

Findo Gask Backstreet Magics



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Findo Gask - Backstreet Magics

Chapter 1 – Fiery Delights

The sizzle of another fireball turned to a deafening crack as it collided with the rock face behind me. It just barely missed my hat, making me grimace. I'm very fond of that old hat. By now, I was getting fed up of having to duck or deflect the magical projectiles. If he carried on chucking them in my direction, I might just get annoyed and take him out with a shot from my trusty automatic. And that would seriously ruin his day, and mine too: the cops would make me fill in all kinds of paperwork if I turned up with a prisoner with a hole in him.

He wasn't very good with the fireballs anyway. Not enough practice. He wasn't the type. He was a fussy little Goblin with highly-polished dragon-hide shoes and trousers ironed with so sharp a crease you could cut yourself. The diamond cufflinks at his wrists were tastefully designed, if not particularly expensive, and matched both his tie-clip and the fob-watch that rested in his waistcoat pocket. It was the kind of look I might expect to see sneering at me politely in an expensive gentleman's outfitter.

The perp looked uncomfortably out of place in this part of the Lower Realms, the deep caves that we Goblins have inhabited for thousands of years. I had tracked him down to a warehouse in one of the seedier caverns. It was a vast rambling building built, as many constructions down here are, partially into the rock face itself. The stuff in here had been in storage undisturbed for decades, judging by the dust and grit underfoot. Such light as there was came from colonies of luminescent fungi that are widely cultivated in these regions. It's cheap enough - just buy a tin and paint it on - and Goblins see well in conditions that those poor humans would think of as darkness.

The Goblin who was hiding in the gloom of the warehouse was a confidence trickster, one well-known in certain quarters at the police precinct stations. I had been asked by a representative of a very important family to retrieve some documents which he had tricked them out of and was now holding to ransom. Important documents, ones whose existence, let alone contents, could change history, and ruin lives and reputations. And some people would be very embarrassed if that were to happen.

No, I'm not going to give you any names or details. Not because I'm worried about litigational entanglements, although of

course I try and avoid the attentions of lawyers, as any sensible person would. Nor is it because I hold some high moral position about client confidentiality. Frankly, if you are reading these memoirs, then you can be assured that nobody is left alive who would be disturbed anyway. But this particular grand family had been very kind and generous just when I needed it the most. They had earned my respect and my trust, and I'm not going to betray that trust here.

The perp's pointed ears and nervous-looking eyes appeared over the edge of a heavy wooden packing crate, stencilled with descriptive runes in black paint. His head swivelled as he sought out my location. I had shifted from my hiding-place alongside the back wall and now, I hoped, he wasn't sure where I was.

"Drop the weapons!"

My voice came from behind a large metal drum. He didn't reply, but just ducked down behind his crate.

"Don't make me do this the hard way."

My tone was firm but fair: he would have only himself to blame if he kept trying to maim me with burning flame.

"Stay away!" he shouted.

He deigned to reply this time, popping up again with another fireball fizzing in his fingers. He must have been running low on those by now; they're quite expensive and there's only so many you can fit into your pockets.

"I'm coming in!"

My shout was louder, as if amplified by the metal of the barrel. Which it was, actually. I'd deployed a subtle little glamour of my own: one which projected my own voice in a realistic fashion. A neat way to keep the perp distracted for a few minutes.

"Don't say I didn't warn you!"

The confidence trickster threw the fireball wildly. It streaked across the warehouse and struck the metal barrel with a deafening bang, puncturing one side and hurling the whole thing fully twenty feet across the floor. Black smoke belched from the drum, making it more difficult to see and smelling strongly of badly overcooked meat.

"Freeze!" I said softly in his ear, pressing the barrel of my automatic firmly into the back of his neck.

He squeaked, perhaps shocked by the sudden feeling of cold metal on his neck. I didn't give him a chance to wriggle. I just thumped him hard in the back so that his face bounced off the

unyielding edge of the packing crate. He fell to the floor and lay stunned, his nose bleeding profusely on the dusty concrete.

With my boot on his neck, I used my free hand to search his pockets. It didn't take long to turn up a fat packet of papers wrapped in a leather folder. I backed away and shook out the wallet. All the documents seemed to be there. Bingo. I stuffed the file untidily in one of the capacious pockets which line the long raincoat I habitually wear.

The perp groaned and tried to move. I kicked him, hard enough so that he took the hint.

"Next time," I said with a carefully calculated tone of menace in my voice, "Think twice about who you're trying to rip off."

*

I really don't know why I get shot at so much. Or even targeted by fireballs. It's not like I'm not a nice person or anything, really. Ask anybody who knows me. But I'd admit my looks are against me: a tall, muscular Goblin with powerful shoulders and a permanently world-weary look in my large green eyes. I'm not so young - but still in the prime of my second century, thank you very much - and I've been a Private Investigator for the greater part of that time. Like all Goblins, my ears are pointed, my teeth are sharp and my fingernails are strong. A human might describe them as fangs and claws, but then what do they know?

I wasn't going to bother dragging the perp about with me, or delivering him to the cops. I'd done what I'd been asked to do - well, the first part, anyway - and he wasn't going to be pestering me now that I'd removed the last few fireball glamours from his pockets. Sure, the moaning Goblin lying on the floor might have an accomplice somewhere. But I doubted it. His *modus operandi* was as a lone operator, living in the shadows of society and only emerging when an opportunity presented itself.

My task now was to return these documents to their rightful owner, and as quickly as possible. The newspapers would have a field day if my client could not produce them as promised. Goblin documents are not easily faked: we tend to take the rule of law seriously enough to use everyday glamours to secure important agreements and legal assurances. But the absence of documents is always a cause of suspicion, at least in the mind of newspaper reporters.

I tipped my hat to the writhing wretch still decorating the concrete, slipped my automatic into its holster under my arm, tugged up the collar of my raincoat and set off for the exit. It was a ten minute walk to the nearest entrance to the public transit tube

system; the cargo-only entrance which served the warehouse had been long shut down and I didn't fancy dodging the crates and pallets moving at high speed anyway. Just two changes of tube and twenty minutes of artful milling around the crowded travel interchanges - which gave me a chance to check if anybody was tailing me - and I was in the rather grand environs where my client's residence was to be found.

I walked up to the front door along a wide path bordered by carvings of noble-looking Goblins in poses that variously suggested deep thought and great wisdom, extreme bravery and exceptional martial prowess, or perhaps just mild constipation. Space in the caverns of the Lower Realms is understandably always at a premium, and such an open area spoke volumes on the wealth of the occupants.

