

Findo Gask Dragon Sleuth



Trevor Hopkins

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Findo Gask - Dragon Sleuth

Chapter 1 – Pressure Drop

It had been a long and exhausting investigation. Neither of us had been shot at - well, not very much anyway - but it had been good to be working with my human partner again. "Gamshack and Gask", at least up here in the surface world. In the Lower Realms, we go by "Gask and Gamshack", but only because that way it sounds better, in my humble opinion, in the language of the Goblins.

Martin Gamshack - a.k.a. Gumshoe - was a Private Investigator with whom I had had dealings for many years. After a complex and dangerous investigation and a desperately tragic incident a few years ago, we agreed to form a loose partnership. This had worked well enough. We had picked up a fair number of challenging and occasionally highly lucrative cases where the interests of humans and Goblins overlapped.

This had been just such a case: a scam involving high-rolling gamblers in Las Vegas casinos. Somebody had started deploying a Goblin-made glamour which predicted - most of the time - the roll of the dice and the fall of the cards. This would have been far too obvious if a single individual had started winning large sums consistently, so the person behind it had engaged a series of proxies, most of whom were not aware of what they were really doing. These stand-ins were recruited from the legion of broke gamblers and long-term losers that can be found hanging around in every casino in the world.

It seemed that these patsies had been approached with a weird offer, an offer that sounded too good to be true.

"Your luck has changed, we want to help," the offer went, "So, we'll give you some money to go and play at your favourite tables. If you lose, well, that's just our bad luck. No hard feelings. But today, just today, we feel it will be your lucky day. So, if you win, we want our money back, and three-quarters of what you win. The rest is yours to keep."

Few gamblers could resist an offer like that, human nature being what it is.

The perpetrator had been clever and cautious, taking a long view, making a profit slowly and carefully. The scam had gone unnoticed for a long time, even under the eagle eyes of the casino

bosses who, naturally enough, take great care to make sure that, on average, the money flows from punter to casino and not the other way around. But eventually the strange phenomenon was picked up: an outbreak of gamblers who had previously lost consistently, all suddenly having a spectacularly lucky day and, inexplicably, handfuls of ready cash to indulge their luck.

By the way, these good-luck glamours really only work properly with a narrow range of possible outcomes - one of six for the throw of a dice, for example - but are cheap enough and readily available in the Lower Realms, despite being against the law. Gambling joints for Goblins take extra care to ensure that the odds are not being bent by freeloaders with a couple of cheap glamours in their pockets. And very few are foolish enough to put anything of value at risk without making sure such protections are in place.

The weak point, as is so often the case with these kind of operations, was the HUMINT aspect - human intelligence - the almost invariable characteristics of people to be unable to keep their secrets to themselves. Our approach had involved Gumshoe hanging around in bars - for a change, sophisticated and expensive casino bars, rather than the seedy joints I normally get to frequent - and buying far too many drinks with the clients' expense money. And listening carefully, of course.

The PI heard a great many wild tales, not all of which had anything to do with this investigation, but he was eventually able to pull together a consistent description: a short man with a strange foreign accent who always wore the collar of his raincoat turned up, a hat pressed down over his forehead and dark glasses over his eyes, even in the warmth of the Nevada desert night time and the dim cavernous expanses of the casinos themselves.

Goblins can't easily pass for human, at least in anything that the surface people would regard as normal lighting conditions. I know, I've tried it myself on more than one occasion. We are shorter than humans, with bald heads and large, slightly prehensile ears. Our arms are longer, our legs shorter, our teeth sharper and more numerous, and our eyesight adapted to the darkness of our underground caverns. Our mysterious mastermind was almost certainly a Goblin in disguise.

Posing as a down-on-his-luck gambler, Gumshoe managed to arrange a face-to-face meeting. He had no difficulty in pulling off the necessary careworn look and his eyes naturally told a tale of ill-fortune and gambles lost. He accepted the offer of a stake with only slightly more than the necessary amount of persuasion and, while finding no visible identifying marks, he was able to confirm our suspicion that somebody from the Lower Realms was ripping off the casinos. Instead of enjoying his luck on the roulette wheels

and blackjack tables, Gumshoe was even able to follow the mysterious individual to one of the many entrances to the caverns of the Goblins which, in cities at least, are marked with runes which most people mistake for extravagantly executed graffiti.

Meanwhile, I set about tracking down the route by which the predictive glamours were being acquired and exported within the Lower Realms. Anybody in my line of work soon acquires a large number of contacts in underworld dealing. A few discreet enquiries soon identified an individual who was buying large numbers of cheap glamours on the black-market and furnished me with several undisguised descriptions of the Goblin in question.

Once I found out from Gumshoe which portal to the Lower Realms the mark was using and staked it out, I simply followed him from the portal through the network of transit tubes which link the vast caves that we call home. I took watch outside the cheap doss-house he was using as a base. All too easy. Easy enough that I was not sufficiently careful. The perp spotted me, panicked and let rip with a cheap knock-off handgun. Those things never shoot straight, which is just as well as one bullet ricocheted off the stone column I was sheltering behind.

I scurried round the back of the hostel and hid outside the kitchen door, sheltered by a dumpster enlivened by the busy scurry of rats investigating yesterday's leftovers. As I expected, the perp stuck his head out of the door, saw nobody and set off down the alley. It was simplicity itself to grab his gun with one hand and stick the muzzle of my own to his head. I just need to secure him with a pair of handcuffs, then it was a short walk to the nearest police station armed with enough evidence to make sure he would be locked up for a very long time.

All in a day's work for Findo Gask, Goblin Detective.

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Our investigative partnership had been engaged by a committee of the casino bosses, at least one of whom must have had some inkling of the true nature of what lay beneath their feet. Or been able to find out. It's amazing just what money can buy, if you try hard enough - and you have enough of it. In any case, the name of our partnership had come to their attention, even though we do not advertise and indeed do our best to maintain a low profile.

Gumshoe had done the initial negotiations, as well as making interim reports in writing, on the phone and person, with me staying firmly out of sight. But now the final report, and our final payment, was due and our contact had requested an interview in person. Both of us: "Gamshack and Gask, Private Investigations."

