

Findo Gask

Deadly Enchantment



Trevor Hopkins

The deep caverns and hidden places of the Goblins house a world both strange and wonderful. It is a world where enchantments really do work, where cheap glamours for everyday use are commonplace, and black-market magics can be obtained easily enough if you have the right contacts in the right bars.

Of course, exporting such magics from the Lower Realms to the surface world of the humans is frowned upon in general terms and in practice policed with commendable efficiency. But the cops and customs officers are neither infallible nor incorruptible, and so it is not unheard-of for an occasional contraband glamour to make it through.

Magic on the loose inevitably causes trouble, mainly for the authorities who exist to deal with such matters: the problems that the people on the surface don't know how to handle. The mere existence of the demesnes of the Goblins is a closely-guarded secret and those in positions of responsibility do not wish that secret to become too widely known.

But if the smuggled magic is of a more private and personal nature, one where the police might be unsubtle or indiscreet, then assistance of a different kind is needed: the services of Private Investigator Findo Gask. For a merely nominal fee of twenty-five dollars a day, plus authorised expenses, PI Gask will track down and return your contraband magic.

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Chapter 1 – Unexpected Find

The Goblin standing in my office stamped her feet angrily and glared at me. I suspected that the high and distinctly pointed stiletto heels she wore were doing serious damage to the carpet. Not that it bothered me; the rather tatty office floor-covering was something I inherited from the previous tenant. A moment's closer inspection would reveal numerous worn spots, cigarette burns and assorted stains caused by a variety of biological agents. Best not to look too closely, if you ask me.

"Look, sister," I said reasonably, tossing my hat on the worn green dragonhide of the desk and leaning back in the squeaky swivel chair, "You're not my client. He is. He's paid me a sum of money, in advance, to find things out. Which I've done. And it's all in my report."

I leaned forward again and tapped the sealed manila envelope lying next to my hat on the desk. It was already stamped and addressed, and I had just been putting on my hat and coat to deliver it to the mailbox on the corner when the subject of my about-to-be-completed investigation flung open the door and stomped in.

The angry stomper was a petite and slender Goblin, very young-looking - although with the strong suggestion that considerable time, effort and expense had been put into retaining that youthful appearance. Her mahogany-brown scalp was buffed and polished, her ears adorned with tastefully expensive jewellery, her dress artfully cut to flatter the boyish slenderness of her form and the absence of curves at thigh and chest, her nails long and pointed and finished in shaded tones of burgundy.

Her eyes - well, her eyes were her best features: eyes to attract and distract, wide and expressive and fascinating, eyes to keep everybody's attention on her face. With eyes like that, the rest of you could look like anything at all. You could hold anybody's gaze for an hour or a lifetime, and the rest of your body might as well not even exist.

"But you can't do that," she exclaimed, "You can't tell him."

"Why not?" I asked, genuinely curious.

She glared at me across the desk again. I ignored her. I've been glared at by experts.

"Were you, in fact, misleading my client?" I went on, "And, more importantly, being sufficiently indiscreet about it that he became suspicious, enough to employ me to dig a little. And it was only a little. You haven't really tried to hide your true nature, have you? Except from him."

"I'm not ashamed of who I am," she said hotly, "Or what I am."

"No. No, you shouldn't need to be," I replied, letting just a little sympathy creep into my voice.

Those huge and lovely eyes welled with tears. She sat heavily in one of the two mismatched guest chairs that I keep on the clients' side of the desk.

"Why didn't you just level with him?" I asked gently, "He clearly thinks the world of you. You never know, he might love just as much if he did know the truth."

I paused, while the dame produced a tiny handkerchief from her purse and dabbed at her eyes.

"But not if he finds out the truth from me," I added, more sternly, "He'll feel hurt, betrayed. He'll never be able to look at you again."

This prompted a further flood of tears. I left her snivelling into the hankie for a minute while I thought about my options. And hers.

"Okay," I said finally, "I'll do a deal with you. You've got twenty-four hours. I'll sit on this report for now."

She looked up, her eyes suddenly alight with hope and, I have to admit, genuine affection.

"Go to him," I instructed, "Tell him the truth, all of it. Stop being coy. Your relationship with my client is in your own hands. Tell him your true gender. Explain that you have been hiding it from him, and why. It's not such a difficult story. You just wanted to find out if he loved you for who you are, not just for your body. If he really loves you, he'll understand. It's your chance to *make* him understand."

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After my confused and emotional visitor had left, I sat behind my desk for a few minutes collecting my thoughts, re-analysing my actions. The subject of my most recent investigation had been cautious, even frightened, rather than deliberately deceitful. My client was a moderately rich and somewhat influential

businessman; not a big player, but one who had nevertheless managed to make his mark in several cutthroat lines of business. He had paid me a substantial advance - at least, by my standards - to investigate his fiancé of several months.

He'd given me no hint as to what I might expect to find, just the suggestion that she was hiding something. Which she was, but from fear of loss rather than malice. I was convinced of it. It was the kind of decision I am all too often called upon to make, on the behalf of my clients. Life-or-death decisions - or something fairly close to it - for other people, often without their knowledge; decisions which would affect future health and happiness, prospects and proposals; decisions which were not always rigidly aligned with the strictures of the law or the directions of conventional morality. It's my job.

My eyes roved idly around the room as I cogitated. My office is a single room, sparsely and cheaply decorated. Desk, chairs, filing cabinets, all from the thrift store. Nothing much to look at. But it does at least have my name painted on the glass part of the door; Findo Gask - Private Investigations in slightly faded gilt letters. It's just a place to interview potential clients; I don't even lock the door so they can just come in and wait if the mood takes them.

I put the envelope in the top drawer of my desk, hidden under a small pile of unpaid bills, scribbled notes and IOUs. Nobody would ever think of looking for it there. Then I sat back, put my feet on the desk and stared at the ceiling. Nothing to see up there either, apart from a few damp stains. It was time for an early dinner, I decided. And maybe a small aperitif before that.

*

There's a bar I go to from time to time, on the corner of the next block from my office. Not frequently enough to be identified as a regular, although the barkeep does recognise me when I come in. But that's his job, after all. The bar is on the way to the transit tube entrance which would swiftly convey me to the cavern which contains my apartment, assuming I take a very slightly roundabout walking route. Which is something I often do, just to keep tabs on anybody who might be trying to tail me. Not that anybody was on this occasion. It's just an old habit, mild paranoia, perhaps - which is exactly the kind of thing that has kept me alive all these years.

Inside, the bar was dim and fairly quiet: a smattering of business types taking the opportunity for an after-work drink or two and the chance to talk off-the-record; a few furtive-look couples who alternated between looking into each others eyes and glancing over their shoulders, obviously enjoying a discreet rendezvous before returning to their respective homes and

partners; a couple of lonely-looking guys perched on bar stools nursing a stiff cocktail. One of them was me.

I looked at the reflection of the bulky Goblin in the long and slightly worn-looking raincoat and the brimmed hat. The reflection stared back at me. I took off the titer and tossed it on the bar next to my dry martini - two olives - then swept up the glass and toasted my own image. The reflection's tired green eyes caught my own. I grinned, showing some fraction of the sharp teeth that almost all Goblins have. The eyes in the mirror narrowed suspiciously and the ears - large and mobile - twisted and twitched in my direction. I guess I had been looking over my own shoulder for far too many decades.

I had chosen this particular bar stool because the reflection also showed the main entrance. I like to keep tabs on who's coming and going. Another old survival instinct. As I chewed thoughtfully on my second olive, a figure appeared in the doorway, stopping just inside the entrance and looking around. He really didn't belong there.

*

The dude in the doorway was dressed in a style from a previous century. Which was fine, since the guy himself seemed to pre-date the garments by *another* century or so. He wore a starched white shirt and an unadorned grey tie, overlaid with a pin-striped waistcoat, a black jacket with long tails and highly-polished patent-leather shoes. Despite his evident age, he stood stiffly upright as if a broomstick had been inserted down his spine.

As I watched in the mirror, the over-dressed newcomer took off his gloves methodically, easing out one finger at a time, before folding them carefully and putting them into a pocket of his coat. His eyes - still shrewdly sharp and baby-blue despite his age - scanned the room. He didn't seem to be looking in my direction at all. I knew this trick; I was pretty certain it was me he was seeking. Time to find out what he wanted.

I put my cocktail glass down on the bar and turned around slowly, sliding off the bar stool and standing up straight. He didn't look the type to suddenly pull a gun on me, but I kept my arms loose and allowed my coat to flap open just in case. The piercing eyes turned in my direction at last, as if spotting me for the first time. He smiled thinly, walked over to the bar, stopped at a respectful distance and performed a shallow bow. It was little more than a nod of the head, but it was so very incongruous, so old-fashioned.

"Good evening, sir," he said politely, formally, "I believe you are Findo Gask, the detective."

"Who wants to know?" I growled in response. People who inexplicably know who and where I am always make me just a bit edgy.

"My name is Tibbermore, sir," he answered gravely.

"Okay," I said cautiously, "And what do you want with me?"

"My employer wishes to engage your services, sir."

"That's just fine," I replied, "Just get them to phone for an appointment. Or drop by the office - during office hours, of course."

Tibbermore looked faintly saddened at my flippancy. Or maybe it was his standard reaction to any statement.

"I'm afraid my employer doesn't leave the house these days, sir. She's not a well woman."

"So who exactly is your boss?" I asked suspiciously.

"Lady Strowan Westwood," he said calmly.

It was a name I recognised, as well as being one I had not heard for a long time. Frankly, I would have thought she was dead by now.

"She would very much prefer it if you would attend her this evening," Tibbermore went on, "At her house. You are invited to dinner, of course."

They say there's no such thing as a free lunch. The same could probably be said for dinner, too. But I hadn't had anything to eat today, and the cocktail was beginning to make me feel hungry. All I had to look forward to otherwise this evening was the blue-plate special in a cheap diner, another drink or two to wash it down, and an early night.

"Okay, lead on," I said, reaching around for my glass and draining the contents in one swallow, "I guess I'm coming to dinner."

*

For these last few millennia, Goblin society has been based on walking everywhere. At least, walking within any particular cavern; links between caverns, which are located all over the world, are provided by the transit tunnels. So, rich or poor, all share a common transport system.

The absence of powered transport within the caverns may sound strange to a human ear, used as they are to the idea of mechanical transport. Their world is one where a wealthy individual would command a private conveyance - a car, boat or

even aircraft - and those less well off would have to use some shared device - a bus or train, for example. And they still take absolutely ages to get anywhere!

For me, then, being directed by Tibbermore to the entrance of a specific transit tube was absolutely normal. We walked in silence; he didn't seem the type to chat and I was left to my own thoughts. I looked around at the familiar features of the cave in which my office is located, and wondered what an uninformed human would make of it all.

A Goblin cavern is not some damp and squalid hole in the ground, but a vast enclosure, miles across and with ceilings a thousand feet above our heads. The roof is supported by soaring columns and pillars and, it is widely believed, a certain amount of old-school magic from the time the complexes were first constructed.

Within, the caves are filled with a mixture of older residences and newer constructions. Traditionally, before the fashion of copying human-style buildings had caught on a few hundred years ago, Goblin homes were formed from hollows partially set into the walls themselves, or abutting the supporting columns. These days, these residences are usually built out into the cavern spaces to form vast gently-sloping terraces that carpet many parts of the floor.

Elsewhere, more modern buildings can be found: free-standing blocks and towers filled with apartments and some penthouses, and a few cases individual grand mansions for the truly wealthy. Even these palaces are usually separated by a few yards of patio and plaza, often decorated with tubs and urns of decorative fungi and assorted statuary; floor space is always at a premium down here.

I followed Tibbermore down the steps to the transit tube entrance. The tubes are not some kind of underground railway that perhaps a human would imagine, but instead provide instantaneous transport from point to point. You just step into the entrance in one place and step out at another. The humans messing around with mechanical transportation is often amusing and only occasionally annoying - when I am travelling around up there myself - but ultimately inevitable, I suppose, given the proscribed nature of magic in the surface world.

This cavern was quite different from the one we have just left. In this place, human-style buildings predominated, and there appeared to have been some style and taste used in deciding their placement, as opposed to the hodgepodge arrangement to be found in any suburb I could afford to live in.

At the tube exit, Tibbermore indicated a direction. Together we walked down a broad boulevard set with large houses to left and right. This was the dormitory for the very well off. To a Goblin's eyes, the space between the grand establishments, not to mention the width of the road itself, spoke volumes. I could practically smell the wealth and influence emanating from behind the highly-polished front doors.

A few minutes stroll brought us to the portico'd entrance of one of the largest and most impressive buildings on the street. This one was different in other ways, too. Most of the other places showed signs of life: guests and servants coming and going, voices or music from within. This place felt quiet, even dead, more like a morgue than a home.

Tibbermore held open the front door for me and ushered me inside. The entrance hall rose to two stories with a gallery running along two walls at the upper level. Dark wood panelling lined the lower portions while indistinct portraits cluttered the walls above. A few pieces of old-fashioned heavy furniture cluttered the geometrically inlaid wood of the floor.

"I am instructed to ask if you would care to wait in the library, sir," he said, every bit the epitome of the old family retainer.

"Sure, why not?" I shrugged.

He directed me across the polished parquet, my shoes creaking on the wood, and into another room. A library indeed: acres of leather-bound volumes lined all four walls, smelling only faintly of dust and more so of ancient learning. A large desk, a couple of over-stuffed easy chairs and an assortment of small tables filled the space between the stacks.

Tibbermore went over to a cabinet set into the bookcases and pulled open both doors. Inside I could make out a collection of polished silverware, glistening glasses and a very passable collection of bottles. He turned back to me.

"Perhaps sir would care for an aperitif?"

This time, I grinned widely. I had spotted a bottle of a very fine old whisky nestling amongst the others. I lowered myself into one of the armchairs.

"A large Scotch," I said in a definite tone of voice, "Would do very nicely."

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Chapter 2 – Absent Glamours

Tibbermore poured a very decent measure of the Scotch into a cut-glass tumbler and delivered it to the table at my elbow on a silver salver.

"Dinner will be served in fifteen minutes, sir," he intoned.

With that, he left me to my drink and to my thoughts. And my cigarettes. I could see that a cut-glass ashtray - part of the same set that included the glass and the decanter - had been positioned on the side table next to my whisky. I dug in my pockets for a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches, lit up and blew smoke at the ceiling. It helps me think.

When I first became aware of her, Lady Strowan Westwood was already a genuine celebrity: very famous and had been for a long time. When I was growing up, I remembered my grandfather, who was something of an amateur theatre critic in his spare time, saying that she had put on some of the most electrifying stage performances he had ever seen. The old boy had taken me along to see several performances while I was a child, which I remember nearly as clearly as Granddad's enthusiasm before and afterwards.

After a long and successful career on the stage, and a similarly long and even more adventurous love-life, Strowan had met and married a minor member of the nobility. Not that ranks and titles mean a great deal in these Republican days, but his Lordship still retained a respectable fraction of his traditional inheritance and seemed to have enough nous to enhance rather than diminish it with his business dealings.

Strowan had effortlessly morphed into a society hostess, using her charms, and her friends and contacts in the theatre business, to build a wide social circle. The dinners and parties at their house - *this* house, I now realised - were the talk of the town and the subject of endless column-inches in the newspapers. To Grandpa's disgust, her theatre performances diminished to almost nothing, although she was seen as a patron of the arts - at least by those who would wish to get their hands on some of her husband's money.

By all accounts, it was a happy marriage. Their likenesses appeared, always together, in the newspapers and glossy magazines, on a frequent basis. Then his Lordship died, suddenly

and with absolutely no suspicion of foul play. (I checked; I am a detective, after all.) Strowan had been heart-broken. She immersed herself in mourning and never re-emerged into society, disappearing from the reports in the newspapers and the lives of almost everybody.