I stood on the inlaid marble under the portico and pulled the polished silver knob that rang the doorbell. Chimes sounded softly somewhere within. I half-expected a long wait while some house-servant made his way from below-stairs. I was wrong. The door flew open immediately and a uniformed lackey waved me inside with unaccustomed haste.

The entrance hall was as grand as I had remembered, although I didn't get the chance to inspect it closely on this occasion. I declined his offer to take my hat - I don't like to be without it or my coat - and was rapidly ushered into the library. The servant nodded politely and closed the heavy oak door behind me.

The room was a masterpiece of dark wood panelling and rows of books expensively bound in embossed leather. The drapes were drawn against such light that might have entered through the windows and the room was dimly-lit even by Goblin standards. At first I thought there was nobody else present.

"Come closer, Findo."

The voice came from a figure slumped in a high-backed chair behind a broad desk at the far side of the room. I made the short trek across the carpet, took the folder I had retrieved from my pocket, placed it on the desk and dropped my hat on top.

"Is that all of them?" the figure asked softly.

"Yes, sir," I replied, "I believe so."

There was a profound sigh from the other side of the desk.

"Thank goodness for that. The press will be here in half an hour. Do you always cut it this fine, Findo?"

"I try not to," I acknowledged wryly, "But sometimes events happen at their own pace, and there's little anybody can do to speed things up."

He nodded, then reached forward to slide the package across the desk, tilting it so that my hat slid onto the polished desktop. He opened it and pulled out the contents, checking each carefully by sight and touch and even smell, it seemed, on one occasion. I stood patiently, at ease in the military manner he might have expected. Finally, he gathered all the paperwork together neatly, slid them back inside and closed the folder, positioned it in front of him and leaned his crossed arms over them protectively.

"Well, Mister Findo Gask," he continued, his voice hoarse with age but not yet infirmity, "You have met my expectations, once again. Please accept my heartfelt thanks. And feel free to send in your bill for payment."

I nodded once, taking his words as a polite dismissal. I collected my hat and made my way out of the room, and out of the house. I had no intention of sending in any bill. My debt of gratitude to him and his family, debts incurred a long time ago, would cover any number of find and retrieve assignments.

*

Once upon a time - a time so long ago it has now receded into fog of legend for the humans - Goblins too lived on the surface. I guess we have always been a little secretive, jealous of our own privacy and, even in those days, we tended to live in enclaves away from the lands of men. Even as surface dwellers, we shied away from the bright light of day and preferred the dark of night for our excursions.

These differences in preferences made the primitive men of that time highly suspicious as to our true motivation, and gave rise to all kinds of myths about our nature. As is the nature of people everywhere, many of these myths were untrue, exaggerated or just plain nasty, and we became the bogeymen of many cultures. Well, perhaps a few of these rumours had their basis in fact, although at this distance in time nobody can be entirely sure.

But in any case, relations between the Goblin peoples and the men-folk became increasingly strained. This was at a time when human developments, and the increase in their population, made it increasingly more difficult for use to hide ourselves from view. Tensions increased and violent clashes became more commonplace.

The leaders of that time therefore hatched a plan, a grand ambitious plan, to move the entire Goblin race completely away from the influence of man. This was a plan which required the

construction of vast underground caverns, tens of miles across, linked by a complex network of tunnels and transit tubes. All this was only tractable because we had long maintained our abilities with magic. This is a practice that almost all humans have long forgotten and nowadays, bizarrely, declare even the existence of such a thing to be impossible.

Goblins are, I have come to realise, something of a magpie race. It is certainly the case that, in recent centuries, we have borrowed - or perhaps just stolen - various technologies from the teeming humans on the surface world. They have developed many useful devices and, where they are robust enough - and cheap enough - we have incorporated them in our everyday lives.

I've even heard it suggested that the magic that is such a part of our existence may not have originated with our species, or at least that some more advanced techniques were acquired from others. Although exactly from whom we gleaned these abilities is not entirely clear and, unsurprisingly, this insight is not one included in the standard histories that every Goblin learns at school.

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It was late afternoon by the time I left my client's rather palatial residence. It was still too early for dinner and there was nothing to call me home at this hour. So there was a little time to drop by the office. Not that it was anything special; just a modest little place in a low-rent cavern. It was somewhere to meet prospective clients, or them to wait for me if they felt like it. Few people can be bothered.

The office was a single room with a door with my name painted on the glass. A bit faded now, but does the job of announcing my credentials. The office door is never locked, which simply saves on repairs, not to mention complaints from the landlord. Anything within - whether useful, magical, grey-area legal or just personal - is either without value or rather carefully concealed against even quite a professionally thorough search and, in a few cases, protected by glamours of their own.

The building itself is a low free-standing block in the human style, maintained to a standard best regarded as "barely acceptable". I passed though the foyer, watching my step carefully on the worn and ripped doormat and made my way past the sand-bucket contained a week's selection of cigarette ends to the stairwell. The landlord was far too cheap to install anything resembling an elevator.

My office is on the fourth floor. I trudged up the dusty concrete stairs, ignoring the stairwell walls painted in the inevitable shade of

faded institutional green and with my head still mulling over the case I had just completed. I expected that I would spend a few quiet hours this afternoon putting my thoughts in order and writing a few short notes for the file, perhaps with the aid of the medicinal whiskey bottle I keep in the deep desk drawer for this very purpose.

As I approached the turn in the stairs between third and fourth floors, I belatedly became aware of somebody making their way down. It was a dame, wrapped in a long expensive-looking fur coat made of the pelts of numerous small animals. She held the wrap tightly closed at the throat, as if she was cold, even though the stairwell was not particularly chilly.

She threw me several curious glances as she made her way down the steps while stood politely to one side at the turn of the stairwell and tipped my hat politely. Just after she passed me, she seemed to come to some kind of conclusion, spun on her heels - very high stiletto heels, indeed - let go of the edge of the coat and pointed directly at me.

"Are you Findo Gask, the detective?" she asked, in that breathless way that too many dames adopt when talking to anything in trousers.

"That's me," I replied, tipping my hat again and smiling in a friendly kind of way, "How can I be of service?"

"I need your help," she whispered, moving much closer to me in a confidential kind of way, "I need your help very much."

Now, I'm no stranger to having females press their ample charms on me at the slightest acquaintance. I'd like to think that, at least sometimes, it's because of my muscular build and rugged good looks. Yeah, I'm flattering myself. More often than not such forward attentions are because the lady in question wants something, or perhaps wants to distract me from something. The trick, of course, is to play along, pant a little like an over-enthusiastic puppy at the appropriate moments, and wait until you find out what is really going on.