In the politest way, it was made clear this is was an invitation not to be refused.

We turned up at the appointed time at the largest casino in town, with me wearing my best attempt at a disguise as a human. Gumshoe abandoned his ancient Oldsmobile in the car park, rather than relying on the dubious skills of the parking valets. In short order we were shown into an expansive and very plush office on the upper floor by a couple of large men in dark glasses and dark suits - expensive suits carefully tailored to leave plenty of room under the arms.

Stretching away from us was a long table of highly-polished wood. Down both sides of it sat a series of men. They were all old men - not as old as me, of course, given the Mayfly human existence - but well-dressed and well preserved, and with the unmistakable trappings of money and power lingering about their shoulders. These would be the legitimate businessmen who ran the city of Las Vegas - unofficially, of course - and all the fleshpots, bars and gambling joints therein.

The goons in suits backed away and closed the doors behind them. There were a couple of modern leather office chairs standing empty at the end of the table closest to the door. We took the hint and sat. I selected a chair which had been adjusted to it maximum height, which meant I was not forced to peer over the edge of the table like a child.

Opposite us, at the far end of the table, was another man, younger than most but one who seemed to be Master of Ceremonies, at least for today.

"Welcome, Mister Gamshack, and Mister - Gask, is it?" he said smoothly.

"It is," I replied in my best attempt at an American English accent, "It's a pleasure to meet you all."

I did not seriously expect to hear any names offered in this audience. So it was something of a surprise when the man at the far end of the table got up and walked around and offered his hand. Gumshoe stood politely and took the proffered palm.

I noticed that he didn't offer to shake my hand. Whether because he was uncertain of the protocols in the Lower Realms or just that he didn't want to be scratched wasn't clear. By the way, Goblins do *not* have claws; it's just that our fingernails are particularly strong and sharp compared with the puny human equivalent.

"My name is Roy Bridges," the boss man said, adding with some pride, "I am the manager of this casino."

"It's a very impressive place you've got here," Gumshoe replied with a lack of sincerity I suspected only I could detect.

Bridges waved his hand airily, dismissing the majestic building and the highly-effective money-sieve as if it was a mere nothing.

"I've been very impressed by the way you've dealt with our recent little problem," he went on, "And I thought - indeed, we all thought - you might consider making your role here in Las Vegas a more permanent one."

Gumshoe frowned. I watched Bridges quizzically as he strolled back to his seat at the head of the table.

"I don't understand," he said, sounding puzzled, "We've completed the assignment you gave us already."

"We find our livelihood vulnerable to - well, I guess magic is the word," Bridges said carefully as he resumed his seat, "And we would like to offer you both a more permanent role to plug that weakness."

It was clear enough that we were being offered a retainer to police the casinos in this town, with the unspoken suggestion that we should deploy magics forbidden on the surface to protect against similar incidents in the future. I have a rule always to decline such offers of long-term employment, regardless of how lucrative they appear to be. They always lead to a position where your employer thinks they own you, and then you end up being put in an immoral, untenable or otherwise undesirable position. Gumshoe knew this rule, too.

"We'd be delighted to be of service at any time in the future," Gumshoe replied, smiling widely, "But unfortunately we do have other cases that demand our immediate attention."

"Ah," Bridges looked faintly disappointed, "Of course your services must be in considerable demand. No matter."

Gumshoe reached inside his coat and pulled out a large manila envelope. He opened it, made a show of thumbing through the typewritten sheets inside, then closed it again and put it on the polished tabletop.

"Here's your final report, as promised," Gumshoe said.

"Ah, yes. Good," Bridges drawled, "And no doubt you feel you deserve your final payment, too. Cash is always best for these matters, don't you think?"

"Always acceptable to me," Gumshoe grunted.

Bridges nodded, and a man on Gumshoe's right produced another envelope. He slid it across the slippery table just out of

Gumshoe's reach. But not mine. I was quick enough to grab it as it slid past. I picked it up and looked inside. Wads of new hundred-dollar bills, still in the bank's binding. It looked about right.

"Thank you," I said, nodding to Gumshoe, "That will do nicely."

"Of course," Bridges demurred, "I imagine you must be going now. Please do think over our offer."

The door opened and the two bouncers reappeared, although he hadn't signalled them in any way I had spotted. We both stood, or at least Gumshoe did; I hopped down from the high chair in a way I've practised many times over the years.

"We'll consider it carefully," Gumshoe replied politely, "And please don't hesitate to call should you require our further services."

"Oh, we won't," Bridges said wryly, "Good evening to you both."

We were shown out of the front door of the casino with polite disinterest. I felt sure the black-suited heavies were studying us closely, as professionals do. If either of us returned to this or any other casino in town, we would be watched closely just in case we got funny ideas about turning a quick buck on the tables.

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Gumshoe and I strolled back across the parking lot, chatting amiably about our most recent closed case before moving to various tasty morsels of gossip. The assignment had been quite a success story. They don't all work out like that, inevitably, but this one featured no bloodshed, a conclusion apparently entirely to the satisfaction of the client, and we didn't even have to press hard to get the balance of our fee.

We must have looked quite the odd couple in the semi-darkness. Gumshoe is short for a man although, while still a head taller than me, he remains very blocky and powerful about the shoulders. He shaves his head to conceal incipient baldness but, since he is very much the traditional Private Eye when it comes to sartorial appearance, he compensates by almost always wearing a hat and a long raincoat with the collar turned up.

As we walked, our chat turned to the question of what our next assignment would be. Despite what we had told Bridges, neither of us had anything particularly pressing on our books at the moment. This wasn't an immediate problem, of course; the balance of the fees would tide both of us over for a good few weeks - months, if I didn't squander it all on paying the less essential of my bills. My bank manager might even be reasonably cooperative, at least for a

while. But, in our business, it is always to know where the next meal ticket is coming from.

