

FAERIE RING BLUES

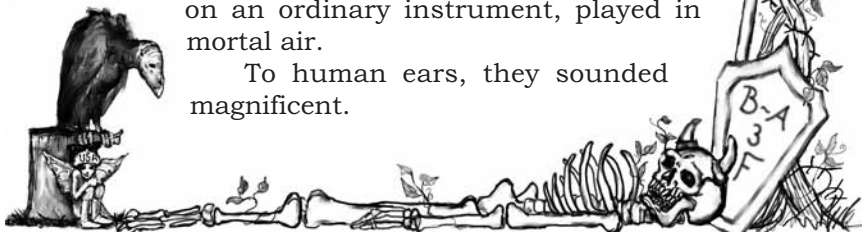
JAMES CHAMBERS

ROLLIN' JOE LINNET WORKED SIX STEEL STRINGS like no mortal man should've been able to, but the only person who knew it was Gorge, seated at the shadowy back corner of the bar, his anger burning hotter with every crying note the black musician played. The virtuoso bluesman enchanted the crowd crammed into Sam's Place that night in the summer of 1958; like everyone else in L.A., they were eager to get as close as possible to new talent before it rose out of reach. And no one doubted that Rollin' Joe was on the rise; no one questioned that he was a master.

Gorge knew better.

He saw how Linnet's hand wrapped around the neck of his weathered Martin acoustic, how his fingers stroked the sweat-tarnished frets, and Gorge knew that whatever talent Linnet possessed had little to do with what he was playing. There was magic in the man. Magic that damn well didn't belong to him. The couple of years since Gorge had been exiled from the Faerie Kingdoms weren't so long that he couldn't recognize the chords and scales of the Enchanted Lands, even when they sounded like hell played by a human on an ordinary instrument, played in mortal air.

To human ears, they sounded magnificent.



300 · FAERIE RING BLUES

To Gorge they were like daggers biting into his soul. Only he knew how to make them sound close to right in this world, because he'd dedicated his life to this music before he was exiled here from the Kingdoms. He drained the bottle of beer he'd been holding, slammed it on the bar without taking his eyes off Linnet, and said, "How the fuck does a second-rate blues guitarist out of some back-water, Mississippi river town learn scales it took me a year to master?"

Delilah, sitting beside him, had no answer. She put down her pencil and closed her sketchbook. She caressed the back of Gorge's hand and watched the hatred smolder in his eyes. When black moods came over Gorge, Delilah's presence was the only thing that helped him keep his temper in check. Gorge's rage was complex and fervent. He hated the Faerie Kingdoms, where he'd been the greatest musician in the Enchanted Lands; he hated its ruling council, the Flock of Eternity, and the ones there who'd betrayed and exiled him. He hated the mortal world, where he was forced now to make his home, and he hated most mortals, too. The things he didn't hate were music and Delilah. After he'd been cast out from the Lands, Delilah had saved his life and loved him. Her love had helped him discover he could play the music of the Kingdoms in the mortal world, even though the shape of this reality was wrong for it, but it was Gorge's love for her that kept him from giving into the worst of the darkness inside him. He wanted to be worthy of all that she'd done for him.

Tonight, though, to hear a mortal playing *his* music as if it were his own was more than Gorge could tolerate. He saw the joy in the faces of the crowd. They were dancing and swaying beneath a cloud of cigarette smoke, tapping their feet to the rhythm of Rollin' Joe's blues, and he thought he should take the stage and play something to set them reeling and show them how music could really sound. Instead, he waited, and when Rollin' Joe finished his set, Gorge went backstage and knocked on the bluesman's dressing room door. No one stopped him. Gorge, who could play music like no one else on earth, had become a top session musician under the name Gavin Grey, and in L.A. no one messed with a star, especially one known for having a nasty temper.

A woman opened the door; her eyes lit up when she saw Gorge. Across the cramped room Rollin' Joe leaned back in his chair and drank from a bottle of beer. His expression lit on Gorge, and Gorge read it clearly: Rollin' Joe was thinking how far and