed in elvin brocades that, like their wearers, had seen much better days. "I'm so glad you could come!" Ash told them, ignoring the girl on his arm while simultaneously stroking her hip with his thumb, just the way he used to do with Druinna.

"Well," a tall beautiful elf said with a melancholy smile, "it's certainly *different*, Ashkin. Not the way it used to be at home, of course."

These must be his emigré friends, political refugees and outcasts of Elfland, still holding on to their fey, tattered dignity.

Linny allowed her gaze to drift. A mistake: Hale was staring at her from across the room. Not Hale. Not now. He was the only one she couldn't be perfect for. He knew her too well. He'd see right through to the coward beneath the green dress.

"Ash," she murmured, brushing his earlobe with her lips, "I'm going to get more champagne," intending to dodge Hale at the same time. But it was a mistake. Hale traced her amid the press of people as though she were the only one in the room, caught up with her next to one of his own paintings.

"Linny," he hissed, closing his fingers hard around her waist, "what the fuck is *wrong* with you?"

Not now, she thought; please, not now. She felt brittle as old ice. She had to get rid of him now, explain later... "Wrong?" she said, opening her blue eyes wide. "Why should anything e wrong?"

"Oh, yeah! Listen, Linny, I know what you're up to: flirting with that art dealer, coming on to Ash—"

He'd been drinking too. It made Hale stupid; it made him jealous. And that made her angry.

"Hardly," she said, giving him her ice-maiden prudish stare. "You hardly know what I'm up to."

"—only it's not *sucking up* to Ash anymore, is it? Here in Soho we've got another name for it, princess."

"I'm sure you do." She wrenched her wrist out of his grasp, feeling the skin burn. She turned and walked blindly away. Her battered senses took her to the nearest door, leading out into one of the Ferret's backstage passageways. She was walking blindly down it, cold and white, as close to out of control as she'd ever been.

Hale followed. "Linny!" he bawled. The walls rang with it. "Linny, get your ass back here. I'm not done talking to you!"

She kept on walking. Soon she was going to run out of places to go.

Hale took her by the shoulders, spun her around, and shoved her back against the wall. She was as big as he was. She should have been able to push him back. But in the green dress, she couldn't fight.

"You're a lie," he hissed in her face. "You know that, Linny, you're a big fat lie. Miss Elf Queen of Soho—but we know the truth, don't we, babe?"

"Leave it, Hale," she said. Even her face felt cold.

"Where did you get those poems Ash likes so much-copy 'em out of a book?"

"No," she whispered. She couldn't believe how badly someone could hurt you once you let them in. "I wrote them."

"No," Hale corrected viciously. "Only half of you wrote them. Elvin nostalgia. Fine elvin sensibility. I can't give them that, and you can. I can't do elf art, but even Robbin thinks you do just great. But remember, that's only half of you. The other half is mine: running through that stupid suburb, getting vengeance on that stupid school—that's *human*, Linny, that's *mine*, and you can't just wipe it away!"

Her lips were stiff with rage. She felt them coldly forming the words. "Don't tell me what I can and cannot do."

"Right," Hale said harshly, shifting his weight against her. "Right. Words are for *you* to use. They're off bounds for us dumb artists."

He was as hot as she was cold. He drove his mouth against hers, his teeth battering against her lips. She almost wished that he would tear the green dress off her, maybe then she would be free—

"Well, well," a familiar voice said coolly. "A little lovers' quarrel."

Billy Buttons stood in the corridor, hands in his pockets.

"Don't let me interrupt," he said. But Hale had already released her, jumping back, fumbling with his shirttails.

"I thought," Buttons said, "that it was time we all broke for a general meeting. Saw the two of you ducking out and thought, What a good idea!"

Bear came pounding down the corridor, Ash and Rob-bin close behind him. God knew what Billy had told them.

"Hale," Ash said Warily, "what's going on? You can't run out on the opening!"

"Not me," Hale said. " 'S Linny. Needs some looking after."

"Fuck you, Hale," she said, but it was too late.

"Oh," Hale said formally. "I don't believe you gentle-men have met Miss Garnett, of Pleasant Gardens, Willow-crest Academy. They don't let too many mixed breeds into Willowcrest—very exclusive school—but Linny gets such good grades they made an exception."

She wouldn't beg him to stop. She wasn't even sure he *could* stop, now.

"What the hell are you talking about, Hale?" Ash demanded. "Linny's as elvin as you or—as elvin as I am!"

"The fuck she is," Hale growled. "Not all humans are short and dark, Robbin. Miss Garnett here's a fucking throwback: human dad, halfie mom. Amazing but true! Mix them together and watch it grow. Result: one genuine elf poet. Ship to Soho, C.O.D." They stared at him as if they didn't believe it. As if he'd gone mad. "Now here's the neat part: can anyone who's not an elf do great elvin art? Bear, what do you think?"