We reached Gumshoe's car - old, but well cared-for and beautifully polished - and I clambered into the back seat. This keeps me out of sight from the casual observer. Gumshoe slid his bulk behind the seating wheel and turned the key. The vast engine rumbled into life immediately. He slid the car into gear and drew away smoothly, careful to drive slowly so as not to attract the attentions of any overzealous traffic cops.

"Where to, Gask?" he asked.

I gave him an address in one of the seedier parts of town, a backstreet in an industrial area well away from the bright lights of the casinos. He grunted in acknowledgement and made a left at the exit of the parking lot.

As Gumshoe drove, I opened the packet of cash we had collected and thumbed through the bills more closely. All present and correct, precisely the fee we had agreed. I separated the money into equal portions and stuffed my half in one of the many capacious pockets in the long overcoat I habitually wear. I put the rest back in the envelope and tapped Gumshoe on the shoulder with it.

"Thanks," he said, taking the proffered dosh and concealing it in his own pocket, "It's a pleasure doing business with you."

I snorted. The cliché was hardly worth a real laugh.

A few minutes later, we drew to a halt at the kerb. The street lighting was so poor that it was very nearly dark, and there was absolutely nobody about.

"Where are you going now?" I asked casually as I got out.

"Oh," Gumshoe replied casually, "I'm just going home."

So he was going to drive back to New York. I knew he hated planes, preferring to drive for days instead and stay in low-rent motels as necessary. He had an old family home, a rambling pile - mostly in a poor state of repair - in up-state New York. But that was not his destination. He meant his little rented apartment in the city. I could tell he was expecting to spend some time with Rosie, the owner of Chill's Irish Bar, with whom he had struck up what seemed to be a long-term relationship.

"Enjoy your drive," I said wryly, "And keep in touch."

He nodded in acknowledgement. I slammed the car door shut, turned up the collar, pulled my hat down further - to shade my eyes and disguise my ears - adjusted my sunglasses and strode off down the street.

*

My route took me to an even darker alley between two warehouses, their brick walls entirely featureless except for the omnipresent graffiti. Hidden amongst the colourful whorls and blocky angles were the Goblin runes I was looking for, the ones that directed me to one of the many hidden entrances to the Lower Realms. I invoked the necessary magic automatically as I approached; the wall opened up and I stepped inside.

The journey to the caverns of the Goblins took but a moment and I was swiftly deposited at the immigration and customs point. A wave of my Private Detective badge at the nearest officer was all that was required for me to be waved through and a moment later I was stepped out onto the bustling streets and boulevards of the Lower Realms.

We Goblins do not live in damp and squalid caves as certain humans would have you believe. But we do live underground, and most of us prefer it that way. Indeed, many of my countrymen would never willingly visit the surface and would feel quite uneasy at the prospect of not having a solid roof over their heads. We prefer our vast airy caverns, miles across, with ceilings of solid rock held up by a combination of ancient engineering and some really big supporting columns.

Of course, as is the nature of people everywhere, some parts of the Lower Realms are indeed rather squalid, but others are filled with elegant, even palatial, residences for the rich. My own place in this world is a small apartment, somewhat towards the bottom end of the spectrum of quality, but at least I can usually pay the rent on time. I was heading in that general direction but my stomach insisted that I should detour to a little restaurant on the corner of the block.

David's Diner was a regular haunt for me. David the patron was at his accustomed place at the doorway when I arrived. He recognised me immediately, greeted me like an old friend - or at least like a valued customer - and showed me to my usual table, a quiet little one at the back.

He handed me a menu - which I didn't need, having memorised the standard offerings quite some time ago - which enclosed the daily specials card. This I studied carefully. David left me to my own devices for a minute or two, then returned clutching a small notebook.

"What can I get you this evening?" he asked politely.

It had been some days since I had eaten solid Goblin fare; somehow, human foodstuffs always seem to have a pappy

tasteless property to them. I needed a proper meal. I tapped the specials card with a forefinger.

"Rat and mushroom kebab, toadstool bread, hold the onions," I decided.

"Right away," David said, scribbling furiously, "And a beer?"

I grinned in response. A large glass of strong dark Goblin beer appeared at my table within seconds, followed swiftly by the rat-on-a-stick. Delicious. Sated, I lingered over a second beer and that morning's newspaper - nothing of significant interest, I thought - then threw a few bills on the table to cover the tab and a reasonable tip.

I tugged up my collar and wandered out into the quietness of the late evening to walk the block to my apartment building. There was nobody about; the street - never very busy even at the best of times - seemed to be completely deserted. I shrugged and set off along the pavement. After a dozen steps, I noticed faint red sparkles on the ground in a circle around me, keeping pace as I walked. Bowing to the inevitable, I stopped dead. Instantly, the red circle solidified and intensified, then the whole dropped away into the ground carrying me away.

Once again, I descended into the fires of Hell.

Findo Gask - Dragon Sleuth

Chapter 2 – Dragon's Den

I looked around me with mild interest as the circle of light dropped into the ground and the earth closed up over my head. The fiery red light that had marked the edges of the stone plug I was now standing on now seemed to be all around me and provided more than enough light to see by. Not that there was much to see, just polished rock walls in a variety of shades and textures as the magically-created tunnel that had engulfed me slid smoothly downwards.

I had seen this kind of thing before, of course, on more than one occasion. It was undoubtedly the work of a group of beings known as the Old Ones. It seemed I had been pre-emptively summoned to an audience. Perhaps I should have been nervous, or even afraid. But the Old Ones are an ancient and long-lived race, with a considerable arsenal of magical techniques at their disposal. If they wanted to, they could have swatted me down like an insect; if they meant me harm, I would already be a rapidly-dispersing warm puff of vapour. Presumably, they didn't want me dead, which meant they wanted to talk to me, probably resulting in me being in harm's way in a much more interesting fashion. I'd find out soon enough.

I sat on the gently glowing and faintly warm stone, pulled a cigarette from an only slightly crushed packet I retrieved from the depths of my raincoat and lit it with a matchbook from some nightclub I visited - on business, you understand - some time ago. As my grandmother used to say: if it's inevitable, relax and enjoy it.