The door to the library opened. It was Tibbermore back again.

"Dinner is served, sir," he said quietly, then added, "If I could ask you to extinguish your cigarette, please. Smoking no longer agrees with her Ladyship."

I took a last puff and stubbed it out in the ashtray. I swallowed the last drop of the excellent spirits, stood up and followed the old butler out of the library and into the dining room.

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The prospect of meeting a childhood idol should have left me speechless and tongue-tied. Although not as much as it would my grandfather who, now that I come to look back at it with an adult's eyes, was probably completely besotted with Strowan Westwood's stage image. But in truth I wasn't quite sure what to expect. My Granddad had been dead for more than a century, so she must be really old by now.

"Mister Findo Gask," Tibbermore said formally as he ushered me through the dining room door.

Lady Westwood was seated at one end of a long and beautifully polished dining table, set with just two places clustered around a couple of large candelabra with at least a dozen lit candles. To my eyes, the room was almost unbearably bright. Even so, Strowan Westwood squinted over the top of a pair of bottle-thick glasses in my general direction. It seemed she was very nearly blind.

"Mister Gask," she said graciously, "I do hope my summons has not unduly inconvenienced you."

"Your Ladyship," I replied, deploying my best speaking-to-toffs voice, "It's my pleasure to make your acquaintance."

She held out her hand; I took it and kissed it, as I had been taught to do as a child. The hand was slender and frail, with veins standing out on the back and knobbled knuckles which told of age and arthritis. She was one who was once famously beautiful but long years had taken their toll. A few vestiges still remained: her movements retained a certain poise and the bone structure of her face hinted at the luminous radiance she once had.

"Please, sit down," she instructed, "Make yourself comfortable."

Tibbermore was already holding the chair at the other place setting. I sat, taking the opportunity to look around a little more

while the butler fussed around me for a few moments. I could see that Strowan was not able to get around very much by herself, judging by the two stout canes positioned discreetly not very far from her hand.

"We'll eat right away, Tibbermore," her Ladyship said, "I'm sure Mister Gask will be hungry."

"Of course, Ma'am."

He padded softly across the room and left by the other door, the one that led to the kitchens, returning almost immediately with a tray. Bowls of soup appeared in front of both of us, then the old retainer offered me toadstool bread rolls - I took two - but did not, I noticed, offer any to her Ladyship.

"Would you care for wine, Mister Gask?" Lady Westwood asked, her voice as clear and alive as I remembered from all those years ago. She might be a blind cripple, but she showed no signs of being gaa-gaa as well as being every bit the gracious hostess.

I picked up my spoon to sample the soup - hot and delicious - and tackled the first of my bread rolls - fresh from the oven - while waiting for her Ladyship to direct the conversation. In my experience, it pays to be patient at this point. New clients often take a while to get to the nub of their concern, perhaps because they have difficulty in admitting to themselves that they actually have a problem at all.

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"I live very quietly these days, Mister Gask," she began, dabbing at her mouth delicately with a napkin, "So few regular visitors."

My detective instincts tingled. It doesn't take much these days.

"Who are your regular visitors, your Ladyship?" I asked.

"Only two, coming to visit an old cripple after all these years," she replied, sounding as if she really couldn't expect any more, "My granddaughter Mayfield. And my old friend and one-time agent, Almon Methven."

I nodded attentively.

"So how can I help you?"

"I find that I need to engage your professional services," she said carefully, putting down her napkin, her soup barely touched, "You come well-recommended."

I wondered who had done the recommendation but considered it best to keep that question to myself.

"Thank you," I replied, doing my best to sound suitably modest, "But what service is it that you wish me to perform?"

"I am missing a piece of jewellery, a necklace of sapphires and diamonds," she said grimly, "One that is both extremely valuable, as well as being very precious to me. It was a present from my late husband. He bought it for me, before we were engaged."

She smiled wanly, a glimmer of her former beauty lighting up her face.

"I think he was trying to impress me with his wealth," she went on, the years rolling back inside her head, "He really need not have bothered. I had already decided I was going to marry him."

I could not help smiling a little in response. There was a pause while she remained lost in thought while I took the opportunity to consume more of the bread and soup.

"So when did it disappear?" I asked eventually.

"I don't know, precisely," she replied, shaking her head, "I could have been any time in the last few months."

"And was there any sign of a break-in? Forced entry?"

Again, she shook her head.

"Have you been to the police?"

"No, I haven't."

"Ah. So you think it might be somebody close to you?"

She looked surprised by the deduction for a moment, then she nodded in understanding.

"You are a detective, I see. You are correct, of course."

"I will need to talk to your staff, your Ladyship," I said apologetically.

"I suppose you must," she said sadly, "Although they have all been with me for a great many years. Tibbermore will arrange it."

"Of course, Ma'am," Tibbermore's voice came from behind me.

"And I can assume you have confided in Mister Tibbermore?" I said.

"Tibbermore has been with me longer than anybody, Mister Gask," Lady Strowan said firmly, "I have complete faith in his integrity."

"Thank you, Ma'am," the old servant said, deftly clearing away the soup bowls, "And I would be happy to vouch for all of the

servants. Although if Mister Gask insists, I will of course arrange interviews at his convenience."

"Well, that may be necessary," I suggested, "Although I think my investigation will start elsewhere."

"As you wish, sir."

I waited until the dining room door had closed firmly behind Tibbermore, then turned to Lady Westwood.

*

"You suspect your granddaughter, don't you?" I said in a low firm voice, watching her closely as I spoke.

"I'm afraid I do," she sighed, "But I can't be sure."

"What makes you suspect Mayfield?"

Lady Strowan was silent for a moment, then she spoke in a quiet little voice.

"She knows where I keep my necklace. She even asked to see it only a few months ago. To tell you the truth, I had almost forgotten about it myself. It took me some minutes to remember where I had stored it."

"But you did show her the necklace?"

"Yes. She even tried it on. And it did look lovely on her. I did think about giving it to her, but I could not bear to part with it. Too many memories."

"And you put it away again afterwards, in the same hiding-place?"

Lady Westwood nodded.

"Well why don't you just send Tibbermore to ask her to visit you, just like you got him to invite me here?" I enquired, "Then you could ask her about it yourself."

"She only visits infrequently. Not even every year," Lady Westwood said, her voice low, "She spends most of her time on the surface."

"Ah, I see."

I did indeed see. We Goblins have lived in these underground caverns for millennia. We are of course well aware of the antics of the humans on the surface. A basic knowledge of the world of men is taught in school, for example. But most Goblins have never visited the upper world and many are terrified at the prospect. It was probable that Tibbermore was one of those petrified by the open sky, quite possibly to the point of catatonia.

But a few oddballs are undeterred by the open sky and choose to reside on the surface. It's not illegal to visit, although it is something that convention frowns upon. But, with suitable precautions, it's certainly possible to set up a residence without incurring the wrath of the Goblin authorities.

And, yes, I am one of those oddballs. Over the years, I have undertaken any number of expeditions to the surface world and, while I'm not entirely comfortable up there, I can at least function adequately. And I have had plenty of opportunity to practice my disguise as a human. So this would have been the factor which recommended me to Lady Westwood.

"So, to be clear," I asked, "You want me to visit your granddaughter, somewhere on the surface and ask her nicely to return your jewels?"

"I do," she said flatly, "Tibbermore will give you the address."

"And if she refuses? Or denies she has taken them?"

She looked flustered.

"Ask her again. Plead with her. Tell her I'm begging her to return them. Or come here and convince me that she didn't take it."

"No firmer persuasion?"

Lady Westwood look shocked at the mere suggestion.

"Certainly not," she insisted, "She is my granddaughter and I am very fond of her. I'm sure there must be some reasonable explanation. I just want her to come and tell me what it is."

*

The rest of the evening passed swiftly. Lady Westwood appeared not to have any more germane information to assist the enquiry, even though I probed a little more about her relationship with her granddaughter and her other family members. It seemed that she had fallen out with her daughter many years ago and they were no longer on speaking terms, and it was only Mayfield's own rebelliousness that had prompted her to get in touch with Grandma.

Between times, I enjoyed an excellent dinner with many courses and slightly too much wine, although I ate and drank at least four times as much as she did. While I filled my stomach, Strowan entertained me with stories of her life in the theatre, which she promised were at least ninety percent true. I couldn't judge their truthfulness, but they were certainly highly amusing.

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Chapter 3 – Relative Rogue

The following morning I woke early, alert and refreshed and, perhaps surprisingly, without even the suggestion of a hangover. It wasn't a late night, as one would expect when being entertained by a frail old lady. And the wines were of the finest quality. Showered, breakfasted and fortified by much strong coffee, I set out for the surface.

Getting to the upper world is much less of a problem for Goblins than humans might imagine. Although most of our caverns are many miles underground, there are plenty of entrances and exits. Most are the vertical equivalents of the travel tubes which link the caverns together, and these take no time at all to convey one to the surface. True, there's a certain amount of faffing around required with the border guards and customs officials who are there to keep out undesirables - which is more or less nugatory, since even humans can and do visit the Lower Realms - and, more importantly, to ensure that proscribed goods are not exported. Oh, and to ensure that import duty is levied on anything which is brought into the caves.

Getting about on the surface without being noticed is a bit trickier. There are basically two approaches. The first is to use the Goblin's natural talent to move silently and swiftly, taking advantage of shadows for concealment and the ability to see in the dark. Of course, it is possible to enhance all this with concealment glamours of various kinds, although such magic is a bit expensive for my wallet. The main problem is the time it takes to get anywhere while remaining concealed; it is so difficult to remain hidden on the forms of transport preferred up there.

The approach I prefer relies on the fact that I am large for a Goblin. Over the years, I have perfected a disguise which will convince most humans, at least in the gloom that they persist of thinking of as darkness. It's okay from a distance too, provided I don't get too close. This allows me to use buses and trains without difficulty, especially as I speak several popular human languages with a fair degree of fluency.

So when I left my apartment this morning, I was wearing lift shoes to add a few inches to my height, a long overcoat with an upturned collar to hide the shortness of my legs - and with plenty of inner pockets for essentials of all kinds - and a brimmed hat to

disguise the baldness of my head, and the long and pointed nature of my ears. To this ensemble, I added a pair of dark glasses, partially to shield my eyesight from the glare of the sun but mainly to hide my eyes, which are large and green.

Underground, my travel consisted of walking a few blocks and a couple of changes on the transit tubes. After minimal formalities at the border - I just flashed my wallet with my PI buzzer at the customs official - I was on my way up to the surface.

*

Goblins generally prefer cooler conditions, and many are more comfortable surrounded by buildings and pavements rather than trees and mud. So it is not a coincidence that most entrances to the Lower Realms are hidden in quiet backstreets and alleyways of cities in the northern part of the Northern hemisphere. These entrances are clearly marked, if you know what to look for, although the Goblin runes are usually disguised as the kind of graffiti which litters almost every unobserved vertical surface in so many parts of the surface world.

This particular entrance was in a quiet backwater of Vannes. I emerged from the portal into the alley flanked by the featureless walls of brick and steel cladding of modern warehouses. It was overcast and drizzling, and any noise I might have made was masked by the screams of seagulls from the dock nearby. I lit a cigarette, turned up the collar of my raincoat and tugged down the brim of my hat to throw my nose into even more shadow. Then I set off down the alley in the direction of the bus station.

The address that Tibbermore had given me seemed to be a farmhouse in a remote part of Brittany. I always keep a fat wad of human banknotes of various currencies and denominations in my wallet - Goblin dollars are very hard and a little goes a long way up here - and so I purchased bus tickets in what I hoped was passable French. I'm sure I was considered to be a tourist but I doubt anybody realised exactly where I had travelled from.

The rural bus ride was slow and tedious, but there were few other passengers. I was able to wedge myself in a corner near the back and pretend to doze while keeping an eye on things from under the brim of my hat. Eventually I reached my stop and debarked without incident. Time zones in this part of the human world said that it would be getting dark fairly soon even though my stomach clearly told me it was barely even lunchtime. I still had quite a walk ahead of me - a couple of hours, I estimated - and I would prefer to complete my journey after the sun was well below the horizon.

The sky had cleared while I was on the bus and the brilliant redness of the sunset caused me a certain amount of discomfort, despite my dark glasses. I took shelter in a dark alley for a while - somehow it always seems I end up skulking in alleyways whenever I visit the surface - emerging only when the stars began to appear in the sky. They provided more than enough light to see by.

I set off along the damp pavement, keeping my distance from the other pedestrians and made my way out of town. Once clear of the built-up area I increased my pace; Goblins naturally walk much faster than humans and I had a long way to go tonight.

*

The old farmhouse looked completely unoccupied: the windows shuttered and barred, doors closed tight and no sign of light or sound of movement coming from within. It was just what I had expected. Goblins do tend to like their privacy, especially if they are weird enough to live on the surface, and the appearance of this place would discourage most humans unless they were intent on burglary. I felt sure there would be other ways of discouraging those visitors with dishonest intent.

I strode up to the front door confidently and knocked, then called out a friendly greeting in the Goblin tongue. It is a language understood by few humans and most would not even recognise it as a spoken form at all. I'm told by some of my human acquaintances that, to the untrained ear, the words sound like grunts and groans interspersed with whines and hisses. For all that, it is rich and sophisticated language and one that no human I have ever heard of could speak without a noticeable accent.

But any Goblin within would know that another was outside and, I hoped, would be reassured by that knowledge. I could just hear faint sounds of movement, so I knocked again, adding another friendly salutation for good measure. I could catch the noises created by a competent individual opening a sensible collection of locks and bolts, and then the heavy wooden door creaked open.

The person standing in the doorway was a vision of beauty the likes of which I had never seen before.

*

It was Mayfield Westwood, of course. She had evidently inherited all of her classical beauty from her famous grandmother. She was wearing a long flowing robe in a silky green fabric which clung to her body artfully; her hips and bust and neck were proportioned in exactly the way a skilled artist would depict with loving exactitude - assuming they had the necessary talent in the first place.

The iridescent beauty of her physical form was enhanced by considerable personal determination, which I could infer from the set of her shoulders. Her poise and musculature suggested she had long endured a high intensity of physical training. Her eyes were bright and penetrating, intelligent and insightful; the kind of eyes that could lead anybody astray.

"Hello," she said in the Goblin tongue, sounding highly suspicious and slightly nervous, "Who are you?"

I removed my hat. This was partially just as a near-instinctive mark of politeness, but it also served to reassure her that I was indeed a Goblin.

"Findo Gask," I explained, "I'm a shamus, a private detective. Your grandmother engaged me to find you and ask you some questions."

I pulled out my wallet and showed her the badge which confirmed, at least partially, my professional credentials.

"My grandmother?" she echoed, sounding uncertain but taking the time to inspect the badge closely.

"Lady Strowan Westwood," I replied carefully, "I had dinner with her last night. Served by Tibbermore. It was delicious."

Her eyes moved from my badge to my face.

"I guess you'd better come in."

She held the door wide and I stepped inside.

The front door of the farmhouse opened directly into a large living room which occupied the whole of the ground floor. The lights were down low, even by Goblin standards, and almost the only illumination in the room came from a solid-looking cast-iron stove which was set into a large fireplace on one wall. Its red flames cast flickering shadows around the room.

Mayfield shut the door behind us, and locked and bolted it carefully. She reached over to operate a switch to turn on more of the lights. They were electric bulbs, in the human fashion, but set at levels of illumination which were attuned to Goblin sensitivities. The few pools of light just served to emphasise the shadows in the other parts of the room.

I looked around. The walls were thick fieldstone, with windows shuttered firmly against the daylight, and the ceiling was punctuated by heavy oak beams set at a level which most men would find set uncomfortably at head height. No problem for me, of course. Or Mayfield.

