

A Restoration of Faith

HARRY DRESDEN

by Jim Butcher, 1971-

Published: 1998



This is the first of the Dresden Files stories, chronologically, and it was the first time I tried to write short fiction for the professional market. I originally put it together as a class assignment at the University of Oklahoma's Professional Writing program, more than two years before *Storm Front* found a home at Roc.

This one won't win any awards, because it is, quite frankly, a novice effort. It was perhaps the third or fourth short story I'd ever written, if you include projects in grade school. I had barely learned to keep my feet under me as a writer, and to some degree that shows in this piece. Certainly, the editors to whom I submitted

this story seemed to think it wasn't up to par for professional publication, and I think that was a perfectly fair assessment.

Read this story for what it is—an anxious beginner's first effort, meant to be simple, straightforward fun.

I struggled to hold on to the yowling child while fumbling a quarter into the pay phone and jamming down the buttons to dial Nick's mobile.

"Ragged Angel Investigations," Nick answered. His voice was tense, I thought, anxious.

"It's Harry," I said. "You can relax, man. I found her."

"You did?" Nick asked. He let out a long exhalation. "Oh, Jesus, Harry."

The kid lifted up one of her oxford shoes and mule-kicked her leg back at my shin. She connected, hard enough to make me jump. She looked like a parent's dream at eight or nine years old, with her dimples and dark pigtails—even in her street-stained schoolgirl's uniform. And she had strong legs.

I got a better hold on the girl and lifted her up off the ground again while she twisted and wriggled. "Ow. Hold still."

"Let me go, beanpole," she responded, turning to glower back at me before starting to kick again.

"Listen to me, Harry," Nick said. "You've got to let the kid go right this minute and walk away."

"What?" I said. "Nick, the Astors are going to give us twenty-five grand to return her before nine p.m."

"I got some bad news, Harry. They aren't going to pay us the money."

I winced. "Ouch. Maybe I should just drop her off at the nearest precinct house, then."

"The news gets worse. The parents reported the girl kidnapped. The police band is sending two descriptions around town to Chicago PD, and they match guess who."

"Mickey and Donald?"

"Heh," Nick said. I heard him flick his Bic and take a drag. "We should be so lucky."

"I guess it's more embarrassing for Mr. and Mrs. High-and-Mighty to have their kid run away than it is to have her kidnapped."

"Hell. Kidnapped girl gives them something to talk about at their parties for months. Makes them look richer and more famous than their friends, too. Of course, we'll be in jail, but what the hell?"

"They came to us," I protested.

"That won't be the way they tell it."

"Dammit," I said.

"If you get caught with her, it could be trouble for both of us. The Astors got connections. Ditch the girl and get back home. You were there all night."

"No, Nick," I said. "I can't do that."

"Let the boys in blue bring her in. That'll clear you and me both."

"I'm up on North Avenue, and it's after dark. I'm not leaving a nine-year-old girl out here by herself."

"Ten," shouted the girl, furious. "I'm ten, you insensitive jerk!" She started kicking again, and I kept myself more or less out of the way of her feet.

"She sounds so cute. Just let her run, Harry, and let the criminal types beware."

"Nick."

"Aw, hell, Harry. You're getting moral on me again."

I smiled, but it felt tight on my mouth, and my stomach churned with anger. "Look, we'll think of something. Just get down here and pick us up."

"What happened to your car?"

"Broke down this afternoon."

"Again? What about the El?"

"I'm broke. Nick, I need a ride. I can't walk back to the office with her, and I don't want to stand here in a public booth fighting her, either. So get down here and get us."

"I don't want to spend time in jail because you can't salve your conscience, Harry."

"What about your conscience?" I shot back. Nick was all bluster. When it came down to the wire, he couldn't have left the girl alone in that part of town, either.

Nick growled out something that sounded vaguely obscene, then said, "Fine, whatever. But I can't get across the river very easy, so I'll be on the far side of the bridge. All you have to do is cross the bridge with her and stay out of sight. Police patrols in the area will be looking for you. Half an hour. If you're not there, I'm not waiting. Bad neighborhood."