Two cigarettes later and I was just beginning to get faintly worried. But I shouldn't have been; it was just the Old Ones' way of softening me up, to make sure I arrived in their demesne in a suitably disoriented state of mind. Without warning, the sides of the tunnel disappeared, leaving me on the top of an immensely high column which was rapidly sinking. I stood up and looked around with interest; I had not been paying very much attention, for a variety of reasons, on my previous visits to these regions, but I had an excellent opportunity to have a good look around.

You might have gained the impression that the caverns of the Goblins are vast and impressive - which they are - but the caves of the Old Ones are infinitely more so. For one thing, the Old Ones

have wings and, presumably, once flew freely over the mountains and valleys of the surface world. They still like to fly, so I understand, so their caverns are truly vast and built entirely without supports: no pillars or columns to hold up the roof or get in the way of one's fifty-foot wingspan.

From my vantage-point, I could see for miles in every direction; in all but one, I could not even make out the boundaries of the immense volume. The entire space was illuminated by irregular patches of red light, on the floor below and on the many ledges and terraces which lined the one boundary I could see. The light seemed to flicker and vary infinitesimally but continually, like firelight.

This region is sometimes referred to as the Hells, although it is not the inferno that overheated human imagination would have you believe. Despite the fiery appearance of the lighting, it was not particularly hot - warmer than Goblins prefer, but not the baking oven of the Nevada desert around Las Vegas. I had heard it suggested that the Old Ones had long ago perfected the technique of channelling light from regions of red-hot magma yet deeper in the earth's crust, but managed to filter out almost all of the associated heat. Just as well, otherwise I would already have perished in the fires of Hell.

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The column upon which I stood fell smoothly towards a broad ledge, not quite at the very bottom of the huge enclosure but just one of a great many terraces that buttressed the lower part of the wall. The top of the pillar reached floor level and stopped, and the circle of red light faded almost instantly. After a second or two, there was not even the faintest of marks to distinguish where the miles-high column of rock that has supported me had oozed into the ground beneath my feet.

The Old Ones had long ago perfected the art of fluid masonry: the ability to persuade solid rock to flow and shape itself as if it were a soft plastic. It was a magic that was denied to Goblins - although I knew of one nearly successful attempt to steal it - but it was one which allowed the Old Ones themselves, or their chosen guests, to go almost anywhere within or on the surface of this world.

I stepped forward, carefully avoiding treading where I thought the join between column and pavement would have been, and looked around. I was standing on a featureless plateau of smooth stone stretching apparently endlessly to left and right and with a vertical rock wall behind me. I strode over to the edge and looked over; it was a long drop to the next terrace far below. All was quiet and still, with no movement that I could detect anywhere.

"Findo Gask," a deep voice boomed beside me, "Good evening and welcome, once again, to our abode."

I jumped out of my skin, not quite literally, and only instincts honed over millennia prevented me from falling to my death. An Old One had materialised not twenty feet from where I was standing. Where previously there had been a smooth unbroken surface, there was now a low circular dais perhaps twenty feet in diameter which looked exactly as if it had been extruded from the stone floor. Indeed, it almost certainly had been.

Goblins say that all humans look the same. This isn't true, of course; at least if, like me, you get enough practice in identifying specific individuals. On the other hand, the Old Ones are genuinely indistinguishable, at least to my eyes. This might well be the same individual who interviewed me on previous occasions, but there was no way to be sure. And there was no point asking for a name; I'm told they do actually have names in their own language, but these are never divulged to. Besides, there is no need: we are given to understand that the Old Ones have their own means of communication, that they are perpetually in contact with all others of their kind, that anything said to any of their number is heard by all, and any response - and a response is not always guaranteed - is given on the basis of an informed consensus.

As for appearance, well, there are enough vague references, apocryphal stories and frequently-retold legends in your own history - or mythology - for you to already have a good idea. Many humans would say that the Old Ones resemble dragons: four clawed feet, two enormous leathery wings, a long serpentine neck and tail, and head adorned with multitudinous horns and fangs. Others would think of them as demons, or *shadu*, or basilisks; your mileage may vary. But all would agree that the Old Ones are powerful, ancient and not to be treated lightly; think deeply first and answer any question with complete honesty is the advice usually given.

I guess I recovered from my shock fairly quickly. After all, I was expecting something of this kind. Trying to cover my confusion - out of an instinctive sense of self-preservation rather than with any serious expectation of succeeding - I strode in the direction of the low pedestal where the Old One lay curled up like a cat making itself comfortable on a cushion.

"Hello," I said simply, "I believe I've been summoned."

A snort, accompanied by a tiny puff of smoke from the nostrils, was the only immediate response. Taking the hint, I stopped at a polite distance and waited.

"Indeed," the Old One said after a pause, with a slight tinge of frustration in his voice, "It seems that we once again have a requirement for your services."

There was the faintest sense of movement from behind me. A stone chair had extruded itself from the floor next to where I stood, accompanied by a low plinth whose upper surface was unblemished except for a shallow bowl. I sat, pulled off my hat and tossed it on the table, then rummaged in my pockets for cigarettes. This was going to take some time if I was being provided with an ashtray.

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I could tell that the Old One was feeling a certain and no doubt very unfamiliar sense of chagrin. For beings widely supposed to be omnipotent and omniscient, the sense that they were not totally aware of events in the wider world would have been immensely embarrassing. I had already concluded that, as had happened once before to my certain knowledge, there was something was going on which was hidden from the all-seeing eyes of the denizens of the Hells.

I lit a cigarette and sat back, blowing smoke through my nose and waiting patiently for the Old One to speak.

"You have been of some small assistance in the past," the Old One began at last.

"Thank you," I acknowledged self-deprecatingly, "It was nothing really."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," the Old One demurred, "But we do recognise efficiency, and diligence, and insight. And we can reward these traits, if we are pleased with the results they achieve. You should be reassured on this point."

My translation of this was: we want you to do a job, an assignment which we cannot achieve ourselves. And we are prepared to pay you for your services. Of course, I had absolutely no idea what form that payment might take. And it didn't sound like I really had a choice anyway.