There was somebody else in the room. I was sure of it. Somebody lurking in the shadows. Somebody doing their best, nearly successfully, to breathe quietly and avoid involuntary movements. Then Mayfield operated another switch and the shadows were eliminated in a flood of light that made me happy I had retained my dark glasses.

Sitting in an armchair in the far corner of the room was a man, a young human male. He had a bald head which looked as if he shaved it daily, and he wore a sleeveless T-shirt, jeans and training shoes. As I blinked in his direction, he stood up and moved towards me extending his hand in a friendly fashion. I smiled in his direction. Now that he was upright, I could see he was short of stature, by the standards of men, but extremely well muscled.

Now, Goblins are very strong for their size and a big male like me was probably stronger than almost any man on the planet. But this one looked as if he could give me a tough time in a wrestling match. I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

The man grasped my hand warmly and spoke in, I was astonished to hear, near-flawless Goblin.

"Hello, Mister Gask," he said clearly, "Welcome to our humble abode."

As I shook his hand, it also occurred to me that, to human eyes, this muscular young man would be regarded by many of his species as particularly handsome and good-looking, perhaps even beautiful.

*

It seemed that Lady Strowan's granddaughter had struck up some kind of a relationship with the human male. That was their business, of course, but it was extremely unusual. I myself have many acquaintances, and even a few close friends, not to mention professional colleagues, who are human. They have my trust and respect, and I flatter myself to think that the respect is reciprocated. And, naturally enough, I have known one or two Goblins who have become emotionally attached to humans.

My own brother Nether, for example, had struck up a caring relationship with a whole family: grandfather, father and daughter. Over a period of nearly a hundred years, the o'Chill clan had run an Irish bar in New York City and my brother had installed himself as the resident Leprechaun. Despite his other less trust-inspiring qualities, Nether Gask had clearly enjoyed their friendship and relied on their discretion to conceal him from the authorities, even if it was, in the end, just a cover for his espionage.

"I'm Glen, Glen Morrison," the young man introduced himself, the sounds of the human name jarring with the rolling syllables of the Goblin tongue.

"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure," I replied, switched to English guessing - correctly, as it turned out - that this was the human's mother tongue.

Mayfield waved me in a direction of a chair which was set to one side of the fire. I sat, cradling my hat in my hands. Then she went over and took the young man's hand in what was undoubtedly a possessive fashion. Together they sat on the davenport on the opposite side of the fireplace, not quite touching but only a fraction of an inch apart.

"Glen and I are, well, friends," she said, looking at me earnestly over the coffee table, a touch of defiance in her voice.

I nodded, careful to let no sign of moral disapproval or judgement show on my face. I didn't need to antagonise them just at the moment.

"You've been living together here for some time now?"

It was a statement, not really a question. And it was obvious, too. The individuals were clearly entirely relaxed with each other, and the old building looked as if it has extensively refurbished to be comfortable for a Goblin. But not recently: there were a few signs of wear and tear on the woodwork and traces of old stains on the furniture.

"Almost ten years," came the reply.

That was a decent length of time for a human, although almost nothing for a Goblin.

"Do many people know about your, er, relationship?"

Mayfield glanced away for a moment although, to his credit, Glen's eyes never left my face.

"We've kept it very quiet," she said softly.

"My parents would never approve," Glen chirped up, "Or even understand. I don't see very much of them nowadays."

"And both my parents are long gone," Mayfield added with only a trace of sadness, "We're more or less alone in the world."

"And your grandmother?" I asked quietly.

Unexpectedly, Mayfield laughed. It was a beautiful, silken tinkle, and neither Glen nor myself could help ourselves smiling at the joyous sound.

"Who knows what my grandmother would think of anything? She was quite a wild thing in her day, you know. Hell, she might even approve!"

It might have been a bluff, or just wild bravado, but it was a really good line.

Findo Gask - Deadly Enchantment

Chapter 4 – Woodland Trail

"But you haven't told her?" I asked Mayfield.

"No, I haven't," she confirmed, "Of course not. She's very old, and not very strong. And I don't see any need to risk upsetting her."

"I can buy that," I said. I didn't add: especially if you held out any hope of getting your hands on a bequest in her Ladyship's will.

Mayfield's lovely eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"Is this why my grandmother has sent you here?" she demanded.

I smiled again, showing my teeth.

"No," I replied, "No, it's not. I don't think she's knows anything about your relationship."

Both young beings again stiffened involuntarily at my use of the expression. Perhaps it was just speaking the word, aloud, in English. Or maybe it was they were being forced to recognise the fact that there really was a deep and long-established relationship, after years of failing to admit to it, even to themselves. I find that people of all shapes and sizes have such capacity for self-deception.

"She certainly didn't mention it to me," I added, "The questions I am directed to ask are on a completely different topic."

Mayfield relaxed fractionally. Glen squeezed her hand encouragingly. As one, their heads turned and they looked into each other's eyes. It didn't take much of a genius to work out what was going on here.

"So what's Grandma sent you all the way up here to ask me, then?" she asked, being her attention back to me, "Couldn't it wait until my next visit?"

"Well, it's about your last visit that I'm here to make enquiries," I said with deliberate emphasis, watching both of them carefully.

She looked puzzled, even confused. There as no hint of guilt or concern in her reactions. As for Glen, well, human reactions are harder for me to interpret, but he too seemed unfazed by the

prospect of being asked a few hard questions by an inquisitive stranger.

"Sometime after your last visit to Lady Strowan Westwood," I spoke carefully, "Something went missing. Something precious. Something valuable. Something of great sentimental value."

Still no reaction from either of them. Both Mayfield and Glen seemed devoid of any signs of shame, just listening attentively to what I had to say.

"It was her diamond and sapphire necklace," I went on.

Mayfield gasped and put her hands to her mouth. Glen frowned and turned towards her, instantly concerned at her distress.

"The one Grandfather bought her?" she breathed.

"Yes," I said firmly, "I believe so."

*

"Oh, no!" Mayfield wailed, a few tears welling in her eyes, "Stolen?"

"It seems that way," I replied, leaning forward and looking deadly serious. I'm good at that look; people pay attention when I deploy it.

She turned to Glen, who took her hand in both of his own and rubbed it in a sympathetic kind of way. Now, in general I'm a suspicious old curmudgeon - in a professional kind of way, of course - but it seemed to me that her reaction was nothing other than both genuine and heartfelt. Her boyfriend seemed equally nonplussed.

"So you're investigating the theft, are you?" Glen piped up.

"Yeah, that's it," I replied, "Started as of yesterday."

"Grandma must be distraught," Mayfield sniffed, "She loved that necklace. It was the first thing her husband-to-be bought for her. She's always treasured it. She was so proud to show it to me on my last visit."

"Did you ask to see it, when you visited?" I pressed.

"Grandma said she would find it, on one of my previous visits, oh, maybe five years ago," she said, frowning slightly at the question, "Then she seemed to have forgotten about it when I turned up the following time. She is getting a little forgetful in her old age, you know."

"But you did mention it, recently?"

Mayfield sighed.

"I only brought it up in conversation all those years ago as something to talk about," she said sadly, "Grandma and I don't have a great deal in common, and she does tend to go on about events which were ancient history even before I was born."

"So what happened?" I pressed.

"So, I mentioned it again, just in passing. It must have triggered some memory. Her face lit up. She struggled to her feet and shuffled over to the sideboard in the drawing room. In the top drawer - not even locked - was a jewellery case."

Mayfield stared into the distance as she recounted the story. I hardly dare breathe for fear of disturbing her train of thought and Glen was watching her intently, too.

"I got the impression that she had put it away somewhere safe," Mayfield went on, "And had forgotten exactly where she had stashed it. But she managed to track it down. Or perhaps Tibbermore had found it for her. So she insisted on dragging it out of the case and made me put it on."

"This necklace, what's it like?" Glen interjected.

"It's beautiful," Mayfield replied, turning to face him with dreamy eyes, "The loveliest jewels and an exquisite setting."

Her attention returned to me. As I watched, she visibly relaxed to a more realistic and hard-headed attitude. And one which I suspected more closely represented her everyday viewpoint.

"But it wasn't something you could wear every day, or even every year," she went on, "It's far too dressy and extravagant for anything other than the most formal of social occasions. I doubt even Grandma ever wore it in public more than a few dozen times."

"So you wore Lady Westwood's necklace just a few months ago?"

"Oh, yes. I paraded up and down the drawing room while Grandma sat in her chair and watched me. She went on and on about how she wore the jewels for parties and receptions, all of which must have been two hundred years ago."

She paused, staring over my shoulder obviously deep in thought.

"Then she seemed to get bored with it," Mayfield went on, "Her attention wandered. Suddenly she just didn't seem to care."

"What did you do?"

"I slipped the necklace off and put it back in the case."

"And what did you do with the case?" I asked, speaking even more softly to preserve the confidential mood.

"I put it back in the drawer of the sideboard where Grandma had taken it from," she replied promptly, "I didn't want to leave it lying around. I told her what I had done, but I wasn't sure she was listening."

"How long ago was this?"

"About three months, maybe more," she answered, then she frowned, suddenly glaring at me from the couch, "But why are you asking all these questions?"

*

I knew the atmosphere of warm confidence and absolute trust couldn't last for ever. Best to accept that the moment had passed. Maybe it's just my self-effacing personality, or something, that encourages people to confide in me at the slightest acquaintance. Or maybe I'm just lucky. Damn lucky, sometimes.

"Your Grandmother has formed the opinion that you had taken her necklace, for some reason," I said levelly, sitting back in the chair, "She sent me to ask you about it."

"She thought *I'd* taken it?" she said furiously, standing up suddenly and putting her hands on her hips accusingly.

"Yes," I answered calmly, looking up at her, "She did. You can see how she might have come to that conclusion, if you think about it. You did ask about the necklace, repeatedly. You did handle it, very recently. You may even have been the last person to have seen the bling before it was stolen."

I stood up slowly and looked down at the beautiful Goblin glowering at me. The advantages of being tall for a Goblin.

"Your dear Grandmother may be a bit old and distracted, even a touch senile sometimes," I went on slowly, "But she's not stupid. She knows you could have robbed her. But she loves you. Enough to get me to talk to you, ask you to return it. She could have just called the cops. And they would be much less gentle in their approach, I can tell you. Count it as a lucky escape, if you like."

As I spoke, Mayfield's expression changed from moment to moment. Now, she looked more horrified than angry. She must have been realising that her aged relative was doing her a favour by engaging the discreet services of yours truly rather than a formal complaint to the police. It could have been a good deal worse.

"But I didn't take the necklace!" she insisted, pouting prettily.

I looked back at her levelly.

"No, I don't think you did," I responded eventually, keeping my voice calm and unthreatening, "But I have to make sure."

Glen the human piped up again. He had been very quiet earlier, perhaps reassured by his girlfriend's presence and apparent comfort, or maybe his knowledge of the nuances of Goblin society and body language was insufficient to realise exactly what I had been doing. But now he seemed surprised and alarmed by Mayfield's reaction to my insinuations.

He stood up suddenly and tried to look threatening. Sure, he was taller than me, and very probably heavier too. But I wasn't impressed. He probably thought he was protecting Mayfield's honour, or something. But he needn't have bothered. I was certainly stronger and faster than he was, and even Mayfield herself could probably best him in a fair fight.

"Look," he rumbled, "We haven't stolen anything. Take a look around if you don't believe me."

I didn't bother. I couldn't see it being stashed here. For one thing, there simply weren't enough likely hiding-places. And, in any case, it was difficult to get sophisticated glamours to conceal hiding-places up here. Even when they are transferable, undeployed magics are carefully prevented from being transported to the human-dominated surface world. Plenty of incentives for the customs officials make that a near-certainty.

All of which was just as well, since I didn't get the chance to poke about in hidden recesses looking for secret hidey-holes. Just at that moment, a loud voice came from outside.

"I know you're in there," the voice called out, in English, adding, "I'm coming in."

*

As is well-documented in these chronicles, no Goblin feels truly safe in a place with only one exit, especially on the surface where an encounter with a surprised human is more than just a remote possibility. Underground, those who cannot afford better will have a residence with just a single door but, once over one's own doorstep, there will be a plethora of alleys, ginnels and passages leading in every direction, with cut-throughs, tunnels, staircases and drop-holes enough to confuse any pursuer. Goblins with more wealth will have at least one extra entrance, often plainly visible, and very probably another one carefully hidden, while the most nervous or perhaps overtly paranoid will have several boltholes including those which use expensive one-time glamours to transport the escapee instantaneously to a place of safety.

Goblins can move very quickly when they have to - so quickly that a human might blink and miss the movement entirely. From Glen's point of view, both Mayfield and I must have disappeared in a blur. I just caught the surprised look on his face as I raced across the room.

I had spotted the hidden exit when I had entered the farmhouse. Nothing so obvious as a sign or marker or anything; it was just the way the furniture was arranged to allow a startled individual to follow a direct line to this particular featureless point on the wall from almost any part of the room. And even if I had not identified it for what it was, I would have instinctively followed Mayfield; I was only a tiny fraction of a second behind her as we passed through the glamour that concealed the passageway behind the illusion of a rough stone wall.

Behind the glamour was a drop tube, perhaps fifteen feet deep. I bounced off the landing mat and set off after Mayfield. We were underground in a narrow earthy tunnel barely tall enough for a Goblin to run through. It was very dark; my eyes instinctively opened wide to take advantage of the few glowing patches on the walls that might conceivably have been natural luminescent fungi or, more likely, a few splashes of that paint-on illumination so widely used in the Lower Realms. Unusual to find it up here, though.

I ran hard, barely able to keep up while dodging protruding roots and stones that the builder - presumably Mayfield herself, although I wasn't convinced she would be up for that kind of physical labour - had found too inconvenient to remove. The tunnel twisted and turned unpredictably, to the point where Mayfield would disappear from view entirely, even though she was only a few feet in front of me.

After a few minutes the tunnel began to ramp upwards and then suddenly narrowed to the point where progress could only be made on hands and knees in the increasingly damp and muddy floor. It seemed that my expenses were going to include a cleaning bill for my raincoat and quite possibly a new pair of trousers.

With Mayfield's feet - she was barefoot - practically kicking soil in my face, we crawled out of an opening which would probably have been mistaken for a badger sett, even by those who would consider themselves Proper Country Folk. I stood up and looked around cautiously. There was no sign of any pursuit, anything other than the cautious noises of timid woodland creatures when a couple of noisy bipeds had suddenly appeared in their midst.

"This way," Mayfield hissed, indicating a direction slightly to our left.

I shrugged. How she knew which way to go was beyond me. I was turned around; I had no idea where I was or even which way was north - although I'd have a pretty good idea of the latter once I managed to get a good look of the stars unobscured by mist and foliage. Navigation by starlight was a skill I had learned and mastered a hundred years ago, thanks to a cut-price correspondence course I had bought from the small-ads pages. The trade press is a mixed blessing for a Goblin in my business, but occasionally turns up the essential necessities.

I followed Mayfield's heels closely. We threaded our way along a rough path in the middle of a woodland of mature trees interspersed with patches of undergrowth which made it difficult to see very far, but at least allowed the moonlight to shine brightly through the branches. I could hear some indistinct noises from behind us but I could not immediately tell whether it was a sign of pursuers or merely some alarmed animal making themselves scarce in the underbrush.

We ran on. Suddenly, Mayfield pulled up, then diverted off the obvious if extremely muddy track and plunged into a thicket. A handful of steps later, we were in the bottom of a hollow - complete dry, despite the recent rain - and so sheltered by foliage that we would have been hard to observe from even a few feet away. Mayfield clearly knew about this refuge; it even seemed as if it had been prepared especially for such an eventuality. Typical Goblin forward thinking and not, of course, mild paranoia at all.

I bent double and tried to control my breathing, unable to speak after the intense physical exercise. I put it down to incipient old age, or maybe just too many late nights. Mayfield seemed to have no such problem; She probably was just as fit as she looked.