"Have faith, man. I'll be there."

We hung up without saying good-bye.

"All right, kid," I said. "Stop kicking me and let's talk."

"To hell with you, mister," she shouted. "Let me go before I break your leg."

I winced at the shrill note her voice hit and stepped away from the phone, half dragging and half carrying her with me while I looked around nervously. The last thing I needed was a bunch of good citizens running to the kid's aid.

The streets were empty, the gathering dark rushing in quickly to fill the spaces left by the broken streetlights. There were lights in the windows, but no one came out in response to the girl's shouting. It was the sort of neighborhood where people looked the other way and let live.

Ah, Chicago. You just gotta love big, sprawling American cities. Ain't modern living grand? I could have been a real sicko, rather than just looking like one, and no one would have done anything.

It made me feel a little nauseated. "Look. I know you're angry right now, but believe me, I'm doing what's best for you."

She stopped kicking and glared up at me. "How should you know what's best for me?"

"I'm older than you. Wiser."

"Then why are you wearing that coat?"

I looked down at my big black duster, with its heavy mantle and long canvas folds flapping around my rather spare frame. "What's wrong with it?"

"It belongs on the set of *El Dorado*," she snapped. "Who are you supposed to be, Ichabod Crane or the Marlboro Man?"

I snorted. "I'm a wizard."

She gave me a look of skepticism you can really only get from children who have recently gone through the sobering trauma of discovering there is no Santa Claus. (Ironically, there is, but he can't operate on the sort of scale that used to make everyone believe in him.)

"You've got to be kidding me," she said.

"I found you, didn't I?"

She frowned at me. "How did you find me? I thought that spot was perfect."

I continued walking toward the bridge. "It would have been, for another ten minutes or so. Then that Dumpster would have been full of rats looking for something to eat."

The girl's expression turned faintly green. "Rats?"

I nodded. With luck, maybe I could win the kid over. "Good thing your mother had your brush in her purse. I was able to get a couple of hairs from it."

"So?"

I sighed. "So, I used a little thaumaturgy, and it led me straight to you. I had to walk most of the way, but straight to you."

"Thauma-what?"

Questions were better than kicks any day. I kept answering them. Heck, I like to answer questions about magic. Professional pride, maybe. "Thaumaturgy. It's ritual magic. You draw symbolic links between actual persons, places, or events, and representative models. Then you invest a little energy to make something happen on the small scale, and something happens on the large scale as well—"

The second I was distracted with answering her question, the kid bent her head and bit my hand.

I yelled something I probably shouldn't have around a kid and jerked my hand away. The kid dropped to the ground, agile as a monkey, and took off toward the bridge. I shook my hand, growled at myself, and took off after her. She was fast, her pigtailed flying out behind her, her shoes and stained kneesocks flashing.

She got to the bridge first. It was an ancient, two-lane affair that arched over the Chicago River. She hurled herself out onto it.

"Wait!" I shouted after her. "Don't!" She didn't know this town like I did.

"Sucker," she called back, her voice merry. She kept on running.

That is, until a great rubbery, hairy arm slithered out from beneath a manhole cover at the apex of the bridge and wrapped its greasy fingers around one of her ankles. The kid screamed in sudden terror, pitching forward onto the asphalt and raking the skin from both knees. She turned and twisted, kicking at her attacker. Blood was a dark stain on her socks in the glow of the few functioning streetlights.

I cursed beneath my breath and raced toward her along the bridge, my lungs laboring. The hand tightened its grip and started dragging her toward the manhole. I could hear deep, growling laughter coming from the darkness in the hole that led down to the understructure of the bridge.

She screamed, "What is it? What is it? Make it let go!"

“Kid!” I shouted. I ran toward the manhole, jumped, and came down as hard as I could on the hairy arm, right at the wrist, the heels of both hiking boots thumping down onto the grimy flesh.