As a distraction, I had to admit that this chick was the business. Definitely hot stuff. She was a tall and well-proportioned female with smooth mahogany skin that told of expensive cosmetics and beauty therapies, with a slight hint that the buffed and bronzed appearance met a certain professional requirement. Not a streetwalker, though: she had class and style, of a sort; more likely an actress, perhaps, or some kind of entertainer.

I took her hand, slipped her arm though mine companionably and made to guide her back up the stairs.

"Let's retire to my office," I said affably, "And you can tell me all about it."

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Chapter 2 – Big Spenders

I pushed open the flimsy wooden door to my office and guided my unexpected visitor inside, directing her towards the better of the two worn chairs that populate the client's side of the desk.

"Okay sister, take a seat," I said briskly, making my way to the other side of the desk and flopping inelegantly in the squeaky swivel chair that lurks there, "What's your name?"

She sat delicately in the chair I had indicated, looking unexpectedly demure with her eyes downcast.

"Tillyfor," she said softly, adding, "I've been waiting for you for hours."

I shrugged, then opened the bottom drawer, pulled out the office bottle and a couple of clean shot glasses, and dumped them on the ink-stained blotter which notionally protects the worn leather surface of the desk. I uncorked the cheap whiskey, poured myself a couple of fingers into one of the glasses, then held up the bottle.

"Lady," I told her, "I've had a tough day so far. Dodging fireballs, that kind of thing. I need a drink. Care to join me?"

She looked up at me strangely for a long moment, then sighed.

"Yeah, why not," she breathed, unwinding slightly, "It's not been so easy for me recently either."

I shrugged again, then poured an equal measure into the other glass. She leaned forward suddenly, grasped the shot glass as if her life depended on it and put about half of it down her throat in one lump. To her credit, she barely winched as the fiery liquid drowned her tonsils.

"Your health," I said politely, raising my own glass in a toast.

I sipped cautiously, then carefully put the liquor back on the blotter. Keeping my eyes on the dame opposite, I opened the top desk drawer, which rattled slightly with the usual random collection of pens, pencils and all the miscellanea of offices and workplaces everywhere, and pulled out a notepad and a biro I thought likely to work at the first attempt.

"You want to tell me what's on your mind?" I asked, not unkindly. A doll that needs a drink that badly has something to get off her chest.

"It's my sister," she said sadly, "She's gone missing."

"Okay, I can see that would upset you," I said cautiously, then added, "Maybe she *wanted* to go missing? Get some time on her own. New boyfriend, perhaps?"

"No!" she almost shouted, then added more calmly, "No. I'm sure there's something wrong."

I stared at her levelly for a few seconds. Despite her flirtatious demeanour on the stairs, she suddenly seemed nervous, vulnerable, even frightened. It was a better look for her, more natural and highly convincing. She was somebody in over her head, in affairs out of her control and probably beyond her understanding. She needed help. My help.

"All right," I said, flourishing my pen, "Start at the beginning."

*

Tillyfor stared into the middle distance, looking at nothing, which was probably a better option than the dingy interior of my office. Apart from the three chairs and the battered desk - all rescued from the deeper recesses of the local thrift store - the walls were striped with the bioluminescent coating which provides most of the lighting around here, except where sporadically decorated with a few rather faded certificates and citations in dusty frames. There carpet was just something to cover the floor and the row of battered filing cabinets were rarely opened and even more rarely contained anything of interest.

I coughed discreetly. Her focus slowly returned to me.

"She's called Tillykerie," she said, "She's my kid sister. Everybody says we look alike, but we're not twins. She's a lot younger than I am and I've always looked out for her, especially after Mom died."

She paused for a moment, inspecting the contents of the shot glass she still held in her hand. Wisely, she declined to drink any more of it right away.

"Money has been tight for a while, and Tillykerie and I have been sharing an apartment. Just a little place."

"So what do you do for money?" I asked.

"I'm a dancer. It's been a bit difficult to get work recently, but at the moment I'm in the chorus line at the Midnight Square Theatre."

"That's a..." I hesitated for a moment, choosing my words carefully, "A burlesque show, isn't it?"

She sat up straight and gave me a very cold look over the rim of the glass.

"What if it is?"

"Means nothing to me," I replied casually, "Everybody's gotta make a buck somehow. Is it a good show?"

She relaxed fractionally.

"Full house every night," she replied with a tinge of pride, "Not much by way of critical reviews, but it's very popular. Some people keep coming back night after night."

I could see that. An earthy, even raunchy show featuring a great many attractive ladies in elaborate and revealing attire was unlikely to get any coverage in the newspapers - the theatre critics being a bunch of stuck-up old buffers - but it would quite a money-spinner. For the management, at least.

"Pays well, this gig?" I enquired, making a note on the page in front of me.

"Better than most," Tillyfor replied with a world-weary sigh, "Better than almost anything I've done before. Except advertising, of course."

"So it's a good job?"

"Mostly. But there's a lot of competition to get into the chorus. You need to stay on tip-top form. Watch your back. One slip and some ambitious child is in your spot like a shot."

"So it's a tough job. But what about your sister? Dancer, too?"

"No!" she replied, once again sounding affronted, "Nothing like that. She's a waitress."

"So where's she waiting on?"

"It's a restaurant, a posh place on Midhampton Terrace called the Stuffed Duck."

I nodded slowly, again scribbling in my notebook. I had heard of this place from, of all things, reports in the Sunday supplements. It was one of the better places, all white starched tablecloths and overblown obsequiousness, located in a quiet side street in Cavern One, not far from the centre of government. It was the sort of place where overpaid federal servants, lackeys of big business, journalists and reporters, and other sycophants would buy each other expensive lunches, and try and pick each others' brains.

"How did she land a job there?"

Tillyfor shrugged.

"She just applied," she said, "She applied for loads of jobs. She got offered this one."

It could be true. The Stuffed Duck was the sort of place that would take on a well brought up girl who knew how to move quietly and speak respectfully to her betters.

"When did you last see your sister?"

She suddenly looked grey, then took another large sip from the shot-glass she still held in her hand. I wasn't sure but I doubted that somebody as athletic as she was accustomed to drinking very much. She should leave the alcohol to those who need it, and who know how to handle it - like Private Investigators.

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I leaned over the desk and took the shot-glass from Tillyfor's hand, which trembled slightly as I touched it. She didn't fight me. I placed the glass, now nearly empty, on the desk in front of her, just out of easy reach. Then I settled back in my swivel chair, which squeaked softly as I moved, and looked at her solemnly.