"Are we safe?" I wheezed to Mayfield as soon as I could speak.

She was peering through the latticework of leaves and branches that enveloped us.

"Probably," came the laconic reply, "Nothing out there I didn't expect."

To my surprise, Glen caught up with us a few minutes later. He was breathing heavily and unable to converse at first, but he had made good time through the escape tunnel and the woodland paths. He ducked into the foxhole under the bushes beside us, hardly breathing hard at all.

"Why did you run?" he demanded, looking from his girlfriend to me and back again.

I glanced at Mayfield. She seemed completely nonplussed.

"I don't understand," she murmured.

"Surely that was a Goblin speaking?" he replied, his own face now taking on an aura of confusion.

I stared at Glen, then turned back to Mayfield. Her mouth was a round "O" of surprise. Glen was right. Thinking back, although the speaker's English had been very good - better than you would normally expect in France - the rich undertones of a Goblin accent were entirely apparent.

Which left the question: why would *another* Goblin be tracking down Mayfield?

Findo Gask - Deadly Enchantment

Chapter 5 – Unnatural Causes

I had no immediate opportunity to cogitate on that particular question. Somehow I never do. At times like this, events seem to unfold onto themselves at breakneck pace. Maybe it's just my luck.

I could just make out a tuneless whistling emanating from the direction Mayfield and I had just come from. I picked up my ears. Mayfield could hear it too and even Glen's inadequate human hearing managed to pick up something. All three of us pulled ourselves up to the edge of the hollow and peered through the luxuriant undergrowth. The whistling grew louder, now accompanied by the sound of soft footsteps. Somebody - no, two somebodies - were tailing us. And they were making no attempt to conceal their presence - indeed, they obviously wanted us to know they were there.

Two short figures appeared around a bend in the track, both bundled up in oversize coats and wearing unfashionable brightly-coloured hats. In the darkness, and from a distance, they might have been taken for a couple out for a bracing stroll in the woods, although why they were doing it this late at night would have been a mystery. It's not as if they were walking a dog, or anything.

As they drew closer, there were a few little things that, to a keen observer, gave them away. Those shapeless woolly hats sat on their heads in a way which looked distinctly odd, and hinted at the large and mobile ears concealed underneath. Then there was the gait: both walked stiff-legged, with a bit of a waddle. The night was not cold, but both were bundled up with scarves and turned-up coat collars. And the sunglasses were a dead giveaway.

I knew these guys. And they would recognise me, I was sure. Not that we were friends, in any way. Or even professional colleagues. Tarsapple and his junior Glenshee were two of the very few Goblins who get even more practice in impersonating humans than I do. I had encountered them on more than one occasion in the past, and all three of us have the scars to show for it.

Tarsapple is a senior - or at least, long-standing - member of a secretive force which polices Goblins on the surface. I've never found out the name of the organisation, although its reach seems to be very extensive. Nor have I discovered the true extent of

their powers; they do seem to have little time and less respect of the independent operator or private investigator operating on what they see as their patch.

Most of the time, Goblins up here are left strictly alone, provided they keep themselves to themselves. In any case, anybody electing to spend much time on the surface is likely to have reasons of their own to prefer being separated from the bulk of their society. But every now and then, these hermits and misfits make a nuisance of themselves, usually when they risk making the humans aware of the existence of the race living beneath their feet. And the role of Tarsapple's organisation is to prevent such disclosures or, more usually, covering them up when they have happened.

Tarsapple and his companion stopped not ten yards from our hiding spot and looked around in a proprietary way. Then he spoke in the Goblin tongue.

"Miss Mayfield Westwood," he said calmly, "Please come out."

She turned to me with a panicked look.

"It's all right," I whispered, "I know these people. Although they're not friends."

The expression of baffled astonishment on Mayfield's face was answer enough.

"It'll be fine," I added reassuringly, with more confidence than I really felt, "I'll go first."

Affecting a degree of nonchalance, Tarsapple was looking down the track in the direction he had come from. He heard the rustling of the bushes as I pushed my way through the undergrowth and turned in my direction as I emerged. His grin of smug self-satisfaction was swiftly replaced with a petulant scowl when he saw me brushing leaves from my overcoat.

"Why is it always you, Gask?" he snarled.

*

"It's not always me. You must know, oh, dozens of people on the Surface," I snapped back, "I'm not the only one who spends a lot of time up here. Besides, I do have a job of work to do."

Tarsapple's eyes narrowed suspiciously - always an effective expression for a Goblin. Glenshee stood motionless next to him, a bulky shape bundled up in oversize clothing, stolid and unimaginative, waiting for somebody to tell him what to do.

"So what's this job you're on, then?" Tarsapple went on.

"That's none of your business," I replied, doing my best impression of a poker face.

Naturally, Mayfield chose just that moment to emerge from the undergrowth. Unlike Tarsapple and his companion, and me, she had made no attempt to disguise herself in human form. Compared with the bulky clothing and concealing headwear, she looked free and natural, fresh and undeniably beautiful. Though I doubted any passing human would have thought of it that way: in the darkness, they would see a scary-looking creature with fangs and claws menacing three worried-looking people.

"What's happening?" she asked, her head swinging from me to the two coppers and back again.

Tarsapple's expression broadened to his habitual cynical grin.

"But I think it has just become my business," he said smugly.

He turned to Mayfield, straightening as he did so from his normal slouch into some resembling a military stance.

"Miss Westwood," he said formally, "I am required to instruct you to return Below with me."

Mayfield's frown conveyed petulance and confusion in equal measure.

"But I don't want to go," she answered, "I like it here. I haven't done anything wrong. And I didn't certainly steal Grandmother's necklace. I was just explaining all this to Mister Gask here."

There was a moment's stunned silence. Tarsapple was evidently revelling in his power. I considered it best to bide my time and attempt to retain the shreds of my poker face.

"I am not able to discuss this matter here and now. And I do have the power to force you to come with me," Tarsapple replied, in a tone of voice that might just have been mistaken for apologetic. I had too much experience - most of it unpleasant - with the guy to fall for this ruse.

Mayfield might not have noticed it. I only did because I was watching for it. There was a tinge of magical powers entwined in Tarsapple's words, or at least released by him uttering them. It was a Compel glamour - a subtle one, fine old-fashioned Goblin magic - being deployed here. A magic which would force all but the most recalcitrant to obey the instruction they had just been given. And so subtle that, in fact, Mayfield might not have noticed its use.

Glen the human had wisely decided to remain hidden in the hollow. Or perhaps Mayfield had directed him to stay. Either way, a good decision. Cowboys like Tarsapple are always likely to react

badly, or maybe just instinctively, when presented with an unexpected human. He would have been lucky to have escaped with merely suffering the stultifying after-effects of a mind-wipe glamour.

Mayfield looked confused, at least partially caused by the subtle magic which had been set on her. But she was made of sterner stuff, it seemed.

"I'd like Mister Gask to accompany me," she said primly, adding more firmly, "As my legal advisor."

Tarsapple's insouciant slouch and suspicious glare re-established themselves. He spun around to face me angrily.

"What the ..." he began.

I held up my hand.

"Miss Westwood's request," I replied innocently, a faint smile playing about my lips, "And who am I to disagree with a lady?"

*

Tarsapple fumed and fretted, but there was nothing he could really do. Not without going well beyond the bounds of common decency and, more importantly, beyond those more stringent bounds of the law.

Now, I am not a lawyer. I have never been attracted to that particular profession, with all its quirks and mores, its performance art and moral flexibility. Mine is a profession with rather more honour, one where I can yet maintain a small measure of self-respect, even if it is significantly less well-paid.

Of course, I have acquired a good working knowledge of the law over the years, even if, on occasions, my judgements and actions have not been entirely aligned with the strict interpretation to be found in the casebooks. Today, I was slightly flattered at being presented this role, offset by a certain amount of trepidation: Mayfield had some pre-formed idea in mind, some part she wished me to play. But I didn't understand the rules, not the ones she was using; I didn't even know the name of this game.

The position did have a few other up-sides, though. Rather than the long walk and the tedious journey on rural public transport which I had enduring to get here earlier, it seemed that the return trip would be in a little more style and quite a bit faster. A *lot* faster, knowing who was going to be doing the driving.

As I have noted more than once before in these chronicles, there is something buried deeply in the psyche of many Goblins which is suddenly let out to play when it has unrestricted access to

powerful machinery. Fast cars - or at least vehicles which can be driven fast - are a particular favourite.

With Tarsapple muttering the entire way, we took a brisk walk back to the cottage to collect a few things for Mayfield, including garments which would provide an effective disguise for her. I was impressed by her ability to slip into not just the clothing and the shoes, but also the ways of moving which made all the difference to a successful deception. I could tell that Mayfield had a lot of practice in getting about in the world of the humans - perhaps more than me.

Fifty yards down the overgrown lane I had walked up earlier that evening, a vehicle was parked - or maybe just abandoned - in a gate set between two overgrown hedges. Maybe it was supposed to pass unremarked on the autoroute and motorway. Or maybe not. In any case, it was a masterpiece of custom automotive engineering: flame detailing on gloss black paintwork, darkly-tinted windows and polished chrome-work, and oversized wheels wrapped in wide tyres barely thicker than elastic bands.

"Nice motor," I remarked ironically, "I can see you've worked hard on the street credibility factor. But don't you find the cops give you a hard time?"

Tarsapple looked strangely at me.

"This thing?" he replied casually, "Hardly my style. But the kid likes it."

He jerked a thumb at Glenshee, who was pulling open the driver's door. The youngster phlegmatic mannerisms had disappeared as soon as he caught sight of his treasured hotrod. Now his eyes sparkled with ill-concealed manic enthusiasm. It was going to be a bumpy ride.

*

Tarsapple opened one of the rear doors of the heavily customised car while Glenshee fiddled with the controls from the driving seat.

"Please get in, Miss Westwood," he said politely, without obvious irony. He didn't need to be more direct, not with the effects of the Compel glamour in operation.

"I suppose you'll want to come too, Gask," he added sourly.

I said nothing, just grinned at him, then skipped around to the other side of the car and slid in behind Glenshee. The younger Goblin turned the key and fired up the engine with a sudden roar, making me jump, before settling to a low rumble.

Both the Goblins in the front donned sunglasses, even though it was dark outside. This was essential, I knew, for dealing with the intense glare of approaching headlights, not to mention the reflections from our own lamps. Driving without headlights was a sure-fire way of attracting attention and Glenshee sensibly chose not to attempt it, even if it did mean a car full of people all wearing dark glasses. I fumbled in my own coat pocket for my own pair. Mayfield too was well-prepared, finding in her own pockets some oversize dark glasses featuring a certain amount of discreet branding and distinctly feminine bling.

Glenshee slipped the car into gear and set off with a tyre-spinning roar which must have sprayed stones and mud into the hedge and seriously inconvenienced any lurking badger. As I had anticipated, the young driver tackled every bend in the road as if some dangerous villain was in hot pursuit and that he had perfect forewarning of any approaching vehicles concealed by bends and obstacles. Perhaps he genuinely did. It would not be impossible for Glenshee to have acquired a certain amount of prescient magic: enough to inform him of dangers on the road ahead. Or maybe he really was a complete maniac.

I should confess at this point that I am an extremely poor passenger, especially when Goblins are driving. Two minutes into the trip I was already turning green - not a normal skin colour for a healthy Goblin - and fighting to hold onto my breakfast. Fortunately, that meal had been quite some time ago. Mayfield, on the other hand, clearly enjoyed the roller-coaster ride. She sat forward looking over Tarsapple's shoulder, occasionally whooping at the more enthusiastic overtaking manoeuvres. Perhaps fast driving was one of many reasons she liked it so much up here on the surface.

It was altogether far too long before Glenshee brought the car to a screaming halt right outside the alleyway I had used when I arrived in this area. Mayfield seemed unsurprised by our destination. She had probably been this way more than once before to visit the Lower Realms. Including all those regular visits to her grandma.

The car had barely stopped rocking from its furious deceleration that Tarsapple leapt out and yanked open the rear door.

"This way, Miss Westwood," he said urbanely. Mayfield graciously accepted his invitation.

Tarsapple's invitation didn't appear to extend to me. I wrestled my way out of the other rear door and half-stepped, half-fell onto the pavement. My head was swimming, my stomach was turning back somersaults, and a black cloud of pain and confusion filled my

vision. It would pass, I knew, but for the moment I could hardly move.

Tarsapple pointedly ignored my distress. He walked with Mayfield into the alley. The entrance to the Lower Realms was marked out clearly - for those who knew what they were looking for - in those Goblin runes so easily mistaken for the graffiti which litters so many urban spaces in the surface world. Tarsapple spoke the opening command - inaudible from this distance, as is the nature of Goblin magic - and the two of them disappeared into the energetically-applied paint work on the side of the building.

Glenshee stayed in the car. Presumably he would park it somewhere conveniently out of sight ready for the next high-speed foray in this part of the surface world. While I lolled on the ground, still trying to control my innards and work out which way was down, the normally-stolid Goblin engaged first gear and screeched off in a haze of petrol fumes which did nothing to calm down the contents of my stomach.

*

After a few minutes, the world stopped orbiting my head and I managed to stagger to my feet. I followed the other two down the alley and through the entrance portal, stumbling inelegantly on the arrival mat. A border guard turned in my direction, stun-stick in hand. I fumbled in my pockets for my wallet and flipped it open to show my PI badge - this acts as a passport in this realm - and waved it distractedly in his direction.

The distraction was a weeping Mayfield. She sat in an alcove, on one of those hard chairs typical of these places, her face in her hands, crying her eyes out. She was being supported by another of the uniformed border guards in that distracted manner many males take when an attractive female stranger suddenly comes over all emotional on them. Tarsapple leaned on a wall nearby, his usual cynical grin now at full wattage. He clearly expected this outcome, the bastard, and had refrained from even hinting at whatever-it-was while we were travelling.

I straightened myself up, retrieved my hat - which had fallen to the floor when I landed - and was just about cross over to find out what was going on when a worryingly familiar voice spoke from behind me.

"Leave her a few minutes, Gask," the voice drawled softly, "She's just had quite a shock."

I spun around. The speaker was short wiry Goblin with a snaggle tooth which made him look a little bit like a country bumpkin, despite the business suit and the dapper hat. It was a carefully cultivated look, one designed to disguise the keen

intelligence and insightful intellect, one intended to ensure that nobody would take the speaker seriously. It was a good look for a policeman.

"Detective Mergie Tewel," I said, frowning, "What are you doing here?"

"Detective Sergeant," Tewel corrected mildly, "I'm the bearer of bad news."

He nodded in the direction of Mayfield, who was thoroughly soaking a large white handkerchief which looked as if it had been produced by the luckless border guard.

"It's Lady Strowan Westwood," he went on, "She's dead."

"Dead? That was a bit unexpected," I said, "She seemed in reasonable health when I left her last night. A bit frail, perhaps, but in very good spirits."

"Ye-es," Tewel replied, speaking so softly that I had to strain to make out the words, "That's the problem. She was murdered."

Findo Gask - Deadly Enchantment

Chapter 6 – Double Engagement

"Murdered? How? When? By whom?" I spluttered, shocked by the sudden revelation.

"You don't really expect me to answer any of those questions, do you?" Tewel said calmly, his eyes taking in every aspect of my reaction.

I blinked. He was right, naturally. Police procedure was dead set against leaking any information to those who might be under investigation in an enquiry. Too easy to tip off a suspect. And, make no mistake, in Tewel's mind, I was a suspect. After all, apart from the servants, I may have been the last person to have seen Strowan Westwood alive. Apart from the murderer, of course.