"I shall strive to give complete satisfaction from my undertakings," I replied formally, "So how can I help?"

"We have a situation," he said, giving every impression that he didn't really want to talk about the situation, "In short, one of my friends and compatriots has, well, disappeared."

My mind raced at the enormity of this statement and my jaw probably flopped around of its own accord. After a while, I got both under control and was able to formulate a coherent question.

"Disappeared? Not dead?"

The Old One looked grave, as only a fifty-foot fire-breathing flying lizard can.

"No, not dead. Our kind live for a very long time and, at the moment of an individual's death, there is a flash of communciation in our minds. It's quite distinctive. And we did not feel it. So, we conclude that our friend is still alive."

I shook my head in confusion.

"But I though your kind are in constant contact with one another, wherever you are," I said, my cigarette burning forgotten in my fingers.

"We are," the Old One confirmed, "We constantly feel the thoughts and presence of all. And that contact just stopped, suddenly. Our kind has never experienced anything like it before."

"When did this happen?"

The Old One specified a time and date more than twelve days in the past.

"Two weeks?" I said, squeaking with surprise, "Your comrade has been gone two weeks? What have you been doing for all that time? Why didn't you call me in before?"

"We have been searching everywhere," the Old One rumbled, sounding annoyed, "We have left no stone unturned. We did not believe that anyone could hide such a thing from us for long."

"And now, as a last chance, you've brought me in," I huffed, "And you've let the trail go cold."

"Perhaps we should have reacted sooner," the Old One demurred, "But we are not the kind of beings to ask for help lightly."

I could see the point. But all too often, clients come to see me weeks after the significant event, when memories have faded and traces erased. It makes my life so much harder.

"Okay, okay. I'll see what I can do," I said, trying to regain the poise of a professional investigator, "Do you know where your comrade was when they disappeared?"

Once again, the Old One appeared to be shifty and uncomfortable.

"Well," he said eventually, "They were on the surface."

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"On the surface?" I spluttered, "I thought your kind never visited the surface any more?"

The Old One sighed, emitting a plume of smoke from his mouth. I emulated him, puffing on my cigarette to calm my nerves.

"We have almost forgotten," he said sadly, "What it is like to fly freely in the open air, to feel the cool wind and the warm sun, to look down on the mountains. Sometimes the urge is too strong. One of us must give in and visit the upper world once more."

"Hmmm," I murmured, not entirely without sympathy, then added, "What mountains was your colleague looking down upon when he disappeared?"

The Old Ones spoke the name of a range of snow-capped mountains. A human might refer to them as the Rockies.

"Isn't that a bit, well, dangerous?" I enquired, "Surely there's a risk that the humans might spot you?"

"We are well-practiced at keeping out of sight of the humans," the Old One replied with what sounded like a sneer, "We know when we are being watched."

For a moment, I wondered just what kind of agency could tackle a huge flying monster, and one which was an adept in all kinds of ancient magic to boot. Sure, the humans have some powerful military weaponry these days, but it was hard to imagine that such capability could be deployed without at some kind of warning, especially for communal telepaths.

"I guess I better get up there and make some enquiries," I said uncertainly, "It'll take some time. It's a huge area."

"We suspect," the Old One went on, suddenly sounding more confident, "That you will need assistance, allies, in this quest. You should not hesitate to call upon them. We feel sure you will use all the necessary discretion as to the objective and the client."

This sounded worryingly like one of those obscure predictions that litter the pronouncements of a member of a mildly prescient race.

I sat as still as the rock chair beneath me for a long moment, in some kind of a daze, smoking my cigarette absent-mindedly. It didn't look like the Old Ones knew any more, or they would have told me already. I was going to have to rely on intuition, and luck. I hated relying on those two particularly tricky characters.

Findo Gask - Dragon Sleuth

Chapter 3 – Renewed Incentive

I interviewed the Old One at considerable length, smoking many cigarettes and with any thought of a good night's sleep long forgotten. Despite all my efforts, and the Old One's infinite patience at my repetition and rambling detours, I added little to the insights I had already gathered. It was increasingly clear that they really did have no idea of what happened: one moment, their esteemed colleague was soaring majestically over the corries and glaciers, the next, gone completely, disappeared without trace and with a sudden psychic loss felt by every one of their kind.

I asked every question I could think of, although later I would learn that there were a couple of fairly obvious enquiries which simply didn't occur to me. I would have saved myself a lot of time and effort if I had scraped together enough insight to ask the really important questions.

Finally, exhausted, the Old One sent me back to the Lower Realms, returning me in the same way I had arrived. A column of solid stone rose smoothly from the floor beneath my feet which deposited me on the street from whence I had departed not five minutes walk from my apartment.

Once over my own threshold, I flung my hat and raincoat at the stand by the door - miraculously, they hung on the pegs more-or-less perfectly - and set about my first task: giving Gumshoe a call. I used a service I used regularly: one which will, for a price, allow telephone calls between the Lower Realms and the surface world. He didn't answer, of course; he was probably driving or, more likely, sleeping. I had no option but to leave him a message, asking him to call me and saying it was urgent, then in a fit of mischievousness, I added: "One of the Dragons is missing."

It would take Gumshoe days to get back to New York and his own office, crawling across the surface of the planet. Of course, he might well pick up his messages on a regular basis, but it was equally possible he would treat the road trip as a - no doubt well-earned - vacation and just amble along, stopping off wherever he fancied and enjoying the local cuisine and the offerings of the local bar. Maybe he'd get my message in the morning.

There was nothing more useful I could do at this hour. I undressed, took a long shower, wrapped myself in my favourite bathrobe and poured myself a small nightcap. It was going to be a

long hard investigation and I would need my sleep. I set the alarm clock for an hour which might coincide with Gumshoe's wakeup call. Then I sat for half an hour trying to put my thoughts in order and sipping the scotch slowly. There was much that was worrying me about this whole business. In particular, I wondered if it was really a coincidence that Gumshoe would shortly be driving through the very region that I now knew needed to be investigated.