A bellow erupted from the manhole, and the fingers loosened. The girl twisted her leg, and though it cost her one of her expensive oxfords and one kneesock, she dragged herself free of its grasp, sobbing. I gathered her up and backpedaled away, turning so that I wasn't leaving my back to the manhole.

The troll shouldn't have been able to squeeze his way out of a hole that small, but he did. First came that grimy arm, followed by a lumpy shoulder, and then his malformed head and hideous face. He looked at me and growled, jerking his way out of the hole with rubbery ease, until he stood in the middle of the bridge between me and the far side of the river, like some professional wrestler who had fallen victim to a correspondence course for plastic surgeons. In one hand, he held a meat cleaver approximately two feet long, with a bone handle and suspicious-looking stains of dark brown on it.

“Harry Dresden,” the troll rumbled. “Wizard deprive Gogoth of his lawful prey.” He whipped the cleaver left and right. It made a little whistling sound.

I lifted my chin and set my jaw. It's never smart to let a troll see that you're afraid of him. “What are you talking about, Gogoth? You know as well as I do that mortals aren't all fair game anymore. The Unseelie Accords settled that.”

The troll's face split into a truly disgusting leer. “Naughty children,” he rumbled. “Naughty children still mine.” He narrowed his eyes, and they started burning with malicious hunger. “Give! Now!” The troll rolled toward me a few paces, gathering momentum.

I lifted my right hand, forced out a little will, and the silver ring upon my third finger abruptly shone with a clear, cool light, brighter than the illumination around us.

“Law of the jungle, Gogoth,” I said, keeping my voice calm. “Survival of the fittest. You take another step and you're going to land smack in the ‘too stupid to live’ category.”

The troll growled, not slowing, and raised one meaty fist.

“Think about it, darkspawn,” I snarled. The light pouring from my ring took on a hellish, almost nuclear tone. “One more step and you're vapor.”

The troll came to a lumbering halt, and his rubber-slime lips drew back from fetid fangs. “No,” he snarled. Drool slithered down his fangs and splattered on the asphalt as he stared at the girl. “She is mine. Wizard cannot interfere in this.”

“Oh yeah?” I said. “Watch me.” And with that, I lowered my hand (and with it the fierce silver light), gave the troll my best sneer, and turned in a flare of my dark duster to walk back to North Avenue with long, confident strides. The girl stared over my shoulder, her eyes wide.

“Is he coming after us?” I asked quietly.

She blinked back at the troll, and then at me. “Uh, no. He's just staring at you.”

“Okay. If he starts this way, let me know.”

“So you can vapor him?” she asked, her voice unsteady.

“Hell, no. So we can run.”

“But what about...?” She touched the ring on my hand.

“I lied, kid.”

“What!?”

“I lied,” I repeated. “I’m not a good liar, but trolls aren’t too bright. It was just a light show, but he fell for it, and that’s all that counts.”

“I thought you said you were a wizard,” she accused me.

“I am,” I replied, annoyed. “A wizard who was at a séance-slash-exorcism before breakfast. Then I had to find two wedding rings and a set of car keys, and then I spent the rest of my day running after you. I’m pooped.”

“You couldn’t blow that... that thing up?”

“It’s a troll. Sure I could,” I said cheerfully. “If I weren’t so worn-out, and if I were able to focus enough to keep from blowing myself up along with him. My aim’s bad when I’m this tired.”

We reached the edge of the bridge, and, I hoped, Gogoth’s territory. I started to swing the girl down. She was too big to be carrying. Then I saw her one bare foot dangling and the blood forming into dark scabs on her knees. I sighed and started walking along North Avenue. If I could go down the long city block to the next bridge, cross it, and make my way back down the other block within half an hour, I could still meet Nick on the other side.

“How’s your leg?” I asked.

She shrugged, though her face was pained. “Okay, I guess. Was that thing for real?”

“You bet,” I said.

“But it was... It wasn’t...”