I had something of a history with Detective Mergie Tewel. He had investigated the rather bloody murder of a shady businessman a few years ago, a murder more than tangentially associated with a case of mysterious disappearances I was engaged with. Worryingly, it was also another occasion when yours truly seemed to fit the frame for the deed. Finally, it was proven to everybody's satisfaction - especially Tewel's, who had apprehended the true villain himself - that I had nothing to do with the crime.

After the dust settled, Tewel and I had parted on good terms, not friends but more professional acquaintances; the kind fuelled by sharing a few beers in a bar or two. I had acquired a high degree of respect for his intelligence and integrity. He seemed to be able to find at least a little time for me; he was one of my few contacts in the Police department who might grant me a favour or two if I asked for it.

Since I had nothing to hide, I decided I would let the normal police procedure take its course. Tewel was somebody who would play things by the book. Even so, there was a certain degree of coolness in his attitude which was out-of-line with our professional relationship.

"I need you to make a statement," he said, taking a little black notebook from his pocket and flipping it open.

"Sure," I replied, "Anything to help."

"At the police station," he added as if he hadn't heard my response, making a neat annotation in his book.

He glanced to one side and jerked his head in my direction. A couple of uniformed police officers detached themselves from the scenery and moved forward in that wary way that coppers everywhere adopt when they are not sure what to expect. Before the cops drew close, Tewel suddenly lunged forward and tugged on my collar to bring my ear down to the level of his mouth.

"If I find you've had anything to do with Strowan's death," he hissed, the venom in his tone at odds with the cool detachment he normally exuded, "You're a dead Goblin. Understand?"

"Hey!" I exclaimed, "I've been out of touch. Been on the surface all day. Besides, Lady Strowan was my client. She asked me to investigate a theft."

Tewel stared at me for a long moment, looking as if he had seen a ghost. Something must have been eating him, something powerfully strong, for a Goblin like that to have acted so unprofessionally.

"All right," he said finally, a semblance of calm settling over him again. He turned to the two uniformed types who were waiting just out of arms reach.

"Escort Mister Gask downtown. I'll be along to ask him a few questions myself shortly."

*

It was late in the evening - as indicated by the clocks in the Lower Realms - by the time I was released from police station. I wasn't under arrest, it was made clear - despite Tewel's uncharacteristic outburst - I was just "helping the police with their enquiries".

In the interim, I had told Tewel and his colleagues everything that had transpired, omitting nothing factual from my account. There was little enough to it, in any case. I described Lady Strowan's briefing to me, and her insightful comments, and her vivacious - if vicarious - entertainment later in the evening. But I kept my private theories and inferences to myself. I doubted Tewel would be interested and, in any case, there was nothing in my suspicions which would stand up in a court of law.

After an hour or two of questioning, and a similar amount of time hanging around, Tewel seemed grudgingly convinced that I was telling the truth, although there was no explanation why he was so obviously emotionally involved with the case. In the meantime, I was presented with a cup of preternaturally disgusting coffee - I drank it anyway - and was allowed to smoke my own cigarettes. Sometimes the busy days just fly by.

The streets were quiet and dark as I made my way through the tunnels and caverns and transit tubes to my apartment. As a matter of course, I adopted one of several tortuous routes, all of which I knew well and gave me plenty of opportunity to spot anybody who might be attempting to follow me.

Which was just as well, since I felt the presence of a tail as soon as I left the precinct station. It was all an autonomous reaction. For a great many decades I have cultivated a sort of tame paranoia, an outlook that keeps looking over my shoulder and inspecting the shadows around me with almost no involvement of the rest of my mind. Now, my resident subconscious agent was ringing alarm bells and sounding klaxons in a way entirely impossible to ignore.

Whoever it was following me around, they were not particularly skilled, although good enough for me to be unable to catch anything more than a glimpse of their face in the distance. I dodged around a few corners, took a few detours through crowded shops and deserted alleys, and soon managed to shake them off. Of course that didn't answer the question *why* somebody thought it worthwhile to tail me. After all, my office is in the phone book and the street directory, and my apartment is not exactly hidden - although it does have a few protections I'll not go into right now.

The following morning, I was up early and out-and-about shortly afterwards. I took a leisurely detour via David's diner for the substantial breakfast which I felt I deserved after missing so many meals yesterday. Without asking, David brought me a newspaper. There was nothing inside on the death of Lady Strowan Westwood. The cops must still be keeping it under wraps for the moment. Made sense, I supposed.

Finally satiated and fortified with several cups of David's breakfast coffee - which probably counts as a biochemical hazard in large quantities - I closed the newspaper, paid the check and tugged on my hat. I strolled the boulevards and sidewalks, and then took a crowded transit tube. Nobody on my tail this morning, it seemed.

I arrived in my own office only a little after the time most people would regard as the start of office hours. Quite early for me, really. I had barely settled down in the squeaky swivel chair behind the desk to sort through this morning's influx of mail - the usual bills and circulars - when the phone rang. I picked up the receiver and pressed it to my ear.

"Good morning, sir," came the measured and cultured tones of Tibbermore, "I trust I find you in good health?"

"I'm fine," I replied, carefully casual, "What can I do for you?"

"I wonder, sir, if you would be able to come over to Lady Strowan's house, this morning?"

I hesitated for a moment.

"Well, my diary is free," I said uncertainly, "But aren't there too many cops still hanging around?"

"There are still a great many police in the house," he agreed, "Does that present a problem?"

"Well, perhaps not," I suggested, "But it might make it very difficult to have a private conversation. That is what you want, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Very well, sir," he intoned, "Would it be possible instead to call by your offices? In perhaps one hour's time?"

"Much better," I said, "I'm sure you know where it is. I'll be waiting for you."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Tibbermore rang off. Somehow I suspected that the old retainer would be absolutely punctual, to the minute.

I lit a cigarette, then dealt with the junk mail - the work of a few moments. I sorted through the unpaid bills, wondering which ones were worthy of the attentions of the modest margin that remained of my overdraft limit. I also found the report I promised to delay sending to my other client. I picked it up, stared at it for a while, then put it back in the drawer. Another twenty-four hour respite would seem to be in order.

On the dot of the appointed hour, there was a polite knock on the dusty glass of the door.

"Come in, Tibbermore," I called, not bothering to get up from behind the desk.

The old retainer entered as softly as he had entered her Ladyship's dining room and closed the door carefully behind him.

"Take a seat," I suggested, waving casually at the battered chairs on the client side of the desk.

"I prefer to stand, sir, if it's all the same to you,"

I shrugged.

"Suit yourself. So what was it you wanted to talk about?"

"There are two items of business which I am directed to discuss with you."

Tibbermore produced a cheque from an inside pocket and placed it carefully on the desk. I studied it carefully. It was made

out to Findo Gask, Private Investigator, in the sum of thirty-five dollars - a single day's retainer and some reasonable expenses, I judged. Payee and amount were inscribed in a firm clear hand, in complete contrast to the signature itself, which was weak and spidery.

"You filled in the cheque as instructed by her Ladyship?"

"I did, sir," he replied, sounding faintly surprised, "Or, more precisely, I followed her ladyship's previous instructions to do so. I trust this is satisfactory to cover your fees for yesterday?"

I shrugged again. I had tracked down Mayfield on the surface, and she had returned to the Lower Realms just as Lady Strowan wanted. It was hardly my fault that the police, and Tarsapple's pirate crew, had taken an interest.

"Yes, yes," I replied, "That's fine. I'll consider the account closed. And the other item of business?"

Tibbermore drew a second cheque from his pocket and placed it on the desk next to the other one. It was drawn on a different bank, although the payee and amount were made out in the same hand as the first cheque. It was a quite different signature. This cheque too was made out to Findo Gask, PI. The amount was one hundred dollars only.

"What's this for?" I said, frowning up at the butler.

"It is a retainer, sir. I wish to engage your professional services," Tibbermore said calmly, "On my own account."

My frowned deepened.

"Okay. But what do you want me to do?"

For the first time, a tinge of emotion appeared in the old retainer's voice.

"I want you to find her Ladyship's killer," he said, his eyes boring into mine, "Find them and bring them to justice."

*

It seemed that Tibbermore was entirely serious. He must have been; after all, a hundred bucks was quite a lot for somebody in his position. I spent some time asking him questions, but there was little enough he could tell me. He explained how he had brought up breakfast on a tray for her Ladyship; tea and toast, as always. He had knocked, waited politely, knocked again, then entered with a minimum of noise. It was not unusual for Lady Strowan to sleep late, he said, particularly when she had not slept well overnight.

One glance at the blood-drenched sheets had shown him that something was wrong. Lady Strowan had not put up much of a

fight, perhaps not surprising for a frail old lady. Tibbermore had dropped the tray in shock and rushed to her aid - fruitlessly, as it turned out, she had been dead for several hours - then dashed back downstairs to raise the alarm and call the police.

Nobody in the house had heard anything; there was no evidence of anybody having forced their way inside the building which was always kept tightly secure, on her Ladyship's explicit instructions. What Tibbermore had understood from the police was partial and contradictory. They had no clues, little evidence; little to go on at all. Just the recent visitors: myself, Mayfield, and Almon Methven, Lady Strowan's theatrical agent.

After that, he simply reprised what I already knew. It seemed there was nothing more he could give.

"Will that be all, sir?" he enquired politely, once my stream of questions had dried up, still somehow managing to be unperturbed.

"Yes, that's it for now," I demurred.

Tibbermore bowed formally, then turned and opened the door. As he moved, a thought occurred to me.

"Tibbermore, one more thing," I said quickly. The old butler stopped in the doorway and turned to face me.

"Who recommended me to Lady Strowan?" I asked, "Why did she send you to get me, specifically?"

"Her Ladyship took advice, sir," Tibbermore said, frowning slightly, "From an old friend."

"Ah. But *who*?"

The old butler paused, apparently unsure as to whether he should answer.

"It might be important," I pressed.

"It was Sergeant Tewel, sir," Tibbermore said slowly, still sounding uncertain.

"Tewel recommended me?" I exploded, "Lady Strowan Westwood knew Mergie Tewel?"

"Yes, sir," he replied, "I understand her Ladyship met him a long time ago. Before she married his Lordship. I remember he was a guest of her Ladyship a few times, but not very recently."

He paused, then added, "I'm afraid that's all I know, sir."

I guess that would explain why Tewel was so uncharacteristically emotional. I'd have to ask him about it sometime.

"Okay," I said, still deep in thought, "I'll get on with the investigation immediately. Let me know if anything turned up."

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir."

Tibbermore let himself out silently while I cogitated. I must have stared at the nondescript plasterwork of the opposite wall for ten minutes, lost in a deep funk. Murder investigations are almost always bad news for the hardworking Private Detective: the cops think you're treading on their toes - or worse, concealing things from them - and they understandably feel professionally embarrassed if you do turn up something they've missed. And with Sergeant Tewel already engaged, and apparently disinclined to believe anything I had to say, I would have to tread very carefully indeed.

My train of thought was interrupted by a flurry of furious rapping on the glass panel in the door. For a moment I thought it was Tibbermore returning for some reason, but a few seconds thought convinced me otherwise: the sound of the knocking was quite unlike that of the imperturbable butler.

Before I could collect my thoughts even enough to speak, the door flew open anyway. It was Mayfield Westwood. She stumbled over the threshold, looking as if she expected the door to be locked and found it otherwise. She stopped and looked around at the unprepossessing space I use for my business: the worn dragon-hide desk - that's just a trade name, by the way - the mismatched chairs and the row of battered filing cabinets mostly filled with fresh cavern climate.

"You don't put on much of a front, do you, Mister Gask?"

"It suits my humble needs," I replied with faux modesty. I don't think she was convinced.

Mayfield threw herself into one of the client-side chairs without waiting to be asked, the ancient furniture creaking slightly under the strain. She seemed focussed, intense: very different from the faintly nervous, jumpy and confused Goblin I had encountered earlier. She regarded me thoughtfully with those lovely eyes for a long moment before speaking.

"I though I hired you, yesterday," she said eventually, looking at me levelly over the desk.

I snorted.

"I wasn't terribly effective," I said apologetically, "The cops seemed to have everything in hand, and they were operating exactly according to their brief."

This was true. Worryingly true. The police procedure and processes were exactly by-the-book, punctilious in the extreme. This was unusual, in my view. Experienced coppers have a high degree of respect for due process, but mainly so that they can work their way around it when it gets in the way. There was something more going on here, something that even the most jaded of policeman could sense, if only at a subconscious level.

Mayfield frowned.

"Well, maybe not," she replied, suddenly thoughtful, or maybe just guardedly, "But your presence in the precinct station seemed to calm thing down."

Or at least distract the police from Mayfield herself. Maybe.

"So, Miss Westwood," I said formally, "What can I do for you this morning?"

"I want to hire you, to engage your professional services" she answered promptly, "Properly, this time."

"Okay," I said levelly, "I can see that. So what do you want me to do?"

Mayfield frowned more deeply, angry wrinkles patterning her lovely forehead.

"I want you to find my Grandmother's murderer," she said through clenched teeth, "Isn't it obvious?"

*

In the interest of good client relationships, I agreed with Mayfield immediately, admitting that there could be no other intent of my engagement and that the error on my part was just being distracted by my own thoughts when she had arrived. She seemed to accept this explanation and apology.

Now, this would not be the first time that I had been engaged to investigate the same matter by two different clients, each offering to pay me for the same investigation. At first sight, this might seem like an easy way for the unscrupulous PI to extract a few more bucks from the more gullible members of the public. Even so, my experience, honed over many decades, is that when two parties each want you to investigate the same crime, at least one of them has a hidden motivation. This invariably leads to additional complexities, or even the risk of me getting my head shot at. So I felt no qualms about accepting double payments for the same piece of work, realising that it would probably be taken out of my hide sometime in the near future.

"So," I asked in a mollifying tone of voice, "Tell me what happened after I was taken off to the police station."

There was little enough to tell, according to Mayfield. Sergeant Tewel had been very kind, very sympathetic. He asked a few gentle questions. He gave the impression, she reported, he was only doing it because that's what was required by procedure, that he was simply going through the motions by the book.

Mayfield had not formed a very good impression of Tewel's commitment or competence in tracking down what she took to be a ruthless, indeed heartless killer of her favourite grandmother. This was a view which seemed entirely at odds with the passionate outburst he had directed at me, but perhaps he was trying to spare the younger Westwood's feelings. But she had seen it as a weakness, not a kindness, and so she wanted me to work independently to find out who had been responsible for Lady Strowan's death.

She seemed steely calm about the whole thing, despite her inconsolable weeping when she had first learned the dreadful news. There was a surprising degree of mental toughness about this lady, a resolute iron core to her being which would neither break nor be bent away from her own desires, her own view of the rightness of things. It was really quite impressive to behold.

Findo Gask - Deadly Enchantment

Chapter 7 – Promised Abeyance

Mayfield didn't seem keen to put any money where her pretty mouth was, however. Still, I was prepared to take on the commission as a verbal contract - despite my understandable hesitation in accepting such a thing in general - since I was intrigued, both by the case and the person of Miss Mayfield Strowan herself. She was a lovely lady but, even more so, a fascinating personality, with a strength of character which seemed like a natural extension of that of her famous grandmother.

Mayfield suddenly pulled herself from the chair, apparently having decided all was settled. Then she stood and looked at me strangely for a long moment.

"I trust you, Mister Gask," she said finally, "I don't know why. But I just know you will be able to help me. Please don't let me down."

"I'll do my best, Miss Westwood," I said simply.

"Thank you."

And with that, Mayfield turned and left, leaving the office door ajar behind her. I listened to the clatter of her shoes on the stairs until they faded into silence. I had no idea how to contact her, even if I did find out something which she would want to know, or if I just wanted to ask her a few more questions. She remained an enigma, a free spirit drifting unimpeded over the surface of the worlds. Perhaps Tibbermore would know how to get a message to her if I needed it.