*

I woke with a start in what felt like the middle of the night, well before the alarm clock started its cacophony. I was still sitting in my bathrobe, my whiskey unfinished, and with a dread sense of premonition rattling about my head. Or maybe it was just a nightmare. I couldn't remember a thing.

A glance at the clock told me I had been asleep for less than an hour and that it was too early to do anything useful. I crawled under the bedcovers and tried to get back to sleep. Nothing doing. There was something unsettling about this case, something that was niggling at the back of my mind. But I hadn't a clue what it was.

I tossed and turned for a long while before I finally gave up and concluded that more sleep was not for me tonight. Facing the inevitable, I got up, made sure the alarm clock was thoroughly disarmed, showered again - I was inexplicably sweaty - and dressed slowly and carefully. I made coffee - thick and black - and found a couple of the hard biscuits which are so popular for breakfast in the Goblin world in a tin at the back of the kitchenette cupboards. Dunked in the poisonously-strong coffee, they weren't too bad.

As I chewed, a thought occurred to me. There must be more to be learned about the Old Ones. I was certainly no expert and I would bet a goodly sum that a subject that fascinating would have attracted a great deal of study over the millennia. I needed some of that understanding, and in a hurry.

A few moments search - all right, twenty minutes of increasingly frantic rummaging - in the drawers and cupboards located what I was looking for. The really quite good university that my parents' money allowed me to attend for a short period a great many years ago had numerous drawbacks, and a few virtues, after I had left under a cloud. And one of the positive things I still had, after all these years, was a card that allowed me free use of the university library.

Universities are not places which start to function early in the morning so I suffered a frustrating few hours of being unable to do anything very useful. Gumshoe didn't call back. The hands on the

clock didn't turn any faster. Eventually, I elected for a little housekeeping. The domestic, and largely mindless, drudgery of dusting and sweeping and cleaning providing just the outlet I needed for my pent-up energies.

Even so, I was on the doorstep of the university library one minute after it opened. If the porter on duty was in the least bit surprised to see a Goblin of middle years waving a hundred year old library card, then he did a good job of hiding it. The helpful librarian on the desk was similarly unsurprised, and deftly directed me in the direction of a stack tucked into a corner of the rambling old building, as well as suggesting the titles of a few works which would provide an introduction to the subject.

I found myself at the library table many hours later, surrounded by open books and scribbled notes, my stomach grumbling at the lack of lunch. I had learned a great many things about the Old Ones, although none seemed particularly pertinent to my current line of enquiry. But there was one thing that did stand out, even at a most cursory glance at the literature. It was a name, a name I recognised. It was a blast from the past, somebody who once studied in the same lectures and the same tutorials, somebody who I once called a friend, and was indeed more than just a friend, a very long time ago.

*

The corridors of the old university building that housed the Department of Preternatural Sciences seemed as echoing as they did when I was a wet-behind-the-ears undergraduate student all those years ago. I had spent quite some time here, filling these halls with backchat and laughter in the high-spirited company of a hundred like-minded others. It was an era of my life which now seemed as long ago as forever and as far away as the moon.

Following the directions made abundantly clear in the Staff Directory I studied as I entered, I navigated the half-remembered maze of glazed brick in nearly indistinguishable shades of green and brown, pacing the stone floors which had seen the tread of a million others just like me.

The directory had led me true. I stood in front of the door, reading again the name picked out in gold paint of the polished wood surface. Doctor Doonira Quaig.

*

We had been inseparable all that year, but it was now the very last night we ever spent together. We had argued, as lovers sometimes do, stayed awake all evening and long into the following morning. Like all such arguments, it was a long time brewing, and

maybe I had been ignoring the underlying tension between us, but tonight Doonira seemed determined to bring it to a head.

I wanted her to marry me, set up house together, perhaps even have babies. I had this naive idyllic vision of a pretty little place where we lived together, with fungi around the door, where I would return home after a long day at the University distilling the wisdom of ages for delivery in lecture theatres to a legion of undergraduate students who would hang on my every word.

She, of course, had very different ideas. She wanted a career of her own - like me, an academic existence in the hallowed halls of an ancient university - to make her own mark on the world. She was smart and savvy, and very, very ambitious. She wanted people to respect her for herself, her own qualities and abilities, and not as the appendage of another.

I couldn't see it, at the time. I was blinded by convention, the mode of living that my parents and grandparents had long adopted. I could see no other way. I was adamant, she tried to negotiate; I got angry, she got angry back; I shouted, she cried.

The argument was going nowhere. We were both increasingly tired and stubborn, having metaphorically painted ourselves into two separate corners with no path or passage left between them. Finally, Doonira sat up and took me by the shoulders, forcing me to turn and look into her eyes.

"Findo," she said sadly, "I once had high hopes for you. But you don't own me, control me. I don't think you really understand me. Or even yourself. You need to work out what you really want from your life. And it doesn't include me."

She slid off the bed and stood up, looking down on my naked form languishing on the rumpled bedclothes.

"You should go now," she said, firmly, even kindly, but quite definitely implacably, "I don't want to see you again."

With hindsight, I wonder whether I would ever have been a success as a professional academic. Oh, I am capable of the occasional brilliant insight, and I can study hard if I have to - that's how I had made it through all of the exams it had been necessary to pass to get even that far. But Doonira was probably intrinsically cleverer than me, and certainly more driven to succeed than I have even been. It would never have worked out for me.

Within the week, I had left the old university and enrolled in the police academy on a fast-track course. I would later qualify as a copper - although that career didn't last very long either. And, until this very day, I never had any further contact with Doonira Quaig.

*

I shook my head to dislodge a few ancient and lingering memories, and knocked firmly on the door.

"Come," said an all-too-familiar voice from within.

I pushed open the door, slipped inside quietly and closed it behind me. I wasn't sure how to open this conversation, so I elected for the boringly conventional.

"Hello Doonira," I said softly, taking off my hat, "Do you remember me?"