"We had an argument," she said eventually, "We were at home, getting ready for bed. Very late. I'd come in tired after the last show, just wanted to sleep. She wanted to talk. It wasn't a good start."

I just looked at her some more.

"Tillykerie wanted more excitement in her life," she explained with a sigh, "She wanted to try out as a dancer. Wanted me to get her into the chorus line."

"Would she have been any good?" I asked, more to keep her talking than anything else.

"We both studied ballet as children. Mother insisted. She's a pretty good, maybe better than me. But Mother wouldn't have wanted her anywhere near a place like the Midnight Square."

I didn't ask whether Mother would have approved of Tillyfor appearing on-stage in a burlesque review. People have such capacity for self-delusion.

"So you told her you wouldn't help her, that she wasn't to do anything your old Mom wouldn't approve of?"

Tillyfor nodded.

"She accused me of trying to run her life, that I wasn't Mother. She got angry, shouted at me, then stormed out of the apartment."

"Do you often argue?"

"We're sisters. Of course we argue sometimes. But we always kiss and make up afterwards."

"So what happened next?"

"I followed her out of the apartment. I could hear her running down the stairs, crying. I chased her into the street but, by the time I got there, she had disappeared completely."

"Disappeared?"

"I couldn't see her anywhere," Tillyfor said sadly, "She couldn't have gone far. She wasn't properly dressed, just pyjamas. Nothing on her feet."

"So where's your place?" I asked, still scribbling in my notebook.

"Thwarthammer."

That figured. A low-rent but tolerably respectable cavern full to the ceiling of high-rise blocks, each containing hundreds of tiny apartments with paper-thin dividing walls. The kind of place somebody who wanted to live cheaply and quietly without their neighbours knowing anything about them would choose.

She added the street and block names, and the apartment number, which I jotted down.

"Then what happened?" I demanded.

"I searched everywhere. I wandered the streets all night. Not a sign."

"And when was this?"

Tillyfor glanced in the direction of the shot-glass, but thought better of it.

"Three nights ago. I haven't slept well since."

"Anyone she might have gone to, a friend? Somebody she knew from the restaurant?"

She shook her head.

"I went to the restaurant, talked to people there. Nobody had seen or heard from her. She hadn't turned up for work the following day. They were a bit annoyed about that. Short-staffed, I suppose."

"And she's not been to the Theatre?"

"No. I've asked everybody there. Nobody's seen her."

"Did you talk to the cops?"

"I went to the precinct station yesterday. The police were very polite and wrote everything down, but didn't seem very interested really. People go missing all the time, they said. She's an adult. Maybe she's got a job somewhere else, they said."

That sounded about right. The cops know that most people who go missing are absolutely fine, just wanted a change in their life, to get away from overbearing parents or inconvenient relationships. But they have to make a report, to cover their backs in the rare event that something bad happens.

"That's not a lot to go on," I said dubiously, frowning at the notes in front of me, "Are you sure you want me to investigate?"

"Yes!" Tillyfor squeaked, "I've got money. I can pay you. Just find my sister for me!"

"Okay, okay. But is there anything else you can tell me?" I pressed, "Anything at all?"

She thought for a moment, her forehead wrinkling prettily.

"When I chased Tillykerie onto the street," she said hesitantly, "I thought I saw Mister Balloch in the distance."

I frowned again.

"Who's he?"

*

I was genuinely puzzled. Tillyfor clearly thought I should know who he was, but it was a name unknown to me. She looked at me disbelieving for a long moment.

"You know, Mister Big?" she said, adding when I showed no glimmer of recognition, "Dalgrin Balloch, the impresario and stage angel? He owns the Midnight Square Theatre?"

"I've never heard of him," I said levelly, "I assume he's your boss?"

"Well, sort of," she demurred, "I don't really have much to do with him. He turns up every now and then, during rehearsals, mainly. Shouts at everybody for twenty minutes, then disappears. Everybody's a bit afraid of him."

"Sounds like a good boss," I said ironically, "Not there most of the time. So who does tell you what to do when Balloch's absent?"

"Oh, that's XXX," Tillyfor said, smiling wanly, "Artistic Director. He's a sweetie. Used to be a dancer himself. Likes all the girls to look their best. Always ready with a needle and thread to adjust the costumes. Only gets really bitchy when you make a mistake on stage for a second time."

"And you've asked this XXX about your sister?"

"Of course. He said he'd like to get another girl like me in the chorus. But he said he hadn't spoken to Tillykerie."

I elected to reserve judgement on that. I considered that the Director of a popular stage show with a high turnover of players would be approached all the time by athletic dancers. Maybe he wouldn't remember. I added him to a short list of people to talk to - currently, a short list of one.

"So, tell me about seeing Balloch outside your apartment," I said, changing the subject.

Tillyfor blinked, frowning slightly.

"When I ran out into the street, I thought I saw somebody at the end of the block. I didn't realise who it was for a moment. I was in a panic, and he's not somebody I know hardly at all. So I looked all around for Tillykerie. When I realised who it was I had spotted, I turned back, intending to call out to him, ask him if he had seen her. But I couldn't see him either. Completely disappeared."

"So you're not sure he was actually there?" I pressed.

She looked uncertain.

"I'm pretty sure he was," she said, not sounding at all positive.

"And was there anybody else around?" I added.

"No, nobody. The streets were deserted. That's why I couldn't understand how Tillykerie could have just disappeared. Or Balloch, for that matter."

I added Balloch's name to my list, with a couple of question marks for good measure. The half-remembered observations of a panicked girl in the middle of the night were hardly a sound basis for an investigative lead. But I had a hunch about this; Tillyfor would remember Balloch by sight well enough, and somebody with that kind of wealth and clout could conceivably have access to all kinds of grey-area or flat-out illegal magic.

"Okay," I said formally, "I'll take your case."

Tillyfor's face lit up in a wide smile.

"Thank you," she gushed, "Thank you so much."

I swept up my still-full shot-glass and held it up in a toast. Tillyfor leaned forward, picked up her own glass again and returning the salute.

"I'll drink to that," I said, sipping my mediocre scotch.

Tillyfor drained the last drops from her glass, barely flinching at the burn in her throat.

"So where are you going to start?" she said hoarsely.

"I'll walk you home," I replied gallantly, "Take a look at the street around your apartment. Then I'm going to find a way to get closer to this Balloch."

"How are you going to do that?" she wondered aloud.

I drained the last of my whiskey.

"Don't worry," I replied confidently, "I have a cunning plan."