There was just one person I could think of who might have information, somebody that Lady Strowan had mentioned as a rare visitor, somebody that Tibbermore would certainly know by sight, and was probably known to Mayfield as well. Almon Methven, her Ladyship's erstwhile agent.

I stood up and circumnavigated the desk, then kicked the office door closed with the toe of my shoe. I pulled open one of the drawers of the battered filing cabinets and drew out a business directory. It was years - decades, even - out of date, but I doubted that would be a problem; things tend not to change very quickly down here compared with the whirlwind of fashion and so-called advancements commonplace in the surface world of the humans.

I tossed the heavy volume on the desk and thumbed through it until I found the right section. It took me a while to identify the most-likely entry, just a few lines that read "Methven and Son, Theatrical Agents" together with a telephone number and an address in a an up-town cavern. It was an area which also contained a disproportionate number of the theatres and entertainment palaces that remain immensely popular in the Lower Realms.

Time for a visit from Findo Gask, Gobin Detective.

*

Almon Methven's offices were surprisingly hard to find, although I managed to track them down eventually. The entrance was a plain door, although recently painted in glossy black, off a side-street in the theatre district, marked by a modest brass plaque and a discreet bell-push. I pushed it discreetly. Nothing happened for a few seconds, then the door unlocked itself with a click and swung open. Nobody there, of course. A simple glamour designed to save somebody's legs rushing up and down the stairs.

Inside, there was just a long staircase going up, bounded by featureless walls painted in one of those nondescript yet stylish colours so beloved by interior designers. The walls were broken up by rows of black and white photo portraits of actors and actresses, all high-contrast and moody-looking, a few of which I did actually recognise. I didn't spot a snap of Strowan Westwood, though.

I made it to the stairs and found myself outside a door, the top half of which was glazed with frosted glass adorned with the words "Methven and Son, Theatrical Agents" in flashy gold leaf. From within, the busy clatter of a typewriter was punctuated by the ringing of a telephone - no, more than one telephone - and the low murmur of conversation.

I knocked politely on the glass, waited a few seconds and then opened the door. The busy office sounds did not abate one iota when I entered. Within, three desks were penned in by a cordon of filing cabinets, waste paper baskets and wall charts. The desks were occupied by three female Goblins, two of them young and pale and very nervous-looking. These office drudges were presided over by the third lady, a Goblin stern of face and full of figure, although that fullness was moderately effectively disguised by the sharply-cut two-piece business suit she wore.

The office manager lounged back in her chair, smoking a cigarette and engaged in what was obviously a long and rambling conversation which may not have had a great deal to do with the business of the office. She struck me immediately as the kind of office tyrant who would probably give Smaug a decent run for her

money. By the way, real dragons don't actually bed themselves down on piles of treasure, although they do live in vast underground lairs and have generally secretive and inscrutable ways.

I took off my hat and waited politely in the doorway. I bent my face into a rictus of smiling good nature and nodded amicably to the matron on the telephone. She glared back at me, obviously irritated at having to interrupt her mid-morning gossip. After a few moments, she used one of those "I've got to go, somebody's here" phrases and rang off. I took that as my cue.

"Good morning," I said in crisp civil tones, "I'd like to see Mister Methven. It is a matter of some importance."

"Are you a client?" she asked, her forehead flexing at the effort of thought and threatening a fatal breakdown in the layers of makeup.

"No, I'm not," I admitted ruefully, then added, "I'm a Private Investigator. I'm investigating a murder. The murder of a client of yours."

The clatter of typewriters stopped suddenly as the two younger secretaries swivelled their necks around to get a closer look at yours truly. The matron waved her hand irritably at the youngsters, who bent themselves to their keyboards with alacrity. Then she leaned forward over the desk and beckoned me closer. Much closer.

"Are you serious?" she hissed.

"I'm afraid I am, Ma'am," I replied gravely.

I drew a business card from one of my many inside pockets and presented it to her with a formal flourish. She took it from me, studied it for a few moments, then turned and pressed an intercom button on the desk phone.

"Yes?" came a squeaky voice from the speaker.

"A Mister Findo Gask to see you," she said, adding with a hint of private glee, "He's a Private Detective."

*

The squeak from the intercom was unintelligible, but the moderately scary office manager must have made some kind of sense of it. She stubbed out her cigarette and stood up to direct me to the entrance to the inner sanctum it was her daily charge to guard. She knocked briskly then pulled open the door without giving the occupant the slightest opportunity to collect their thoughts or stop whatever they were doing in private. I stepped inside and closed the door behind me.

Almon Methven was a prissy little Goblin, short and rotund to the point where it looked like he could barely touch his fingertips together over his belly. He had watery eyes and ears so attenuated they were barely larger than those of a human. He was fussily-dressed in an expensive tailor-made suit of a fashionable cut and cloth, his wide-collared shirt tie-less and casually open at the neck, although still fastened at the wrists with jewelled cufflinks.

His office was large yet sparsely furnished, although the few items of furniture therein were very clearly of the finest quality. Facing me across the deep-pile carpet as I entered was a single desk of inlaid and polished woods, behind which Methven sat almost completely obscuring a high-backed office chair finished in soft grey leather. To my left was set a large square coffee table with a precisely matched and identically positioned davenport on each side. On the walls hung larger prints of, I assumed, some of his most famous clients, or perhaps just his personal favourites.

Methven prised himself from his chair and waddled around the desk, extending a podgy hand.

"Mister Gask," he said with a professional smile, the kind intended to disarm the irate visitor, "I understand you're making some kind of enquiry. How can I help?"

Against my better judgement, I took his hand and shook it. It was clammy and limp.

"Thank you for seeing me," I said with equally cool professionalism, "Bad news, I'm afraid. There's been a murder. One of your clients."

Methven frowned with an expression of deep concern, then waved me in the direction of the coffee table.

"Please take a seat and tell me what's happened."

I sat on the indicated couch and placed my hat neatly on the table in front of me. Methven settled himself awkwardly in the sofa opposite. I took a deep breath and put on my finest professional demeanour, doing my best to look poised and attentive. From another pocket in my slightly overused coat, I drew out a little notebook bound in black leather and an especially sharpened pencil in order to take written notes.

Regular readers of these memoirs will know that I rarely bother with notes, even in the most intricate of cases. I have a very good memory and I find that the act of jotting down notes distracts from the close observation of the interviewee. So many people tell me more by their reactions to my questions, the body language more eloquent - and often more truthful - than the spoken kind.

I decided on the direct approach. Best to get worst out in the open.

"The victim is Lady Strowan Westwood," I said sorrowfully, "She died at home, in the early hours of yesterday morning."

"Strowan? No!" Methven shrieked, suddenly looking desolate and bursting into tears.

He drew a freshly-laundered, if rather effeminate-looking handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his eyes. He did look like a Goblin who would blub at the slightest provocation, although he managed to pull himself together with a rapidity that surprised me.

"I can't believe she's dead," he moaned, sniffing into his hankie. Then he added, as if the thought had just occurred to him, "But who would want to murder an old lady like her?"

"That, sir, is exactly the question I'm trying to answer."

He stared at me for a moment, then nodded sadly.

"I'll do anything I can to help."

"Okay. How long have you known Lady Strowan?" I asked in a carefully neutral voice, making a few jottings in my notebook.

"All my life, pretty much," he replied, his eyes focussing on the middle-distance, "My father, rest his soul, started this company many years ago and Strowan Westwood was one of his star successes. They were dear old friends. My father used to visit her ladyship frequently, even after she married. He was a regular dinner guest."

Methven stopped and sniffed into his handkerchief once more.

"Did you know Strowan?" he asked tearfully.

"I met her once, two days ago," I replied, "She engaged me on another matter and entertained me over dinner."

"Served by old Tibbermore, no doubt," he said sadly, "She could be utterly charming if she wanted to be, but there was always that sense of inner steel."

I had to agree with that assessment.

"So, your father introduced you to Lady Strowan?" I pressed.

"Yes. When I joined Dad in the business, I would sometimes accompany him to her dinner parties and soirees. When he became ill, somehow I started occupying his slot at the dining table. It was just part of the arrangement."

"The arrangement?" I parroted, "What's that?"

Methven snorted.

"We have had a long-standing business understanding with Lady Strowan," he explained, "If she ever wanted to get back into the acting profession, then we promised to make it possible for her. It was a solemn commitment my father made a long time ago, and I'd have to respect it, too."

"And did she want to return to the stage?" I asked, looking up and wagging my pencil.

"Never showed any sign of it," he said, shaking his head, "She didn't ever mention it. She seemed to have been happily retired."

I nodded thoughtfully, my eyes returning to the scribbling on the page in front of me.

"When did you last see her Ladyship?"

"Three, no four weeks ago," he said, "She doesn't entertain much, these days."

"So I heard. So, apart from you, who came to dinner?"

"Her granddaughter Mayfield," he answered promptly, "Sometimes I would see her there. And of course Cutmal Lundie was often in attendance."

I frowned and looked up sharply, forgetting to make a note in my book.

"Cutmal Lundie?" I asked, "Who's he?"

It was Methven's turn to look puzzled.

"Why, he's Mayfield's future husband," he said slowly, "They're engaged."

*

"Engaged?" I said before I could help myself. Just occasionally my mouth runs away by itself.

"Oh, yes," Methven went on, apparently not noticing my astonished reaction, "They've been betrothed for ages, but somehow they never seem to get around to announcing a date for the wedding."

"Really?" I said inconsequentially, rapidly corralling my composure and pushing it back where it belonged, "Well, sometimes these things are best not rushed."

"Rushed?" Methven snorted, then dabbed his eyes again then put the handkerchief back in his pocket, "No chance of that! They've been engaged for fifty years."

The interview was interrupted by the urgent buzz-buzz of the intercom. Methven levered himself from the davenport and waddled across to the desk where he pressed a button on the phone.

"Yes? What is it?"

The squawk from the intercom was no more intelligible at this end, but I thought I caught the words "appointment" and "lunch" through the racket.

Methven said: "Okay. Thanks," in response and turned back to me from the desk.

"I'm very sorry, Mister Gask," he said, "But I do have another pressing appointment. Business must go on, you know."

I couldn't think of any more questions for Methven in any case. I was far too distracted by a different question, the question why neither Tibbermore nor her Ladyship had mentioned this Cutmal Lundie as a visitor, nor his engagement to Mayfield Strowan. I retrieved my hat from the table and stood up, still deep in thought. In this case, it actually worked. A wild notion which rapidly became a conviction; I stopped and turned as I reached the door.

"Mister Methven," I said, addressing his back as he fiddled with something on the desk, "The police haven't been to call, have they?"

Methven turned casually, his attention still on whatever he was doing on his desk.

"The police?" he said, only half paying attention, "No, they haven't. Should I expect a call, then?"

"I'd imagine so," I replied, adjusting my hat to its usual rakish angle, "Give Sergeant Tewel my regards."

Findo Gask - Deadly Enchantment

Chapter 8 – Relative Upset

It was time to pay a visit to Tibbermore. Some new questions to ask, making sure I got some answers. I don't like it when people hold out on me, especially when those people are my clients. But I shouldn't be surprised. Clients almost always hold out on you. Sometimes it really is entirely irrelevant, but not often. Understanding the motivation of my client is frequently a good handle on understanding the motivations of other involved in the case especially, as is usual, when the others are well-known to one another.

I retraced my steps to Lady Strowan's house, keeping my usual jaundiced lookout behind for anybody who might be trying to follow me. Not a tickle. Perhaps whoever it was had been disheartened by the ease with which I shook him off last time. But I doubted it.

There was still a very visible police presence when I arrived at the house. The main entrance - the one I had used when I was escorted by Tibbermore - was barred by several lengths of that yellow-and-black tape you see in all good crime scenes wrapped round the pillars of the portico, and more effectively by a couple of bored-looking uniformed cops. Not that anybody was seriously trying to get in but some news must have leaked out. The tape barrier was lined with reporters, cameramen and curious bystanders three deep, with no signs that any of them were going to leave any time soon. If Tewel or one of his colleagues didn't make a formal statement to the press very soon, then the newspapers would be full of those "...speculation is rife..." pieces which usually get three-quarters of the facts wrong and confuses everybody for months.

There was no point in trying to bluff my way in through the front door. But Tibbermore had initially invited me to her Ladyship's house before agreeing to attend my office instead. I concluded that the entire building could not have been out of bounds. Time to seek out the tradesman's entrance, round the back.

*

As it happened, there wasn't a tradesman's entrance as such. Rather, there were a variety of working doors and gates in the high stone wall which edged the narrower and less grand street that ran behind the row of imposing residences of which Lady Strowan's

mansion was but a part. Most entrances were firmly shut and secured against the kind of tampering which I was likely to be able to undertake given the high likelihood of being observed. But there were few people about; it seemed that the hounds of the press had not thought to explore this side of the residence.

Fortunately, no breaking and entering was required on this occasion. One gate stood wide open, leading to an inner courtyard given over to recently-washed sheets drying on clotheslines and a few urns growing the kind of fresh fungus used to season traditional foodstuffs down here.

I strode through the gate as if I owned the place and followed the obvious pathway which looked as if it led to the scullery door. Other doors gave the appearance of being the entrances to storerooms, laundries and kitchens. Once upon a time, this would have been a bustling place packed with staff preparing food and washing sheets for the myriad houseguests and visitors that Lady Strowan's fame and position would command. Now it looked unused, locked in a kind of stasis awaiting a new lease of life.

As I walked, an old maid dressed in the deep black of mourning hobbled out of the scullery door. She was bent nearly double from age and fragility. She was carrying a woven basket lined with a clean white cloth and, when I was close enough to inspect it closely, what looked like a worryingly-sharp kitchen knife. She gasped and stopped dead when she finally caught sight of me, clutching the basket to her chest as if it were some kind of defence.

I too stopped and raised my hat politely.

"Good afternoon," I called out, waving genteelly with the hand not holding the hat.

She curtseyed - an action I hadn't seen carried out for many a long decade - and mumbled some enquiry as to my errand. It was all very old-fashioned and innocent, and a far cry from the hubbub of reporters and general gawkers outside the main entrance.

"I wish to see Tibbermore," I said in a clear firm voice.

"Yes, sir. This way sir."

The maid turned on her heel and led the way back to the scullery door.

*

The old servant led me through the scullery, slowing momentarily to place the wickerwork basket on a well-scrubbed wooden draining board next to one of several heavy porcelain sinks. I followed her into the main kitchen, which was big enough

to allow a platoon of cooks to produce resplendent banquets for a small army, but now looked barely used. On the other side of the kitchen, we stepped out into the narrow corridors of the servants' quarters, lined with doors which led who-knows-where.

I was curious. Normally when I turn up at people's doors unannounced, they are at least a little bit suspicious, if not downright nasty. Here, I seemed to be expected.

At the end of the corridor was the windowless little office which was the domain of the head of the servants. Inside there was a tiny desk, barely big enough to allow a newspaper to be fully unfolded. On one side was a wall-mounted metal cupboard with a combination lock which must have contained important items, such as the keys to the wine cellars, and the other was lined with bookcases containing leather-bound volumes which no doubt contained details of domestic transactions stretching back hundreds of years.

Tibbermore was sitting behind the desk, making an entry in another of the bound ledgers with an old-fashioned fountain pen in an equally old-fashioned italic hand. He looked up sharply as the maid knocked and curtsied, then smiled thinly when he spotted me behind her.

"Thank you, Molly," he said firmly, standing up politely and beckoning me inside.

The maid curtsied again and backed out, shutting the door behind her.

"Good afternoon, sir," Tibbermore said, indicating the only other chair in the room, "You found our hidden gate, I see?"

"Indeed," I replied, sitting down and tugging off my hat, "I take it I'm on the list of those allowed through?"

"Correct, sir," he confirmed, "It seemed expedient. The main part of the house is still cordoned off by the police, although they don't seem to be doing very much. In any case, we prefer to keep the attentions of the gentlemen of the press at the front door."