“Human,” I said. “No. But hell, kid. A lot of people I know aren’t really human. Look around us. Bundy, Manson, those other animals. Right here in Chicago, you’ve got the Vargassis working out of Little Italy, the Jamaican posses, others. Animals. World’s full of them.”

The girl sniffed. I glanced at her face. She looked sad, and too wise for her years. My heart softened.

“I know,” she said. “My parents are like that, a little. They don’t think about anyone else, really. Just themselves. Not even each other—except what they can do for each other. And I’m just some toy that should get stuck in the closet and dragged out when people come over, so I can be prettier and more perfect than their toys. The rest of the time, I’m in their way.”

“Hey, come on,” I said. “It’s not that bad, is it?”

She glanced at me, and then away. “I’m not going back to them,” she said. “I don’t care who you are or what you can do. You can’t make me go back to them.”

“There’s where you’re wrong,” I said. “I’m not going to leave you down here.”

“I heard you talking to your friend,” she said. “My parents are trying to screw you over. Why are you still doing this?”

“I have another six months to work for a licensed investigator before I can get a license of my own. And I got this stupid thing about leaving kids in the middle of big, mean cities after dark.”

“At least down here, no one tries to lie and tell me that they care, mister. I see all these Disney shows about how much parents love their kids. How there’s some sort of magical bond of love. But it’s a lie. Like you and that troll.” She laid her head against my shoulder, and I could feel the exhaustion in her body as she sagged against me. “There’s no magic.”

I fell silent for several paces as I carried her. It was hard to hear that from a kid. A ten-year-old girl's world should be full of music and giggling and notes and dolls and dreams—not harsh, barren, jaded reality. If there was no light in the heart of a child, a little girl like this, then what hope did any of us have?

A few paces later, I realized something I hadn't been admitting to myself. A quiet, cool little voice had been trying to tell me something I hadn't been willing to listen to. I was in the business of wizardry to try to help people; to try to make things better. But no matter how many evil spirits I confronted, no matter how many would-be black magicians I tracked down, there was always something else—something worse—waiting for me in the dark. No matter how many lost children I found, there would always be ten times as many who disappeared for good.

No matter how much I did, how much trash I cleaned up, it was only a drop in the ocean.

Pretty heavy thoughts for a tired and beaten guy like me, my arms burdened with the girl's weight.

Flashing lights made me look up. The mouth to one of the alleys between the buildings had been sealed off with police tape, and four cars, blue bulbs awhirl, were parked on the street around the alley. A couple of EMTs were toting a covered shape out of the alley on a stretcher. The flashing strobes of cameras lit the alleyway in bursts of white.

I came to a stop, hesitant.

"What?" the girl murmured.

"Police. Maybe I should hand you over."

I felt her weary shrug. "They're only going to take me home. I don't care." She sagged against me again.

I swallowed. The Astors were Chicago's elite crowd. They carried enough clout around the old town to get a bum would-be private investigator put away for a good long time. And they could afford the best of lawyers.

It's a lousy world, Dresden, the cool little voice told me. And the good guys don't win unless they have an expensive attorney, too. You'd be in jail before you could blink.

My mouth twisted into a bitter smile as one of the uniform cops, a woman, noticed me and cast a long frown in my direction. I turned around and started walking the other way.

"Hey," the cop said. I kept walking. "Hey!" she said again, and I heard brisk footsteps on the sidewalk.

I hurried along into the dark and stepped into the first alley. The shadows behind a pile of crates created an ideal refuge, and I carried the girl into it with me. I crouched there in the darkness and waited while the cop's footsteps came near and then passed on by.

I waited in the dark, feeling all the heaviness and darkness settle into my skin, into my flesh. The girl just shivered and lay against me, unmoving.

"Just leave me," she said, finally. "Go over the bridge. The troll will let you cross the bridge if I'm not with you."

"Yes," I said.

"So go on. I'll walk up to the police after you're gone. Or something."

She was lying. I'm not sure how I could tell, but I could.