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Chapter 3 – Join the Club

I stood up, put my glass gently on the blotter, retrieved my hat from its perch on the edge of the desk and then stuck out my elbow for her to take. These gentlemanly urges will be the death of me one day, I suppose.

Tillyfor glanced up at me, put her own glass next to mine tidily, then unfolded herself from the chair in one smooth movement. She was quite a girl, poised and elegant, not in the least bit ungainly even on those teetering high heels. And seemingly unaffected by the large-ish shot of strong drink she had just put away. Even so, she took my offer of a supporting arm gratefully.

I guided her down the stairs - tugging the rather badly-fitting door closed behind us - and out through the rather unprepossessing lobby of the office building onto the pavement. We strolled the five blocks to the closest transit tube entrance, jostled for a few minutes from one connection to another and finally emerged in Thwarthammer cavern.

The whiskey seemed to have loosened Tillyfor's tongue, even if it had not unsteadied her gait, and she chatted almost cheerily as I guided her along the street. She didn't add anything to the information she had imparted earlier, but gossiped merily about this neighbour keeping an unsanctioned pet, the noisy arguments of that old couple, and the mystery of the brother and sister who had long shared the other apartment but were never seen together outside.

This cavern was an old-fashioned suburb built long before the fashion of mimicing human buildings had really caught on. It was a veritable warren of stairs and platforms forming a gently sloping terrace, with the residences - all low-rent, but mostly kept as well as one could on a very modest budget - set into the natural rock itself. Goblins like the security of caves, the sense of protection from the outside; my grandmother would have felt entirely at home here, five hundred years ago.

I showed Tillyfor to her door and politely declined the offer to come inside. This was more for self-protection than gentlemanly conduct: I wanted to make sure she understood both our roles in this particular drama. She didn't seem particularly upset about this. I also declined the offer of a cash advance, even when she

extracted a few bills from inside her expensive fur coat and waved them under my nose.

"I'll write you an invoice," I promised wryly, "Send it to you. I know where you live."

She seemed more surprised at this refusal than the other one.

"Good night, Mister Gask," she said, turning to face me as she stepped over her threshold, "And thank you again for helping me."

"Yeah, I'll be in touch," I replied gruffly. I didn't specify when.

I spent a few minutes poking around the area where Tillyfor claimed she had sighted Balloch. The place was a natural warren, with narrow streets and steps and alleyways everywhere. I could disappear in a dozen directions from this spot, even without the aid of an expensive glamour. So Balloch could have been here - or at least somebody who looked like him - and whoever it was might have had something to do with the disappearance of Tillykerie. Or it could have been a coincidence. Tillyfor's sister could have run off on her own, if she'd wanted to, and nobody would be the wiser.

I was wasting my shoe-leather here. It was time to look up on an old friend, one who once made a promise I could call upon, an old favour I had thought I would never need to use.

I tugged my hat down further over my eyes, turned on my heel and strode briskly off in the direction of the transit tube entrance. Nobody tried to follow me.

*

"Well, yes, of course I know Mister Dalgrin Balloch. In fact, he's dining in the Club right now."

I was standing in the kitchens. Or, more precisely, in one of those obscure corridors lined with storerooms and other places with rather less well-defined purposes that led off from the kitchens. My companion was one Ronan Strathallan, the head waiter at Rourke's, a private dining club whose corridors we were presently cluttering up.

Rourke's was not a restaurant, exactly. Even to be able to book a table for dinner, you had to be elected as a member, as well as being able to cough up the not insubstantial sum that was the annual membership fee. It didn't advertise, or even give any indication of what kind of place it was from the outside. Of course, that sort of exclusivity naturally appealed to those who measured themselves in terms of what they had which others did not. Just the kind of place that a moneyed, loud-mouthed bully like Balloch would want to be a part of. It seemed my luck was in today.

Strathallan ran the place, more-or-less. Oh, sure, there was a Membership Committee, a group of pompous old buffers who no doubt prided themselves on maintaining standards, but nevertheless somehow managed to let in any nouveau-riche upstart who happened along. But there needed to be a steady and sober hand at the tiller, one who hired the staff, managed the purchases, handled the finances and also somehow managed to pay themselves pretty well besides.

The head waiter himself was unusually pale-skinned, almost white, rather than the mahogany-brown of most Goblins. He was only moderately tall, but seemed even more so because of his extreme thinness. He had slender, sensitive fingers which made him look like a concert pianist, or perhaps an undertaker, an effect enhanced by his cadaverous features and his habit of wearing a tuxedo and black bow tie. He moved precisely and unhurriedly, even elegantly, at all times and exuding a sense of calm purposefulness - except when it came to shouting at the kitchen staff, of course.

I had been engaged by Strathallan once, a few decades before. A club member had been found dead in one of the private dining rooms - the kind which even the waiting staff were not to enter unless expressly summoned by the means of an electric bell.

But the bell had not sounded all night and, when all the other members had been ferried off to their beds - or somebody's bed, at least - nobody had emerged from the dining room. After much deliberation, and increasingly frantic knocking at the door to the private room, the staff risked the unabated wrath of the member by opening the door, which was locked, and therefore required the use of the sole master key, held securely by the head waiter himself.

The esteemed member had been found sitting at the table, murdered most horribly. Foul Play, as they say, had been suspected. He was thought to have had a companion at his dinner table, although there was no sign of the young female when they opened the door and, when I had questioned the staff afterwards, nobody at all had a clear recollection of the lady in question.

I had solved the case. It was actually a grisly case of suicide, made to look like murder. A clever, if rather desperate brain was behind it. The young companion had never existed at all; she was just a chimera created by a very well executed glamour, one which must have cost a small fortune to procure. The member in question was flat broke, completely bankrupt, and wanted to disguise the fact; through a series of failed investments and poor business decisions, he had lost the sort of money that, by

comparison, the expensive glamour or even the membership fee paled into insignificance.

There was even a thought that he wanted an old enemy - also a club member, of course - to be implicated in this apparent murder. I never proved that, of course. But such revelations and suspicions would have pulled the club apart, destroyed its moneyed exclusivity. As it was, it was all over very quickly, with barely a ripple of gossip or murmur of dissent. Strathallan was immensely grateful to get the police off his back, presented with a clear-cut case. So he really did owe me a favour.

"So, what's he like, as a customer?" I asked.

"Member," Strathallan chided gently, unfailingly polite, "Please remember that all my Gentlemen are Members here."

I grinned wryly. I do that a lot. Strathallan was such a stuffed shirt. But I needed his cooperation just at the moment. Better to play along.