"Probably wise," I said noncommittally.

These kinds of magical entrances are rare these days, being difficult to make and thus very expensive. The glamour has to be tuned to the individuals who are permitted to enter, itself a skilled adjustment. To anybody else, the entrance is not just impermeable but also invisible. Tibbermore must have access to a very able magical artisan.

"Now," I went on, turning my hat around and around in my hands, "I need to ask you some more questions?"

"Of course, sir," he answered blandly, although his forehead betrayed the slight wrinkling of confusion, "On what topic?"

"The topic," I said slowly, "Is Cutmal Lundie."

"Ah, yes," Tibbermore replied, looking faintly upset, or perhaps he just had a twinge from a stomach ulcer.

"Lady Strowan never mentioned that Cutmal Lundie was a regular visitor," I added, "But I have it on good authority that he was often here."

"Intelligence from Mister Methven, I imagine," Tibbermore said perceptively, "And, yes sir, Mister Lundie was a regular visitor. Too regular, perhaps."

"So why didn't her Ladyship mention him?"

"The reason," Tibbermore said sadly, "Is that Lady Strowan didn't *know* that Mister Lundie was a visitor."

I frowned deeply.

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Well, sir," the old retainer said placidly, "There's something of a family secret here. I was hoping to avoid telling it, but I imagine you will insist."

*

Tibbermore settled himself in the chair just across the little desk and, perhaps unconsciously, adopted a poise and tone of voice I would have expected from a primary school teacher about to read a story to the little ones.

In oblique terms, he confirmed what I had already suspected about the nature of the relationship - close but informal - between Mayfield and Glen. Not that he needed to; the evidence of my own eyes was quite enough. He also admitted that he was in collusion with Mayfield herself to conceal the relationship from Lady Strowan, and everybody else for that matter.

Indeed, in reality, he was even tacitly supporting the relationship, deflecting enquiries about Mayfield's continued absence from the Lower Realms, hinting at motivations and mitigating circumstances, without ever finding it necessary to tell an explicit lie. Clearly, he was instrumental in making it possible for her to spend most of her time on the surface, shackled up in the little hideaway with her boyfriend.

But this wasn't the only misdirection that Tibbermore indulged in, not the only little matter that he kept from his Mistress. There were more revelations still to come.

Many years before, Tibbermore explained, while both her parents and Lady Strowan's husband were still alive, Mayfield would occasionally attend parties at the Westwood mansion. Lady Strowan had established a considerable reputation as a society hostess - for a certain kind of society, of course - while thoroughly indulging herself and exercising her husband's millions into the bargain. The actress and the lord would entertain frequently, putting on grand balls in the mansion and elaborate soirées in the courtyard. The young Mayfield would, from time to time, be invited to meet the rich and famous, the influential and the fabulous, the beautiful and the notorious, all of whom would gather to mingle with the cream of Goblin society.

At the time, Mayfield was very young and still very much an emerging, deepening beauty; already lovely, but invoking an uncanny sense that her exquisiteness would mature with time. She was still outwardly demure and even shy, but already displaying a hint of the steely strength of character she had inherited from her grandmother.

And so it was that Mayfield was introduced, at one of the numerous balls and parties, to a young Goblin called Cutmal Lundie who, by all accounts, fell deeply and irrevocably in love with her. It was true from the beginning that his feelings for her were not reciprocated. Unfortunately, youth and shyness - or perhaps good manners - did not allow her to rebuff him firmly enough, or clearly enough. Or perhaps he was just a little deranged, even then.

Cutmal's parents were also from the upper echelons of our society - or at least they liked to think of themselves as such - and were perhaps bedazzled by the prospect of a glittering alliance with a family who seemed to be doing so well. Without consulting Mayfield, the two sets of parents arranged a betrothal, which was immediately announced in the usual newspapers and was also widely circulated by the gossips and letter-writing contingents.

Mayfield's reaction, when she found out, was neither demure nor shy. In short, she went ballistic. She shouted, she stamped, she fell out with parents, roundly berating them in private and denouncing them in public. After that, she refused to have anything to do with them, withdrawing herself from society of Goblins, although where she had disappeared to was, at the time, quite unremarked.

Mayfield's parents were later tragically killed in an accident. Tibbermore did not convey the details and I didn't press the matter, although he assured me this was an accident, with no suggestion of foul play. This unfortunate turn of affairs did just a little to mollify Mayfield's position, although not very much. I did bring her closer to her aged grandmother, who was by now

suffering the emotional pain of an unexpected bereavement. Both Westwoods young and old became effectively recluses, using money and family influences to hide themselves away from the wide circle of acquaintances they had so obviously relished in the past.

Cutmal Lundie clearly never forgot Mayfield Westwood. Tibbermore told me he had bombarded her with letters, telephone calls, flowers and gifts of decorative fungi. She returned them all. Firmly in denial, Lundie told everybody he encountered that he was still affianced to Mayfield, that the marriage was simply a matter of time. This had the effect of forcing Mayfield even deeper underground or, more precisely, onto the surface where she had encountered Glen, the circumstances of which Tibbermore did not know.

Irrevocably lovelorn, Lundie also adopted the curious habit of turning up unannounced at Lady Strowan's residence, sometimes when there was no other visitor but very often when Almon Methven had been invited as a dinner guest. Tibbermore considered it uncanny how Lundie seemed to know the infrequent occasions when Methven would be in attendance, although I suspected an entirely mundane explanation which required Lundie merely to have a certain amount of skill in following people.

Lady Strowan knew that Almon Methven enjoyed his food and would make sure that a splendid meal was laid on for him when he came to dine, even though Strowan herself could no longer manage more than a few mouthfuls of any of the courses. Tibbermore thought that Lundie was angling to be invited to the dinner table as well, but Tibbermore was robust in holding to Mayfield's wishes in excluding him from her Ladyship's company. So, more often than not, Lundie could be found seated at a corner of the vast kitchen table, eating leftovers and watching the cook and the sole remaining kitchen maid - no doubt the redoubtable Molly I had encountered earlier - cook and clean and tidy up.

Mayfield was embarrassed, even distressed, by the continuing unwelcome attention from Lundie. She had begged Tibbermore to conceal Lundie's visits and to make sure she never met him in the house. The old retainer had acceded, with considerable nervousness and qualms, but had stuck to the promise rigidly.

So Lundie was still hanging around and Tibbermore, responding to Mayfield's desires, continued to exclude him from the company of Lady Strowan. Still, he was entirely powerless to prevent accidental encounters between Lundie and other guests, like Methven. Lundie clearly wanted to engineer a chance meeting with

Mayfield herself, but the combination of her determination and Tibbermore's machinations made sure this never took place.

Tibbermore could not bring himself to admit to it, but he clearly looked on Mayfield with a great deal of affection. As far as I knew, he had no family, no children of his own, and it was entirely likely that he treated Mayfield as the daughter he never had.

*

I was silent for a long while after Tibbermore finished his tale.

"I need to talk to this Cutmal Lundie," I said finally.

"I suppose you must, sir," Tibbermore said, sounding dismayed, "But please be discreet. I assured Mayfield that I would keep her family secrets, but now you know them too."

"They're still secrets," I said grimly, "Nobody will hear them from me. Do you know where Lundie lives?"

"I'm afraid not, sir."

I imagined that Mayfield would have forbidden Tibbermore from retaining such information.

"No, of course not," I muttered, then added more loudly, "If he turns up here, let me know, okay? And I'll see if I can track him down anyway."

"Very good, sir."

I stood up and jammed my hat back on my head. Tibbermore rose politely in one smooth movement. I turned to go. Then a thought struck me.

"Is Mayfield going to inherit this place, now that Lady Strowan's dead?"

"I cannot say, sir," Tibbermore responded with more than a hint of ice in his voice, "I am not privy to the details of her Ladyship's will."

"No, no, of course not," I said placatingly, "But, is there anybody else who could possibly inherit?"

Tibbermore unbent slightly.

"Mayfield's father was her Ladyship's only child," he said hesitantly, as if old memories were being dragged from a deep hole in his head, "But there is perhaps one other family member. Mayfield's elder brother, Cairnie."

I raised my eyes to the ceiling. Now there was another individual to track down, one who might have a motive.

"And where will I find this Cairnie Westwood?" I asked, a trace of exasperation in my voice.

"I have no idea, sir," Tibbermore replied, sounding apologetic, "Nobody has seen Cairnie in decades. He ran away from home before Mayfield was even born. For all I know, he might be dead."

Findo Gask - Deadly Enchantment

Chapter 9 – Double Agent

This was all getting worse and worse. A missing brother - who might or might not be dead - an over-attentive and unwanted fiancé, a human live-in lover - young Mayfield had certainly managed to be right in the centre of a whirlpool of attention. And old retainer Tibbermore conveniently omitting important facts from my attention.

Still, none of these factors and relationships need be related to the murder of Lady Strowan - although they all cried out for being carefully investigated - nor need any of this be at all connected to the disappearance of the expensive necklace. The theft - if that's what it was - may have been an opportunistic act by a lucky criminal. Or perhaps it really had simply been mislaid and even now it was laying unregarded in some dusty drawer.

Tibbermore himself showed me out, walking with me across the kitchen courtyard.

"Come in this way anytime, sir," I said politely, "Molly or one of the others will direct you to me, night or day."

I elected against a return to my office. It was unlikely that there was anything there to interest me, although I did make a point of checking in with my message service. No dice.

Instead I undertook some research on Cairnie Westwood, visiting the public library whose worn steps and dusty windows are such a feature of the main square in the next-door cavern but one. The aged librarian recognised me immediately when I arrived and was more than helpful in directing me to the appropriate stack. She fussed around me like an old mother hen. I think I must spend too much time in that building.

With the librarian's slightly over-eager assistance, I found a small number of newspaper reports and accounts of court proceedings. Not that there was much to report, it seemed. The young Goblin had been quite a tearaway, rebelling against the society of his parents and the expensive schools he had been expected to attend. He had been considered smart but lazy, bored by the lessons and much preferred the excitement of breaking the rules. He had been arrested on minor charges half-a-dozen times, but somehow the charges were dropped before they made it to the courts. Family money at work, no doubt.

But eventually the family patience wore thin and there was a good old-fashioned stand-up argument between Cairnie and his parents. The youngster stormed out, vowing never to return and slamming the door behind him. Initially his parents were moderately unperturbed: Cairnie had stamped off before, eventually returning displaying at least a hint of remorse and promising to reform.

Then the hours turned into days, and the days turned into weeks, and still Cairnie did not show up. His parents, by now racked with remorse, alerted the police and, when the coppers were unable to discover anything, made appeals in the newspapers, offered a substantial reward and even engaged the services of an expensive firm of private investigators. But nothing definitive was ever found, just a few unconfirmed sightings and third-hand reports which hinted he was still alive.

It was getting late by the time I left the library. I made my way to the little apartment I maintain in one of the more downmarket caverns, making a detour to take in a quick bite at David's Diner. Once home, I sat in my favourite chair, nursing a tot of the cheap whiskey I use to hold down dinner and mulled over the case. There were still too many threads which needed to be unravelled to make any kind of sense. But at least I actually had some threads to tease apart - people to track down and talk to, leads to follow up. Also, I should make a report to my other client, if I could figure out a way to track her down. Another task for tomorrow.

I finished the whiskey and went to bed. I didn't remember any dreams.

*

I awoke early, showered and dressed leisurely and ambled back to the corner diner for a light breakfast, a large black coffee and a long slow look at the newspapers. In stark contrast to yesterday's spreads, reports of Lady Strowan's death now filled the front pages and many column-inches inside. There were formal obituaries, personal reminiscences from supposed friends and articles telling the story of her life, all illustrated with many pictures from her acting days and from the later times when she was queen among the society hostesses.

All the stories were silent on how she died. A naive reader might have inferred that it was simply old age - the number of her birthdays was reported consistently and presumably correctly in the newspaper pages. But there was no suggestion that she had been murdered, nor confirmation that she had actually died from natural causes, nor, for that matter, whether an autopsy was or was not undertaken.

My reading done, I sat staring into space for an indeterminate time, a creased pile of newspapers on the table to one side and a much-refilled mug of coffee on the other. David, the avuncular and apron-clad patron who had run this place since immemorial, approached softly clutching the coffee pot. He waved the pot questioningly in my line of sight which the desired effect of returning my focus to the here-and-now. I shook my head to deflect the delivery of yet more caffeine.

"Reading about Strowan Westwood's death?" David said gently.

"Yes," I replied, "It may be tangentially related to a case I'm working on."

I am a great respecter of client confidentiality, hence the white lie.

"I used to enjoy her performances," the patron said, his eyes faintly misty with distant memory, "I was a great fan. It was a sad day when she left the stage."

I had to agree and muttered something to that effect.

"It was all very sudden," David went on, "And highly unexpected. Performances cancelled, understudies yanked into leading roles at short notice, that kind of thing. Very unusual, even unprofessional, in a profession she loved so very much."

I looked up at David sharply.

"Why did she do that?" I asked.

David shrugged and spread his hands wide, an expressive gesture for a Goblin.

"Nobody knows," he said sadly, "But I do remember that speculation was discouraged at the time. Quite vigorously, on occasion."

This was very interesting. Very interesting indeed. This was before my time and David's astute observation was new news to me.

"Thank you, David," I said politely, getting up to leave and making sure I left a more than usually generous tip.

"My pleasure, Mister Gask," he replied gravely, sweeping up the banknotes in one smooth movement and concealing them in his apron pocket.

I made my way to my office. I wasn't followed. I made sure of that. Whoever it was tailed me earlier had evidently given up. It was mid-morning by the time I got to the office. It was quiet and undisturbed, the only change being a few more flakes of dust on the tops of the filing cabinets. It's not that I not a good

housekeeper, by the way; it's just that you can tell a lot about who's been in your office in your absence from the movement of the dust.

As is my habit, I collected my mail from the box downstairs as I came in through the street entrance. I was sorting through the junk - uniformly uninteresting - and the bills - nothing too threatening - when the door burst open and Mayfield stomped in. Well, that was certainly going to save me the effort tracking her down.

She was clothed in a very demure black dress which covered her from neck to ankle and a bonnet, also black, with a ribbon and a piece of gauze which could have been mistaken for a veil. She wore sensible-looking black shoes with quite a low heel - which was just as well given the stamping around she was indulging in. Her face displayed a curious mixture of barely-contained fury and a desperate inner sadness.

I stood up as she came in, partially out of politeness, but mainly because anybody bursting through my door is likely to make me just a little bit jumpy. I waved a hand to offer her a seat, but she ignored me, pacing across the office to the row of filing cabinets and glaring at them enough to melt a hole through the cheap painted steel.

"I've just come from my Grandmother's funeral," she said through clenched teeth, "And that degenerate creep of a brother of mine was there."

She rounded on me angrily.

"How did he know?" she demanded.

She strode over to my desk and focussed her glare on me.

"Was it you?" she hissed, "Did you tell him?"

*

I looked at Mayfield levelly across the desk.

"I have had no communication with Mister Cairnie Westwood, ever," I said earnestly, "In fact, I only learned of his existence yesterday afternoon."

I carefully omitted to mention exactly who had brought his existence to my attention.

"Later, I did a little research in the library, so I've got some idea of the history. He's been out of circulation for a long time."

"Yeah. But if you didn't tell him, how did he know about the funeral?" Mayfield demanded.

"Accounts of Lady Strowan's death have been reported in every newspaper this morning," I explained reasonably, "As well as most of last night's late editions."

She looked mollified, at least a little.

"Okay," she responded more calmly, then her eyes narrowed, "But how did he know exactly where and when it was to take place?"