She would go to the bridge.

I'm told that bravery is doing what you need to do, even when you're afraid. But sometimes I wonder if courage isn't a lot more complicated than that. Sometimes, I think, courage is pulling yourself up off the ground one more time. Doing one more set of paperwork, even when you don't want to. Maybe that's just plain stubbornness; I don't know.

It didn't matter. Not to me. I'm a wizard. I don't really belong here. Our world sucks. It might suit the trolls and the vampires and all those nasty, leering things that haunt our nightmares (while we clutch our physics books to our chests and reassure ourselves that they cannot exist), but I'm not a part of it. I won't be a part of it.

I took a breath, in the dark, and asked, "What's your name?"

She was silent for a moment and then said, in a very uncertain voice, "Faith."

"Faith," I said. I smiled, so that she could hear it. "My name's Harry Dresden."

"Hi," she said, her voice a whisper.

"Hi. Have you ever seen something like this?" I cupped my hand, summoned some of the last dregs of my power, and cast a warm, glowing light into the ring on my right hand. It lit Faith's face, and I could see on her smooth cheeks the streaks of the tears I had not heard.

She shook her head.

"Here," I said, and took the ring from my finger. I slipped it onto hers, over her right thumb, where it hung a bit loose. The light died away as I did it, leaving us in the dark again. "Let me show you something."

"Battery went out," she mumbled. "I don't have money for another one."

"Faith? Do you remember the very best day of your life?"

She was quiet for a minute. Then she said, her voice a bare whisper, "Yes. A Christmas. When Gremma was still alive. Gremma was nice to me."

"Tell me about it," I urged quietly, covering her hand with my own.

I felt her shrug. "Gremma came over Christmas Eve. We played games. She would play with me. And we stayed up, on the floor by the Christmas tree, waiting for Santa Claus. She let me open just one present, for Christmas Eve. It was one she'd gotten me."

Faith took a shuddering breath. "It was a dolly. A real baby dolly. Mother and Father had gotten me Barbie stuff, the whole line for that year. They said that if I left them all in the original boxes, they would be worth a lot of money later. But Gremma listened to what I really wanted." Then I heard it, the tiny smile in her voice. "Gremma cared about me."

I moved my hand, and a soft, pinkish light flowed up out of the ring around her thumb, a loving, gentle warmth. I heard Faith draw in a little gasp of surprise, and then a delighted smile spread over her mouth.

"But how?" she whispered.

I gave her a smile. "Magic," I said. "The best kind. A little light in the dark."

She looked up at me, studying my face, my eyes. I shied away from the perception of that gaze. "I need to go back, don't I?" she asked.

I brushed a stray bit of hair from her forehead. "There are people who love you, Faith. Or who one day will. Even if you can't see them beside you, right here, right

now, they're out there. But if you let the dark get into your eyes, you might never find them. So it's best to keep a little light with you, along the way. Do you think you can remember that?"

She nodded up at me, her face lit by the light from the ring.

"Whenever it gets too dark, think of the good things you have, the good times you've had. It will help. I promise."

She leaned against me and gave me a simple, trusting hug. I felt my cheeks warm up as she did. Aw, shucks.

"We need to go," I told her. "We've got to get across the bridge and meet my friend Nick."

She chewed on her lip, her expression immediately worried. "But the troll."

I winked. "Leave him to me."

The girl didn't feel anywhere near so heavy as when I carried her back. I studied the bridge as we approached. Maybe, if I was lucky, I'd be able to sprint across without the troll being able to stop me.

Yeah. And maybe one day I'd go to an art museum and become well-rounded.

Bridges are a troll's specialty; either because of some magic or just because of aptitude, you never get across the bridge without facing the troll. That's life, I guess.

I set the girl down on the ground next to me and stepped out onto the bridge. "All right, Faith," I said. "Whatever happens, you run across that bridge. My friend Nick is going to pull up on the far side any minute now."

"What about you?"