She lifted her head from the papers at her desk and turned to face me. A true gentleman would have said, with absolute conviction, that she had not changed one iota over the intervening centuries. A trained detective would have noticed the differences: crows-feet in the corners of the eyes and furrows on the forehead, a little thickness at the waist and hips, darker brown skin at the knuckles and elbows. But she looked well in the obligatory academic uniform of long white coat and wire-framed half-moon spectacles. The centuries had definitely been kinder to her than they had been to me.

As I spoke, her brow furrowed for a long moment, then her eyes opened wide with surprise as recollection struck.

"Findo Gask!" she breathed, "After all these years."

She smiled broadly, stood up from the desk and came over to me with both hands extended. I took them in my own and looked, once again, into her eyes. They were the same startling shade of amber as I remember. Then she took me by surprise: she stood on tiptoe - she was still a tiny little thing and I have always been big for a Goblin - and planted a kiss on my cheek.

"Of course I remember you," she went on, "You're looking well. I've been following your career with interest."

It's not like my name appears in the newspapers every day, or even every decade. I prefer to keep a low profile. And most of what does appear in print is garbled, misreported or just plain wrong to the point where it is sometimes difficult to recognise my own part in the action. So she had probably got entirely the wrong idea about how I conducted my business.

Doonira let go of one hand and drew me across the room with the other, positioning me in front of one of two easy chairs that faced each other across a low table in the corner of her office. I took the hint and sat. Then she disentangled her remaining fingers and sat in the other chair. She looked directly at me appraisingly.

"Let me guess," she said coolly, "This is not just a social call. You want something. You need help in one of your investigations."

She always did have a worrying ability to read me, to be several steps ahead of me. This didn't seem to have changed. I grinned widely, sat back in the chair, tossed my hat on the coffee table and pulled out my cigarette packet.

"Well guessed," I replied, waving the packet in her direction, "I can tell you've done well for yourself. Quite a successful career. And you've managed to make yourself one of the leading experts in an area I urgently need advice on."

She frowned prettily, but accepted a cigarette. I pulled one out for me too, then helped her with a light.

"You mean the Old Ones? Why would you want to know about them?" she asked, blowing smoke, "They do tend to keep themselves to themselves, you know. I don't have any special connections in the Hells."

I grinned even more widely. I was going to enjoy this.

"The Old Ones are my clients," I said smugly, "Again."

The look on her face was priceless: a soundless "O" of surprise, the cigarette frozen half way to her mouth. I felt it was time to recycle a line I had already used on Gumshoe.

"It seems that one of the Dragons is missing."

Findo Gask - Dragon Sleuth

Chapter 4 – Moonlight Quest

The driven and ambitious Doonira wasn't very far below the surface charm of the polished professional academic.

"You've had direct contact with the Old Ones?" she exploded.

I nodded.

"Only last night I was in the Hells," I explained, "Interviewing an Old One about a disappearance. One of their own, indeed. A crime may or may not have been committed, but everything I read - and confirmed by the Old One himself - says that it can't be done."

"I've been trying for a hundred years to arrange for a visit, without the slightest hint of success," she said angrily, "And *you* get invited down there on a whim."

"Oh, I don't think it was a whim," I replied placatingly, "In fact, I'm sure of it. I've been useful to the Old Ones before."

She shook her head slowly, getting a grip on her frustration. I don't think acceptance came easily for her, but she got there in the end.

"And I think they're taking the current situation very seriously," I added while Doonira tracked down her missing cool, "Otherwise they wouldn't have involved me. They like to keep a low profile."

"The Old Ones are said to be in constant contact with each other wherever they are," she said thoughtfully, reaching over to her desk for her notebook and pen, "Yet you say one has disappeared?"

"That's it," I assented, "In daylight, flying about on the surface."

"Yes, I see," she said, scribbling furiously and sounding not at all surprised, "I'd heard rumours that the Old Ones still fly above the surface sometimes. So that's true, is it?"

"The Old One said they sometimes feel the confines of the Hells too constraining, and one of their number gets to take a vacation."

"They do that often, do they?"

"Often? Probably, by their standards. But not by ours, I think."

Her pen had not ceased its crazy path across the paper. Then she looked up suddenly, her eyes boring into me.

"I think you know a lot about the Old Ones, from first-hand experience..."

"And from your books and papers, too, of course," I interrupted, "Although I have been to the lower Hells several times before."

"I'm beginning to think I know nothing at all," she fumed.

"I'm sure that's not true. Now," I resumed, holding up a hand to forestall the onslaught of questions I could practically see queuing up behind those beautiful and highly intelligent eyes, "You'll want to know a lot of things."

I stubbed out my cigarette butt and reached for my hat. I had been reminded by the rumbling of my stomach that I hadn't eaten anything very much for nearly twenty-four hours.

"Why don't you let me take you to dinner," I went on, "And I can tell you all about it."

*

The towers and squares of the old university were built on a gently-sloping shelf well above the general level of the cavern floor. Here, the ceiling was low - no more than two hundred feet clear of the tallest of the spires. The pools and weirs of an underground river - carefully tamed into serenity by a masterpiece of Goblin engineering - wended its way between the buildings, filled with tiny slivery fish and dotted with the small boats that students and tourists could hire by the hour. The whole situation exuded a strong sense of peace and solitude, ideal for contemplation and study, which was no doubt what the original designers were striving for.

I walked with Doonira across the stone-paved quadrangle which formed one of the oldest parts of the establishment: unchanged for a thousand years, so it was said, except for the attentions of the gardeners on the trimmed and topiary'd fungi which decorated the urns and beds. On the far side, we made our way out through the main gates, which stood wide open at this hour, where Doonira waved to the ancient porter in his office.

"Good evening, Doctor Quaig," came the porter's voice, "And you too, Mister Gask."

Some people around here have very long memories.

The place we settled on was a rambling bistro on several levels which had been fashionable when I was studying here. It was still popular with the students now, it seemed, thronging with groups

and couples all talking at high volume and spending their parents' money like there was no tomorrow. Despite the crowd, we managed to snag a quiet table in a dark corner where smiling and friendly young waiter - no doubt a moonlighting student hoping to augment his financial position with a good tip - hurried up to present us with menus and to take our order.