This was a much better question. I hadn't been invited to Lady Strowan's Westwood's funeral and, frankly, I hadn't expected to be. All the reports I had seen in the newspapers had described it as a private affair - *Family and Close Friends only. No flowers* - and it seemed like the detailed arrangements for the event had not been given to the press.

"I didn't know when the funeral was going to be either," I answered, "Nobody told me."

Mayfield stared at me for a long moment, then slumped deflated into one of the guest chairs.

"So it must have been somebody who did know," I went on, projecting the voice of reason, "Who else was at the funeral?"

"Just me, and Tibbermore, of course," she said sadly, "And Almon Methven. And that policemen, Detective Tewel I think his name is."

"Detective Sergeant Tewel," I corrected absently.

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I do."

"Oh." Mayfield looked confused, then added, "I didn't realise he knew my Grandmother that well."

I shrugged. But it was another good observation. Sergeant Tewel obviously was close to Lady Strowan or at least had been at some point. I was curious enough to make a mental note to find out more sometime soon.

"So what happened at the funeral?" I asked.

"Cairnie turned up just as the service was starting, looking as if he had visited Grandmother only last week. A casual wave and friendly nod to those others present. He stood quietly, ignoring everybody, with his eyes on the ground. Once the final rites had been said and I had dried my eyes, I looked around for him, intending to give him a piece of my mind. But he had disappeared. I never saw him leave, or arrive either."

"So you've no idea where he went?"

She shook her head.

"No idea at all."

"And you're sure it was him?" I pressed, "I thought he ran away before you were born."

Mayfield looked at me strangely for a moment.

"You have done your homework," she said slowly, sounding sad, "You're right. But I've seen plenty of pictures. My mother used to sit me down and talk me through the family photo albums. Sometimes she'd cry. Sometimes she'd speculate about what Cairnie would be doing now. But mostly she'd get angry at the terrible way he treated her."

She stared over my shoulder deep in thought for a second, then her attention returned to me.

"I've seen those pictures often enough to be quite sure," she said, the steel returning to her voice, "I tell you, Mister Gask, if that brother of mine had anything to do with Grandmother's death, then I want him strung up."

*

"Do you really think Cairnie had something to do with the death of your Grandmother?" I asked urgently, leaning forward over the desk.

Mayfield looked desperately bitter for a moment and then shook her head hopelessly.

"No, I don't really think so," she said with a sigh, "Now that she is dead, he might be expecting a bequest in her will. But he only had to wait a few years and Grandmother would have passed away naturally. All he needed was a bit of patience."

All very level-headed of her, I thought, all very cool and calculating.

"I think I need to talk to this brother of yours," I said thoughtfully, "Is there anything you can tell me to help track him down?"

She shook her head, her forehead wrinkling prettily. Then a thought occurred to me.

"When's the reading of Lady Strowan's will?" I asked.

"Tomorrow morning," she said promptly, "Eleven o'clock. Why?"

This is very typical of Goblin society in recent times, say the last couple of thousand years. We have long lives, at least compared with the humans, but we do not tend to dwell on death

when it inevitably happens. Funerals take place within a very few days of death and any legal proceedings - especially last wills and testaments - are completed within the week.

"Ahh, so you already have a scheduled hearing at the Courts of Probate?" I said, trying to keep the worst of the smugness out of my voice, "I'd like to make a small bet that your wayward brother also turns up at the reading."

Her face brightened as she realised what I was saying, then her eyes narrowed at the thought of laying her hands on Cairnie.

"You'll need to give me a good description," I went on, "Then all I have to do is hang around outside the Courts and then follow him when he comes out."

She sounded surprised that I knew that much about it.

"Which Judge?" I added.

"Uh, just a minute," she muttered.

She fished around in her purse until she found an envelope. It was of thick heavy paper and the red wax seal which had held it closed still bore the imprint of the Courts. She re-opened it and drew out a handwritten letter on the same old-fashioned paper which she then studied for a moment. Goblins appreciate the traditional ways in such matters.

"Judge Kirkton," Mayfield read aloud.

I knew Kirkton, had crossed metaphorical swords with him before. Actually, he was a conscientious Judge who would invariably uphold the letter of the law, at least as far as it applied to Probate. But it would probably be better if he didn't know I was involved.

"Okay, that's a plan," I confirmed, "Is Glen all right?"

"Yes," she replied, looking sad, "We've spoken on the phone a lot. I don't think he likes me being away. And I'm missing him too."

"So you're not travelling back to the surface all the time? Where are you staying down here?"

She suddenly looked defensive.

"Why do you want to know?" she demanded.

"Because you're my client, assuming you do get around to handing over a retainer. Because I need to make reports to you, regularly. Because one member of your family has already come to an untimely end, and it could just happen to you too, so you might need some protection."

She had the good grace to look apologetic and slightly worried. Better scared than dead.

"I've been staying in a hotel," she answered quietly, "Somewhere out of the way. But I'm going to be staying at Grandmother's place. I'll move in tonight. Tibbermore insisted."

"Good. I'll catch up with you there later."

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Chapter 10 – Unauthorised Text

Mayfield had left in a sober mood. I hoped she took the advice and moved into Lady Strowan's house. It would be safer there. More people around. There was just a possibility that whoever had attacked her Grandmother would have some grievance with her. I'd had felt a lot happier if I could have worked out some good reason for that view. But at the moment it was all just supposition and gut feelings.

Talking of gut feelings, my interview yesterday with Almon Methven had been interrupted for reason which seemed, with hindsight, just a little dubious. It was time to make a second trip. I stared at the telephone receiver on its hook, musing for a moment about making a telephone call to make an appointment. I decided against this course of action; after all, it made it all too easy to make an excuse, or even a swift getaway.

So I traipsed over the theatre district once more to visit the headquarters of Methven and Son, Theatrical Agents, anticipating facing the wrath of the office manager and the pleading glances of the wage serfs metaphorically chained to the lesser desks. I half-expected it would be a wasted journey, a wild-goose chase after a source of information which probably didn't have much to offer in the first place. But it was still the best lead I had.

As it turned out, Methven himself was declared to be officially present when I knocked at the entrance at the top of the steps. The grand promoter and theatre agent himself flung open the door of the inner sanctum to greet me in person as soon as my presence was announced over the persistently unintelligible intercom. He waddled forward with arms extended, determined to shake my hand with some pretence of warmth, even though in the event it was as limply fish-like as on the previous occasion.

"Mister Gask," Methven exclaimed, "Good to see you again. Come in, come in."

Somebody, it seemed, had been talking to Almon Methven. Somebody had persuaded him that it was worth his while to humour me, to be nice to me. I wondered who that somebody was.

The rotund Goblin ushered me into his office with much flapping of limbs and finely-honed pleasantries. Once we were both settled

into the expensive davenports, I asked him directly if the police had now interviewed him.

"No," he said, "I have to admit I had expected a call. But no dice, so far."

"Uh-huh," I muttered noncommittally. I couldn't work out what Tewel was up to. I knew him to be a very good and insightful copper - despite his uncharacteristic outburst previously - and one likely to follow the procedures to the letter.

"Well, I'm sure Tewel and his pals will be along soon enough," I added, "But in the meantime, is there anything else you can tell me about Lady Strowan which might help my investigations?"

Methven was thoughtful for a moment.

"There is one thing," he said slowly, "It occurred to me after your last visit."

"Okay," I said encouragingly, "What is it?"

"Strowan Westwood was writing an autobiography."

*

"An autobiography?" I echoed, sitting bolt upright in surprise.

"Yes," he confirmed, "And I was acting as her agent. It's great stuff. Would you like to see?"

"I most certainly would."

Methven prised himself from the comfortable davenport and made his way across the expensive carpet to the expensive desk. He pressed a button on the intercom and was answered by a sharp squawk.

"The manuscript for Strowan Westwood's autobiography, please," he instructed.

The response was another, longer burst of noise within which could just be detected the sounds of confirmation. It was all for effect, of course: the entrance from the outer office was marginally closer than the desk and it would have been less effort to open the door and just speak. But that wouldn't have allowed him to demonstrate his expensive toys.

Methven returned to the davenport and watched the door impatiently. The Guardian of the Office appeared a few moments later, clutching in a fat file which she deposited on the corner of the coffee table and then left without a word being spoken.

Methven twisted the folder towards him and flipped open the cover. There were two kinds of paper in there: modern white paper of the kind which would work nicely with the typewriters I

had observed in furious operation outside, which contrasted with a heavy cream vellum. I could almost hear the scratch of an old-fashioned fountain pen, or maybe a even a feather quill, as the nib progress over the uneven surface.

"This is great stuff," Methven said, sounding suddenly gleeful, "And all actually written by Lady Strowan herself. No ghost writers for her."

"What?" I exclaimed, "You mean, written in her own hand?"

I couldn't believe that. Strowan Westwood's fingers had been too old and arthritic to be able to do more than sign a cheque. Even the amount and payee she had relied on others to fill in at her instruction.

"No, of course not," Methven smiled, "She dictated the chapters and they get delivered here every week or so, written out longhand. Then I get them typed up."

I picked up a sheet of the creamy manuscript and studied the handwriting. I thought I recognised the loops and whorls of the old-fashioned hand.

"This is Tibbermore's writing, isn't it?" I queried.

"Yes, of course," Methven confirmed, "Who else would she trust with such a task?"

I nodded. In my mind's eye, I could just see the old butler, sitting ramrod-straight at a desk with his pen hurrying over the surface of the paper, while the sharp mind and keen wit of Lady Strowan imparted yet another tale from her own exciting and adventurous existence: people she had met, parties she had attended, places she had been - all the pleasures and vicissitudes of a long and charmed life.

"These memoirs are like gold dust," Methven rattled on, "There are stories in here which I've never heard before. And I've heard a lot of stories, from Lady Strowan and others, from years long past. Now, of course they'll remain incomplete, but still very much publishable. In fact, with Lady Strowan now dead, it'll sell even more copies. It'll be in print in a few weeks."

Methven suddenly leaned forward over the low table, his eyes narrowing in determination and greed.

"I have to say, Gask," he growled, showing more of his numerous small sharp teeth, "Nobody, but nobody, is going to stop me from publishing this book. Not you, not the police, and certainly not anybody else."

It was like being savaged by a small plump spaniel. I'm sure it all made business sense and I doubted that Almon Methven

maintained the family firm without a smidgeon of acumen. I knew from my own experience that Lady Strowan was a formidable and highly entertaining teller of tales, and I could imagine it being an instant bestseller.

I stared at Methven for a long moment.

"Let me offer you some advice," I said seriously, "Free, gratis and for nothing. Keep those manuscripts safe. Make sure they get published. Get some copies made, leave them with trusted associates or even your lawyer if you can afford it. That might just save your life."

Methven looked shocked, frightened. I wasn't going to explain, not to him. Perhaps I didn't need to. There could be secrets revealed in the memoirs or, more likely, secrets which would no longer be revealed now that Lady Strowan was dead. Secrets which somebody wanted to protect, perhaps even a secret which Strowan Westwood didn't even realise was a secret; well, that secret might just be worth killing her for.

*

I stood up, struck with a troublesome thought which writhed in my head and just wouldn't go away.

"These manuscripts? Did Tibbermore deliver them himself?" I demanded urgently.

"Always," Methven answered, now sounding just as frightened as he had looked a moment earlier.

"And when was he last here?"

"It was more than a week ago," he muttered after a moment's hesitation.

It was just as I thought. More of the draft memoirs were probably resting somewhere in Lady Strowan's house, dictated before she died, probably put away somewhere safe and forgotten about in the panic of discovering her corpse. Or, if it wasn't there, proof positive that the manuscript, or something in it, was the motive behind the grisly murder of a old lady. I had to get over there right away.

"Look, Gask," Methven stopped me as I made for the door, "Am I really in danger?"

"I don't know," I said with absolute honesty, "But, if it were me, I'd take some precautions. Spend a little dough, if I had it. Look, in your business, you must have a few contacts, a few people who owe you favours. Get in touch."

*

Journeys underground are generally very swift. The transit tube systems installed aeons ago to link the caverns take no appreciable time to transport a person - or anything else which will fit through the entrance, for that matter - from one point to another. Normally, it all works very well, and a traveller familiar with the interchanges and exit points can make smooth and rapid progress to their destination.

I was in a tearing hurry, quite possibly a matter of life or death. It would just be my luck that, on this occasion there were long queues at the transit entrance as Goblins leaving the matinee performances chatted and ambled their way towards their next entertainment.

If it was the police, they would have just blown their whistles and the crowds would have parted to let them through. Private Investigators such as myself have no such privileges and I was forced to resort to extreme rudeness. I dodged the strolling groups and arm-in-arm couples, pushed my way headlong past those dithering over their tickets or swaying in their cups, and leaving behind a stream of oaths and furious imprecations, all of which sounded impressively nasty in the Goblin tongue.

Once free of the pressing crowds, I made straight for the secret rear entrance I had used before. Again, it recognised my presence so that I could both see it and make my way through it without hindrance. Once inside, on the other hand, it was immediately apparent that I was too late. The number of policemen milling about was a dead giveaway.

*

I had appeared in the inner courtyard of Lady Strowan's resident entirely unexpectedly, deposited there quite literally by magic. The other, more mundane and much more visible entrances were being guarded by a couple of uniformed coppers, despite the fact that the strong wooden doors were bolted and barred against even quite a determined attempt at a forced entry. And, given the wealth of the household, probably reinforced with the odd protective glamour, too.

Across the stone-flagged expanse, I could see the old maid known as Molly being either comforted or questioned by a phlegmatic-looking old Sergeant in uniform, accompanied by a second female officer. Other cops were searching the storerooms and outbuildings, while signs of frenetic activity came from within the main house.

One of the two young constables guarding the gates turned and spotted me. Not that I was trying to hide my presence, of course.

"Hey, you!" he shouted, "Stay where you are. What are you doing here?"

I stopped dead and held my hands slightly away from my body, making no attempt to reach into my pockets for my buzzer. Always a wise precaution with nervous and inexperienced cops, ones showing signs of being jumpy and trigger-happy.

"Name's Gask, Findo Gask. I'm a shamus," I said levelly, "I'm here to visit my client."

"Great," the other youngster muttered to his colleague, "Now we've got a Private Dick on our hands. Just what we need."

"Your client?" the first copper asked, loosening his revolver in its holster and approaching me cautiously. The other one held back, circling around to make it harder for me to do a runner. Standard police procedure. I was taught it myself once upon a time.

"Tibbermore," I replied calmly, "He's the butler here."

The look in his eyes told me everything I needed to know, even if I didn't want to. The stiff-backed aged retainer, faithful to his mistress until death - and beyond - was now himself no longer in the land of the living. He was one of the good guys, for all his reserved manner and old-fashioned politeness. The world will not see his kind again.

"Look, kid," I said with a hint of exasperation in my voice, "I'm on the side of the angels here. I need to talk to my client."

"Uh-huh," the first cop said, drawing his revolver but not quite pointing it at me, "Let's see more of those hands, shall we?"

I raised my arms to shoulder level while the second officer patted me down. Both of them seemed disappointed when they found I wasn't packing a gun. Now, I don't always go around tooled up; the kind of thinking you do with a gun in your hand is likely to get yourself killed. So, on this occasion I had left my regular automatic in its holster, secreted in the secure hiding-place in my apartment. I had other weapons, of course, quite an arsenal in fact, hidden in many places, not all of which were in the Lower Realms.

"Okay," the second cop said, drawing back and unholstering his own weapon, "Let's go inside."

"Sure," I said pleasantly, treating his gunpoint instruction as a polite request to be graciously granted, "I dare say Sergeant Tewel will be wanting to see me."

We had not made more than five steps when the Detective Sergeant himself emerged from the kitchen door, trailed by a couple of hard-looking constables.

"Gask!" he growled, pointing an angry finger at me, "I want a word with you. Right now!"

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Chapter 11 – Hidden Threats

(To be continued...)

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