I gave her a casual roll of my neck. "I'm a wizard," I said. "I can handle him."

Faith gave me another look of supreme skepticism and fumbled to hold my hand. Her fingers felt very small and very warm inside of mine, and a fierce surge of determination coursed through me. No matter what happened, I would let no harm come to this child.

We walked out onto the bridge. The few lights that had been burning brightly earlier were gone—Gogoth's work, doubtless. Night reigned over the bridge, and the Chicago River gurgled by, smooth and cold and black below us.

"I'm scared," Faith whispered.

"He's just a big bully," I told her. "Face him down and he'll back off." I hoped very much that was true. We kept walking and skirted wide around the manhole at the apex of the bridge; I kept my body between Faith and the entrance to the troll's lair.

Gogoth must have been counting on that.

I heard Faith scream again and whirled my head to see the troll's thick, hairy arm stretched up over the edge of the bridge, while the troll clung to the side of the bridge like some huge, overweight spider. I snarled and stomped his fingers once more, and the troll bellowed in rage. Faith slipped free, and I half hurled her toward the far side of the bridge. "Run, Faith!"

The troll's arm swept my legs out from beneath me and he came surging up over the railing at the side of the bridge, too supple and swift for his bulk. His burning eyes focused on the fleeing Faith, and more of his slimy drool spattered out of his mouth. He scythed his cleaver through the air and crouched to leap after the child.

I got my feet under me, screamed, and threw myself at the troll's leg, swinging my long legs around to tangle with the creature's. He roared in fury and went down in a tumble with me. I heard myself cackling and decided, without a doubt, that I had at least one screw loose.

The troll caught me by the corner of my jacket and threw me against the railing hard enough to make me see stars.

"Wizard," Gogoth snarled, spitting drool and foam. The cleaver swept the air again, and the troll stalked toward me. "Now you die, and Gogoth chew your bones."

I gathered myself to my feet, but it was too late. There was no way I could run or throw myself over the railing in time.

Faith screamed, "Harry!" and a brilliant flash of pink light flooded the bridge, making the troll whip his ugly head toward the far side of the river. I ducked to my left and ran, toward Faith and away from the troll. Looking up, I saw Nick's car roaring toward the bridge with enough speed to tell me my partner had seen that something was going on.

The troll followed me, and though I had gained a few paces on him, I had the sinking realization that the beast was lighter on his feet than I was. There was a whistling sound of the cleaver cutting the air, and I felt something skim past my scalp. I bobbed to my right, ducking, and the second swipe missed by an even narrower margin. I stumbled, and fell, and the troll was on top of me in a heartbeat. I rolled in time to see him lift his bloodstained cleaver high above him, and I felt his drool splatter onto my chest.

"Wizard!" the troll bellowed.

There was a yell, and then the cop, the one who had followed us before, hurled herself onto the troll's back and locked her nightstick across his throat. She gave the stick a practiced twist, and the troll's eyes bulged. The huge cleaver clanged as it tumbled from Gogoth's grip and hit the pavement.

The cop leaned back, making the troll's spine arch into a bow—but this wasn't a man she was dealing with. The thing twisted his head, squirmed, and popped out of her grip, then opened his jaws in a frenzied roar that literally blew the patrolwoman's cap off her head and sent her stumbling back with a wide-eyed stare. The troll, maddened, slammed one fist into the pavement, cracking it, and drew the other back to drive toward her skull.

"Hey, ugly," I shouted.

The troll turned in time to see me grunt and swing the massive cleaver at his side.

The rotten, grimy flesh just beneath his ribs split open with a howl of sound and a burst of motion. Gogoth leaned his head back and let out a high-pitched, wailing yowl. I backed off, knowing what came next.

The poor cop stared in white-faced horror as the troll's wound split and dozens, hundreds, thousands of tiny, wriggling figures, squalling and squealing, poured out of the split in his flesh. The massive thews of the beast deflated like old basketballs, slowly sinking in upon themselves as the bridge became littered with a myriad of tiny trolls, their ugly little heads no bigger than the head of a president on a coin. They poured out of Gogoth in a flood, spilling onto the bridge in a writhing, wriggling horde.