"As a *Member*," I reiterated.

*

Strathallan subsided, his minor victory won.

"Well, he's only recently become a Member," he replied, carefully emphasising the word, "Although he's been here as a guest numerous times over the last decade or so. Sometimes, as the guest of one Member or another who might have been a little short of liquidity from time to time."

I grunted noncommittally. Typical behaviour. Balloch desperately wanted to become one of the elite, and was not above bribing a few hard-up members with the price of a good dinner or two in order to get a good recommendation to the Committee.

"And since he's been a Member?" I prompted.

"Here's been eating here regularly; two or three times a week. Mostly on his own, although he does seem popular in the smoking room afterwards."

I nodded. Buying large brandies for anybody within earshot, and allowing himself to be buttonholed by the bores and drunks that would congregate in such places.

"And when he doesn't dine alone?"

"Always a single guest. Sometimes an older gentleman who struck me as a business associate. Or sometimes he enjoys the company of a young lady: always a different one, but always tall and displaying a certain athletic quality."

"Did the girls like him?"

"They always seemed suitably appreciative. Enjoyed their dinners, drank the wine. Seemed to sparkle more afterwards."

So Balloch liked to try and impress dancers, did he? I don't suppose he was the first rich bastard to buy his way into the shadier side of the theatre business in order to date chorus girls. I wondered for a moment whether Tillyfor had ever been here. Then I concluded she would have mentioned it if she had been.

Strathallan looked at me thoughtfully for a long moment.

"Can you tell me what your interest in Mister Balloch is?" he asked eventually.

"I have a client," I replied carefully, "And I have to respect my client confidentiality. I'm sure you'll understand that."

I paused. Strathallan nodded sagely. I was sure he didn't want any of the details of my previous visit to the Club to become public knowledge.

"I need a favour," I said earnestly, "I need to get close to this Balloch character. Can you make like I'm a club member, just for tonight?"

Strathallan's eyes narrowed.

"This is most irregular," he said gravely, "I'm sure the Committee would not approve."

"But they don't need to know, do they? All you have to do is show me to a table, preferably one close to Balloch, and feed me a dinner. Your cheapest menu will do. Just leave the rest to me."

Strathallan looked uncertain to the point where I really thought for a moment he was going to refuse my request. Then he nodded, just once.

"Please don't embarrass me, Mister Gask," he said sombrely, "Rourke's has its standards, you know."

"Trust me, I'll be as good as gold," I promised, "Just get me near to him."

"Follow me," Strathallan instructed.

He set off down the corridor away from the kitchens, then taking a sharp right turn at the first junction. I followed close on his heel. The corridor had a utilitarian, functional look, the walls painted in an institutional shade of pale grey. At the end of the corridor was a plain and unremarkable door. Strathallan pushed it open a fraction and peered out.

"This opens onto our lobby," he said softly, closing the door again carefully, "Give me ten minutes to organise things, then go out there and make your way over to the reception desk. I'll be waiting for you."

I waited as patiently as I could, giving him a couple of extra minutes for good measure. When time was up, I tugged my hat down over my eyes for extra attitude and swung my way out of the door as if I owned the place.

*

It would have been a pretty impressive place to own.

The foyer was a masterpiece of elegance and luxury. The walls were clad with dark wood panelling that exuded the patina of well-cared-for agelessness, as well as the regular application of beeswax. The polished stone floor was inlaid with an intricate mosaic and a high ceiling discreetly enhanced with a repeating motif of gilt *fleur-de-lys* was held up by carved marble columns at regular intervals. Dotted here and there were glass-fronted cabinets displaying an eclectic collection of doodads, most of which I could not even identify. They looked expensive, though.

Dead ahead was a heavy ornate desk, behind which sat a severe-looking but nevertheless well-preserved old battle-axe, the kind who would effortlessly deflect any attempt to bullshit one's way into the main dining room. The doorway to that hallowed sanctum lay beyond.

Next to the aged dowager stood the pale and skeletal figure of Strathallan, looking as calm and unperturbed as ever. I swaggered up to the reception desk and leaned on it nonchalantly. Always best to overplay these situations, I find. When hamming it up, use the whole pig.

"Name of Gask," I said, giving the prissy matron behind the desk the full effect of my prize-winning sneer, "I have a reservation."

"Good evening, Mister Gask," Strathallan said urbanely before the receptionist could even open her mouth.

She glanced up at him, a frown creasing her forehead. He returned the puzzled look compounded with mild frustration, pointed with a long elegant finger at an entry in the leather-bound ledger - to his credit, the ink didn't even smudge - then tapped twice in a peremptory fashion. His attention returned to me, smiling one of those insincere official-issue head-waiter smiles that neither showed his teeth nor quite reached his eyes.

"Your table is ready, sir," he went on with a maximum of oiled obsequiousness, "Please do follow me."

He turned on his heel and led the way through the mystic portal to the inner sanctuary. I nodded ironically to the old dear, who glared back at me with a calculated intensity finely balanced between delivering a proper expression of her annoyance and her understandable desire to retain a well-paying job.

Inside, the dining room was filled by the busy buzz of those torn between giving their full attention to a really good dinner and the necessities of conversation with one's dining companions. The widely-spaced tables were set with crisp white linen tablecloths, heavy silver cutlery and fine china discreetly monogrammed with a red-and-gilt "R". Low murmurs emanated from most places set for two or more, while those who dined alone were oases of reverent silence.

Strathallan directed me to a place set for one and politely held the chair for me politely. I sat. He fussed for a few moments, then presented me with a heavy leather-bound menu. As I looked up, he indicated with a subtle movement of his eyes the sole diner seated at another table not fifteen feet away. Then he nodded urbanely and backed away.

I opened the menu, which was substantial enough to warrant a fairly thorough study, and pretended to be taking it seriously. I actually spent those few minutes studying through hooded eyes the bulky middle-aged Goblin at the other table.

Findo Gask - Backstreet Magics

Chapter 4 – Meet and Greet

Mister Dalgrin Balloch appeared to be one who made a habit of over-indulgence: there was more than a faint suggestion that he would have been the Billy Bunter schoolboy who had, in fact, eaten all the pies. He had small piggy eyes, with the sclera noticeably tinged blood-red, separated by a bulbous nose with a patchwork of veins visible even at my distance. The rolls of fat around his neck seemed to make it difficult to bend his head, and he leaned forward over his plate which further enhanced the porcine appearance.