"Sure," Bear rumbled. "Anyone can if your heart's in it."

"I don't think Robbin agrees," Hale went on stridently. "I don't think even Ash agrees, not really. So how do we explain Linnea Garnett? Do we say she successfully fooled a panel of experts? 'Cause let me tell you guys, she sure fooled me."

"You don't have to explain anything," Linny said stiffly. This was all so different from the way it was supposed to be. She couldn't believe it was happening. Was she dreaming this; or had she been dreaming the peace of the Studio? The guys were supposed to be the unit; she was the outsider here. She'd wanted in because of the closeness she'd felt in the Studio—and, by a miracle, they'd let her in. Now Hale was tearing it apart, ripping all the fragile connections that had held them together, human and elf, male and female. He was forcing a breach where none should be—hurting her because somewhere along the line everyone had hurt him. She loved Hale, wanted him hurt least of all. And she hated him for doing this.

"Hale," she explained to the others, "can't help it. It's in his blood. It's that copper brutality; just like his copper daddy. Maybe he'll outgrow it, get real romantic. Hale's romantic past is all a fake, you know. He'd never even been out of the suburbs till he met you guys." She turned to Hale, shaking. "Okay? All done? We even?"

Now Hale was staring at her. To her horror, tears stood out in his meadow-grass eyes. She turned away.

"Is it true, Linny?" Robbin had his hand half out to touch her, whether to test or to comfort she didn't know. "Is it true what he said?"

"If you have to ask," she said, "it doesn't matter, does it, asshole?"

And that was as much as she could stand. She turned and walked away down the corridor, feeling already the heavy boots back on her feet, the purring cycle under her, the weight of years ahead of her.

"Mr. Hale?"

Hale looks up from the painting he has long ago lost interest in, is completing only out of stubbornness, and grits his teeth. If he hears that earnest little voice one more time today, he is going to scream. Or kick something. Or hurl the cat and the student out the window.

The cat has knocked a jar of turpentine and two jars of river water onto the rug. It winds itself around Hale's feet, as if this will make Hale forgive. Hale sets his face in a bland smile, hoping the student won't pick up on the aggravation beneath. He's been living too long alone, that's his problem. Not the kid's fault. The boy only wants information—a face identified, a scene labeled, handwriting translated. And he is a workhorse—three weeks in Bordertown and he's already gotten halfway through the storage room. When he gets through that, Hale will break it to him about the attic.

"Mr. Hale, why do they stop?"

The question takes him by surprise.

"I mean, you painted them for so many years... and then they just stop."

That's funny. He's never thought about that really. About *why*. He hadn't intended to stop painting street scenes, he just... had. When the neighborhood changed beyond recognition. When all his old pals were dead, crazed, or gone. When all the women's faces kept turning into Linny's.

"Soho changed," he says. "Hell, we thought we ran Bordertown from down here, set the styles clear up to the Hill. But in fact it was the Tooth that gobbled us up; there's little to distinguish Ho Street from the Promenade these days. So what is there to paint? My own past? I've already done that. The present doesn't hold much interest."

The student's gaze goes past Hale to the stack of paintings Hale has made, paintings he does not want the University or the galleries to cart away. The painting of Ash. The entrance to Danceland; several other landmarks. Bear. Linny.

"What happened to all your pals, Mr. Hale?" the boy asks shyly, peering from beneath the dreadlocks. "I mean the kids in the pictures." Hale has finally persuaded him to leave the goddamn suit in his suitcase; now he wanders around Hale's house in bleached drawstring pants, his feet bare. Yet nothing Hale can say will get rid of the *Mr. Hale*.

"What do you mean, what happened to them? You're a specialist on the period, you know what happened to them!"

"Oh," the boy says with an elegant gesture of his slim brown hand. That's new: must have picked it up from the elves around here. Hale absently doodles the line of it with his brush end in the still-wet oil paint. "I know about Robbin Pearl, the famous art dealer, houses in Bordertown and Paris. Ash Bieucannon, famous recluse painter." He gestures at the stack of canvases. "But what about *them*,

the kids they were when you painted them? What happened to them, Mr. Hale?"

Hale sighs, shifts in his chair. This kid's been living among the dust and ghosts of Hale's past for too long. The same characters turning up in sketch after sketch, becoming more real to him than his own life. He can imagine the boy trying to argue with the silent smile of Ash, wondering if he could get big Bear to like him, falling in love with Linny... Not good, to live with ghosts.