The troll's cheeks hollowed, and his eyes vanished. His mouth opened in a slack-jawed yawn, and, as the leathery, grimy sack of tiny trolls emptied, he sank to the ground until he lay there like a discarded, disgusting raincoat.

The cop stared, mouth wide, attempting to form words of a prayer or a curse. Nick's headlights whirled and spilled across the bridge, and with twice ten thousand screams of protest, the tiny trolls dispersed before the light in all directions.

A few seconds later, there were only myself, Faith, the cop, and Nick, who was approaching us across the bridge. Faith threw herself at me and gave me a quick hug around the waist. Her eyes were bright with excitement. "That was the most disgusting thing I have ever seen. I want to be a wizard when I grow up."

"That was... was..." the cop said, stunned. She was short, stocky, and the loss of her cap revealed tightly braided, pale hair.

I winked down at Faith and nodded to the cop. "A troll. I know." I walked over to the cap and dusted it off. A few trolls, squealing in protest, fell to the street and scampered away. The cop watched with stunned eyes. "Hey, thanks a lot for the help, Officer"—I squinted down at her badge—"Murphy." I smiled and offered her the hat.

She took it with numb fingers. "Oh, Jesus. I really have lost it." She blinked a few times and then scowled up at my face. "You. You're the perp on the Astor kidnapping."

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but I needn't have bothered.

"Are you kidding?" Faith Astor sneered. "This... buffoon? Kidnap me? He couldn't bum a cigarette off the Marlboro Man." She turned toward me and gave me a wink. Then she offered both her wrists to Murphy. "I admit it, Officer. I ran away. Take me to the pokey and throw away the key."

Murphy, to her credit, seemed to be handling things fairly well for someone who had just confronted the monster under the bed. She recovered her nightstick and went to Faith, examining her for injuries before directing a suspicious gaze at Nick and me.

"Hoo boy," Nick said, planting his stocky bulk squarely beside mine. "Here it comes. You get the top bunk, stilts, but I'm not going to pick up your soap in the shower."

The cop looked at me and Nick. Then she looked at the girl. Then, more thoughtfully, she looked at the leathery lump that had been Gogoth the troll. Her eyes flashed back to Nick and me, and she said, "Aren't you two the ones who run Ragged Angel, the agency that looks for lost kids?"

"I run it," Nick said, his voice resigned. "He works for me."

"Yeah, what he said," I threw in, just to let Nick know he wasn't going to the big house alone.

Murphy nodded and eyed the girl. "Are you all right, honey?"

Faith sniffed and smiled up at Murphy. "A little hungry, and I could use something to clean up these scrapes. But other than that, I'm quite well."

"And these two didn't kidnap you?"

Faith snorted. "Please."

Murphy nodded and then jabbed her nightstick at Nick and me. "I've got to call this in. You two vanish before my partner gets here." She glanced down at Faith and winked. Faith grinned up at her in return.

Murphy took the girl back toward the far side of the bridge and the other police units. Nick and I ambled back toward his car. Nick's broad, honest face was set in an expression of nervous glee. "I can't believe it," he said. "I can't believe that happened. Was that the troll, what's-his-name?"

"That was Gogoth," I said cheerfully. "Nothing bigger than a breadcrumb is going to be bothered by trolls on this bridge for a long, long time."

"I can't believe it," Nick said again. "I thought we were so dead. I can't believe it."

I glanced back over the bridge. On the far side, the girl was standing up on her tiptoes, waving. Soft pink light flowed from the ring on her right thumb. I could see the smile on her face. The cop was watching me, too, her expression thoughtful. It turned into a smile.

Modern living might suck. And the world we've made can be a dark place. But at least I don't have to be there alone.

I put an arm around Nick's shoulders and grinned at him. "It's like I keep telling you, man. You've got to have faith."