But he was exceptionally well dressed in a sober and expensive dark suit, crisply ironed shirt and a silk tie in wildly unconstrained shades of pink and yellow. Not my taste at all, but he certainly had money to throw around. His tailor, shirt-maker and cobbler must all have been handsomely compensated for their considerable efforts at accommodating and disguising his bulk.

My covert scrutiny of the big guy at the next table was interrupted by the quiet approach of a youthful and rather nervous-looking member of the waiting staff.

"Ready to order, sir?" he asked diffidently, flourishing a notepad.

I nodded, smiling thinly, and picked the very cheapest item on the menu that I could quickly identify. Even so, it was eye-wateringly expensive by the standards of almost everybody, to the point where I was not entirely sure the price had inadvertently included some additional zeroes. So as not to appear completely cheap, I beckoned the waiter closer and quietly added a large glass of the house wine. I really didn't want to suffer the attentions of the wine waiter, but I was a bit thirsty.

The young waiter made a few deft notes on his pad and scurried off. I really hoped that Strathallan would hold to his agreement not to charge me; if I was to present it as expenses to Tillyfor, she would justifiably be a trifle upset. It seemed I needn't have worried. The waiter returned a minute later, bringing with him a bottle in a wine cooler which he placed in a corner of the table.

"With the compliments of the Club," he confided softly, so quietly that even a Goblin's sharp ears would not have picked it up from the next table.

I smiled, more warmly this time, and let the youngster go through the usual rigmarole of showing me the label, pulling and inspecting the cork, and the ritual tasting of a splash of fluid in the bottom of a large wineglass. I waved my approval without really thinking about it, allowing the steward to fill my glass, return the bottle to the cooler and hastened away.

Now with nothing to distract me, I swept up my wine glass and took another sip. I don't know very much about wine - it's not my usual tippie - but this example tasted particularly fine. I leaned forward, lifted the bottle from the ice bucket and inspected the label more closely. I wasn't sure, but I was fairly certain that this was a rare vintage. It was certainly very old, as indicated by the date on the front. It must have been lying in some dusty cellar for the best part of fifty years. And now it was being wasted on me.

Carefully not looking in the direction of Balloch, I made quite a show of nodding to myself sagely, between repeatedly tasting the plonk with exceptional care and attention. I set about giving the impression of being one who would happily pay a fortune for an extraordinary bottle of wine, a drink to savour all by himself on a quiet midweek evening, as well as being an old soak who ordered a cheap meal just so that he had something to toy with on the table.

*

Balloch seemed oblivious to my presence, focussing with considerable concentration on the food in front of him. He seemed to have selected some *spécialité de la maison* consisting of many small and aromatic dishes. A constant stream of waiters were arriving at his table, delivering new plates or taking away the previous and now-empty ones.

I took this opportunity to look around at the dining room and inspect the rest of the diners. Almost everybody present was male - staff and members alike - and the pervasive sense of wealth and gravitas accompanied, for many of the members, with the effects of much gravity as well.

The few females that were present fitted firmly into two camps. Firstly, severe-looking and antique family members in expensive but old-fashioned attire who were being entertained with extravagant food and obsequious conversation, with wheedling male voices forming a counterpoise to quietly-spoken but nonetheless firmly expressed disapproval from the grandmothers and dowager aunts.

The second grouping were young, lithe and uniformly beautiful, dressed with considerable care and with a great deal of fashion sense, but who nevertheless looked just a bit out of place in these old-fashioned formal surroundings. They seemed more than a little grateful for the opportunity to dine here, and gushed and giggled and grinned through the conversations while fumbling with the cutlery and condiments. None of them looked like wives. I wondered again if Tillyfor or her sister had ever been entertained by Balloch in this fashion.

As I studied the stage and the players around me, I continued sipping from the wineglass in my hand, topping it up from the bottle. The taste of the wine was exceptionally smooth and complex. But I was going to need to keep my wits about me, so I dug into the pockets of my coat and retrieved a glamour I rarely have need - or desire - to use. It was one which counteracted the effects of the alcohol in the wine and indeed, if the advertising puff was to be believed, anything else in the glass which was unhealthy for me. Such a waste, I mused, of the really good vintage, but needs must.

As these things tend to be, the glamour was packaged in a small and brightly-coloured cardboard box adorned with detailed instructions for use, disclaimers of dubious legality and advertisements for other products from the same maker. I positioned the little box so that it was obscured from Balloch's sight by my body, flipped open the lid with my thumb and spoke the few words which activated the spell. As is the nature of Goblin magic, the words were inaudible to anybody else, and indeed even the movements of my lips would have been obscured momentarily. The lengths some manufacturers will go to in order to make sure the secrets of their glammers are preserved.

The wine in its goblet glowed briefly. Satisfied that the magic had taken effect, I crushed the remnants of the box in my hand and dropped it into the ashtray. Then I sipped the wine once more. It took all of my will-power not to spit it out there and then, and to keep my expression unchanged. The fluid was almost certainly safe to drink and would even quench my thirst if I was really that desperate. But now it tasted flat and unpleasant. All the organic chemicals that had given the vintage those rounded and complex flavours - and were just a tiny bit poisonous - had been removed.

Fortunately my taste buds were saved from their fate when the meal I had ordered arrived in the hands of the young waiter. I nodded my thanks and picked up my knife and fork as if to try the artfully-presented titbits, then put them down again as soon as the waiter had turned his back.

From time to time I have had the opportunity to study drunks at close range. I have even been thoroughly inebriated myself on more than one occasion. But there is a skill that every Private Investigator needs to master: how to give every impression of getting uncontrollably drunk, without actually being so. I dug deep into the handbook of method acting, conspiring to give every impression that I was fully enjoying the weak fruit juice that the fine wine had become, and merely toying with the solid foodstuffs.

Balloch was definitely watching me. He had noticed the bottle of fine wine that had been provided - much better, or at least more expensive than anything that had been delivered to his table - and had been carefully glancing in my direction as I slid further into my cups. I finished the last of the wine and stood up a little unsteadily, having left most of the foodstuffs on the plate, and wandered out in search of a bar.

*

The bar, when I tracked it down, was in the smoking room. The smoker was set up as an old-style Library, the kind where almost nobody actually opened a book but everybody appreciated the ambience of ancient leather and polished wood and peaceful contemplation. The latter was a state of mind assisted by having just eaten a large and elaborately-prepared meal, and most of the overstuffed chairs were occupied by figures emitting coils of cigar smoke or equally dense clouds of snores.

I found my way to a pair of unoccupied chairs separated by a convenient table, and slumped into one of them. Strathallan materialised at my elbow.

"Did you enjoy your dinner, sir," he enquired with exaggerated politeness, "And the wine?"