"You mean, 'Is it going to happen to me?'" Hale says. "Yes, probably; if you keep working hard and caring about things. Look what happened to Linnea Dark Garnett. She managed to escape her Soho connection, went down to the World, and started the Elvin Revival craze that led to Ash and Robbin being such hot stuff down there. Have you found my first edition of her *Songs from Elsewhere* yet?"

The boy shakes his head mutely, eyes bright. "*A first edition? Is it signed?*"

"What? No. Oh, no. Not signed. I bought it up here, when it first came out."

"I hear Robbin Pearl's supposed to be writing his memoirs now."

Hale chuckles. "That should be a good time. Just don't take them too seriously. Now, Robin did all right for himself; started his business buying elvin artwork for World museums. Married a Bordertown girl—human, if you can believe it!"

The boy looks at him, uncomprehending.

"No," Hale says, "guess there's no reason why you wouldn't. I couldn't get *everything* into those paintings.

"As for Ash... hell, you probably know more Ash Bieucannon stories than I do. I expect most of them are true. The lovers. The drugs. I was there the time he tried to bring William Butler Yeats back to life. Ash always had a fetish for dead poets; but he was never very meticulous in his work. And so he had the poor ghost stumbling all over Bordertown for a good two weeks, Ash sticking pins in a map, trying to track him down." Hale laughs—not at the memory, which is still rather horrible, but at the story it makes now. "The city finally paid a group of elf mages to lay the guy to rest..."

Hale grows thoughtful, tapping his pipe against his knee. The elvin cat climbs into his lap, butting its head against the artist's hand.

"I don't see Ash anymore," he says finally. "He, umm, doesn't want to see anyone. He stays up in that old monstrosity way on the other side of the Hill, with his guard dogs and his cute little model, can't be a day over nineteen. Ash looks old. Elves don't age like we do: they don't age gradually over the years, but all in a rush, like a tree losing its sap. Ash, well, he's lost it—though by their standards he's not old. Dragon's Milk, you see. He got rich, and then he could afford it all the time. For a while he was the Prince of Dreams, but now he's just plain crazy. He doesn't know me anymore. He's convinced the art critic for *Nightlife* is threatening his life—a sweet, earnest little halfie, wouldn't harm a fly. But that wouldn't be so bad if he'd only write, or paint... you won't see anything more from Ash Bieucannon."

The student is looking hard at the study of Bear with the shotgun and Linny on her bike that's still pinned up on Hale's wall. "So what about Bear?"

"Bear... you'd have liked Bear. Don't let's talk about Bear, now; we're discussing the road to success, remember? Billy Buttons, the halfie with the wonderful coat with all the folds, he's on that road somewhere, I'm sure of that. BB never liked to publicize his successes. José Gutierrez, tattooed José, you'll meet if you go to that big elvin surplus store up on Calameada. Druinna, now there's an interesting story—she's the pretty little elf-girl in that series of—"

"Yes," the student interrupts, "I know which one she is. What happened to her?"

"Well, at first she looked to be a sad case: got married, got fat, had too many kids... next thing I hear, she's running the old Wheat Sheaf, looking like a million bucks, and her oldest girl's got a hot band playing around town..."

"But, hey." Hale catches himself about to begin another story of people this kid doesn't even know.

"There it is. They all grew up, and got rich and famous. And a nice student from the World came up to old Hale's studio and spent all his time cataloguing their pictures, until finally the poor young man went completely crazy and his hair turned white and all his teeth fell out from overwork." Hale eases himself up from the chair. "So what do you say we knock off early today, go down to the Wheat Sheaf, and I'll buy you a beer?"

The kid grins and nods, dreadlocks swinging. "I'll get my shoes," he says.

Hale hears feet pounding on the stairs as the boy runs down them, his excitement sharp in the air. Well, of course. Maybe it's not the Soho Hale remembers, but it'll be fresh and new to this kid—a Bordertown of his own. The magic place at the edge of the Elflands that he'd saved for two years to come to.

Hale can hear the boy talking to the cat. It's still odd to hear another voice in the house, he's grown so used to being alone. Thirty years of living alone. Almost thirty-one.

The first few years he kept hoping she'd come back. He knew she would. She belonged on the streets of Soho. After that he stopped waiting. Or so he likes to believe. He tells himself that living alone is just an acquired habit, like too much Dragon's Milk, or Linny's passion for coltsfoot. He gazes up at the painting

of her, cig in her mouth, that cocky half smile.

So she's still telling people her father is an elvin lord.

Some things never change.

Hale unbuttons his paint-covered overshirt, exposing the Danceland t-shirt he wears underneath. As he tightens the laces on his boots, he can hear the Mock Avenue Bell Tower clock chime the time, incorrectly. He counts twelve rings. That means it's a quarter to ten.

Hale damps the spell lights as he leaves the room. The cornflower-blue gaze rests in shadow.