"The wine was exceptionally good," I replied, "Very rare, I believe. Do we have any more of it?"

"It was the last bottle," he sniffed.

"Cluttering up the cellar, no doubt," I interjected, "Glad to see the back of it. No matter. Perhaps you would bring me another drink."

Strathallan bowed his head briefly and backed away, just as Balloch entered the smoking room. The head waiter was a master of timing, it seemed, and more enthusiastic about helping me than I had expected. Briefly, I wondered why.

Balloch stood in the doorway for a moment, eyes narrowed, looking around like a raptor ready to pounce. It was a look at odds with his piggy appearance. He looked harder, smarter; like somebody it would be worth taking seriously. He noticed the

empty seat opposite mine and recognised me as tonight's victim, then started threading his way around the sleeping members. I affected an interest in the leather-bound volumes on the shelves next to my elbow, keeping half an eye on his approach.

"Excuse me?"

I swung my head up and focussed blearily on Balloch.

"Mind if I sit here?" he said, seating himself on the polished leather without waiting for a response.

"Be my guest, old boy," I replied affably, waving a hand.

He fidgeted in his chair for a moment, then leaned forward over the coffee table and extended a hand.

"Dalgrin Balloch," he said.

I blinked and took his hand.

"Findo Gask. Pleased to meet you, I'm sure."

Strathallan chose that moment to reappear with a small snifter of what turned out to be an ancient Armagnac which he placed with some reverence on the polished walnut of the table. I nodded my thanks, picked up the glass cradled in the palm of my hand, swirled it around the globe to warm it slightly then offered it to my nose. It smelled wonderful. I raised the glass in a silent toast to Balloch, who was watching me like a hawk, sipped daintily, then nodded my approval to Strathallan much more emphatically.

"Bring me one of the same, waiter," Balloch instructed brusquely, "Right away."

He either didn't know or didn't care who Strathallan was. No wonder the old retainer had taken something of a dislike to him. Strathallan murmured something along the lines of: "at once, sir" and faded into the background.

Balloch reached for an inside pocket. I managed to suppress the instinctive reaction of those in my profession when somebody suddenly reaches inside their coat. He drew out a silver case and flipped open the lid, waving it in my direction.

"Care for a cigar?"

The inside of the case was lined with some fragrant and no doubt horrendously rare and expensive wood. Swaddled within were no more than half a dozen fat cylinders, one of which protruded maybe half its length. A second alongside it stuck out just a little.

"That's very kind of you," I said, leaning forward, "I don't mind if I do."

I took the cigar with was protruding only a little, pushing the other back into the case with my knuckle as I did so. I'm always a suspicious character. It's one of the things that have kept me alive all these centuries.

I watched Balloch carefully. He took the other cigar without hesitation, flipped closed the case and returned it to his pocket, his hand returning with an elegant silver lighter and a curious little gadget which - after a moment's hesitation - I recognised as a cigar cutter.

Just at that moment, Strathallan returned with a second balloon for Balloch and a small tray which he placed in front of me. I grinned on the inside of my face. Arranged neatly on the tray, on a bed of crisp white linen, was another cigar cutter and a silver box of matches.

While Balloch fussed with his own cigar, I did the job properly: I removed the paper band, neatly trimmed the end with the cutter, then lit one of the long matches, let it burn for a few seconds so that the sulphur did not taste the smoke, then carefully applied the flame to the cut end of the cigar.

I blew smoke at the ceiling and sat back to give Mister Balloch my full attention.

*

Balloch finally managed to get his smoke alight to his own satisfaction.

"Haven't seen you in the club before," he said casually, inspecting the burning end of his cigar.

"Well, you know how it is," I drawled, "I don't get in here very often these days. Business, you know. Keeps me out and about."

I leaned forward and picked up the brandy balloon, then waved it slightly unsteadily in a second toast. Balloch took the hint, returned the salute and sipped at the Armagnac. He liked it. So did I. I could get a taste for this stuff, if I worked at it for a while. Better than the cheap rotgut I usually drink.

"Going well, your business?" Balloch asked in with very nearly successfully concealed interest. Time to string him along a little.

"Oh, quite steady, fairly sound," I replied airily, then added, "All a bit boring, actually. I'm looking for new avenues, new opportunities."

Balloch should never play poker, at least with me. He just couldn't conceal the surge of excitement when he thought he had a fish on the hook. Oh, he tried to keep a calm thoughtful look on

his face, but the flash in his eyes told me everything I needed to know.

"Well, as it happens," he said urbanely, pausing for another sip from his glass, "I'm looking for another investor in a little enterprise of my own. I'm a theatre angel for modern popular productions and there's a spot in a new show at the Midnight Square Theatre."

"You know, I'm very interested in the theatre," I said slowly, as if thoughtfully - or what would pass for it having apparently drunk a whole bottle of wine, "Although I don't know very much about it."

I got the whole sales spiel. Balloch spent at least fifteen minutes talking about the theatre business nineteen to the dozen: what a wonderful opportunity for an investment, how different the world of entertainment was from other businesses, the whole nine yards. The pitch was polished and well-argued, and left me with little to do other than to nod in a fascinated way every thirty seconds and sip my brandy occasionally.

"Very interesting," I said when he had wound down enough for me to get a word in.

"So you'd like to know more?"

"I'd certainly like to have a closer look," I replied, attempting to look shrewd through my supposed inebriation, "Understand a bit about how the theatre works, that kind of thing."

"I'd be delighted to show you around," Balloch said, smiling broadly, "How about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, yes, that would be possible," I slurred, "Not too early."

"It's a date," he said decisively, "Now, I must be off. Shall I expect you at the Midnight Square at, say, eleven?"

I nodded repeatedly, trying to give the impression that I was committing something important to a slightly befuddled memory.

"See you tomorrow morning," he went on, "Have a good night."

With that, he drained the last of his brandy, stood slightly unsteadily, stuck the cigar in his mouth and wandered off.

I watched Balloch as he made his way out of the library. Few, if any, members watched him leave; most were either dozing or engaged in their own animated conversations. Strathallan observed him closely, bowing slightly as he passed. Balloch ignored the waiter entirely. People who really belong here, I mused, were brought up with certain standards. One of them was: always be polite to the servants.

I drained the last of my Armagnac. It really was good stuff. A few moments later, Strathallan materialised at my elbow and swept up the now-empty glasses.

"Was the wine to your satisfaction, sir?" he murmured, keeping up appearances in case anybody nearby was less asleep than they appeared.

"You know," I replied offhandedly, "I think it might have been corked."

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