I decided upon a bottle of a dry white wine and two glasses; not particularly my taste, but it was one I remembered that Doonira used to like. I also ordered food, enough for three, probably. I had worked up quite an appetite. The booze and comestibles arrived quickly, which was just what I needed; I don't think Doonira was even aware of what was on the table in front of her.

Between mouthfuls, I talked for a long time while being lightly grilled on all sides by the beautiful Doctor Quaig. She ate a little - I made sure of it - and I kept her wineglass topped up while the pages of the notebook on the table slowly filled with scribbles and annotations.

Finally the fountain of questions ran dry. She sat, sunk in quiet thought for a few minutes with her mind's eye elsewhere. I toyed with the last of the wine in my glass and waited patiently. Finally, her attention returned to the here-and-now and her gaze fastened on me.

"You can see I desperately need your help," I said sincerely, "And right away."

"So, you want me to drop everything and follow you on some kind of mission? A quest, probably a wild goose chase? After all these years?" she said suspiciously, adding when I didn't react, "You're serious about this, aren't you?"

I put down the wine glass and leaned forward over the table.

"Yes," I said earnestly, "You know you want to, really. And you would kick yourself for a decade if you didn't let me talk you into it."

Doonira looked at me for a long moment. Perhaps I knew her better than she thought.

"Two hours," she said finally, "To put my affairs in order. Cancel some tutorials, delegate some lectures. Pack a few things."

She picked up her own glass, inspected the contents critically, then drained the last of her wine.

"Then," she said wryly, clearly aware of the irony of the situation, "I'll be ready to run away with you."

*

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised to find that Doonira's lodgings were within the confines of the university itself. She never had been one for the acquisition of homes and property - it was another thing we now had in common. I guessed that as soon as she had been given a tenured post - the kind which traditionally came with the offer of a suite of rooms in the old buildings themselves - she had simply given up the rented furnished lodgings she had previously occupied and moved into the university full-time.

Doonira's rooms were in another old part of the college, all mullioned windows and heavy columns and arched ceilings. It was the kind of room that would make almost any Goblin feel entirely comfortable, surrounded by the reassuring touch of solid stone on every side.

The main room was set up as a spacious study; there would be a bedroom and a bathroom though the doors I could see in the further wall, and Doonira probably took all her meals at High Table in the main hall. Centre stage was a large desk, clearly the desk of one who does a lot of real work. Books and papers were stacked all over the place, not untidily but organised so that everything that was needed came immediately to hand.

Any errant thought I might briefly have entertained about Doonira and I resuming our previous intimacy was swept away by the air of brisk efficiency she adopted as we entered. She sat at the desk and wrote a series of brief notes, sealed them in envelopes with sealing wax and handed them to me to deliver to the night porter at the lodge near the main entrance, for onward distribution in the morning.

I ran the errand. When I returned, Doonira opened the door for me, then disappeared into one of the inner rooms, returning a few minutes later with a stout and practical-looking rucksack. The white labcoat had been replaced by a long coat in some beige fabric and her feet were encased in a pair of robust walking boots with thick soles which probably added an inch to her height.

While I waited, I made some calls myself using Doonira's desk phone, starting with my answering service. Gumshoe had picked up my message and left one of his own, including a phone number and a room number of some motel where, no doubt, he would be staying overnight. I called him directly. There were the usual few minutes of clicks and buzzes from the phone caused by the arcane switching which allowed calls from the Lower Realms to be connected to telephones in the surface world, then the ring-tone started again. It was answered on the second ring.

Doonira seemed just a little startled to hear me speaking English to Gumshoe, but visibly relaxed when she heard me ask

the man to meet me "and another" in a town not thirty minutes drive from his current location, where the closest exit from the Lower Realms was located.

"So we're going to the surface, are we?" she asked when I replaced the receiver on its rest.

"Yes," I affirmed, "I thought we better take a look at the area where the Old One disappeared."

"Good thought," she demurred, "So I better be prepared."

She returned to the inner room momentarily and returned with a floppy hat with a wide brim - ideal for shading the face and hiding the ears - and a serviceable pair of sunglasses. She returned to her desk and stuck her notebook into the rucksack, together with a few oddments taken from the drawers. She closed the rucksack and swung it onto her back, then looked around the study.

"Ready?" I asked, "Got everything?"

"I guess so," she said, "So let's go."

*

We emerged from the exit in the inevitable industrial alleyway without incident about half an hour later. It was dark and silent, but I knew Gumshoe could not be far away. We Goblins have very good noses and I had already caught the scent of him nearby. I took Doonira by the arm and gently guided her along the alley to the cover of the omnipresent dumpster, then took a cautious peek from the mouth of the alley.

Gumshoe had parked his Oldsmobile on the deserted side-street not fifteen feet from the alley. The human PI was on the sidewalk, leaning on the fender and smoking a cigarette with apparent casualness, although in reality I could tell he was keeping a close lookout.

He caught sight of me almost immediately, stubbed out his cigarette and opened the car door. I tugged Doonira and the two of us nipped along the street and through the door into the back seat in the few seconds just before Gumshoe turned and lowered his bulk into the front seat. Unless you were watching very closely, all you would have seen is a bored middle-aged man finish his smoke and settle himself for a long drive.

"So, you two do this kind of sneaking around a lot, do you?" Doonira said snidely in accented but perfectly understandable English.

In the front, Gumshoe emitted a series of muffled grunts which I knew to be his laughter. I grinned widely.

"We sure do," I replied, barely suppressing a laugh myself, "Welcome to the partnership of Gamshack and Gask, Private Investigations."

Gumshoe turned and looked over his shoulder at us.

"Howdy," he said in his best cowboy accent, then added, "Where to, Gask?"

"Get onto highway 50 and head west."

Gumshoe nodded then turned the key in the ignition. The engine started with a roar which made Doonira jump, then he slipped the vast old monster into gear and drew away from the sidewalk smoothly.

"May I introduce Doctor Doonira Quaig," I said over the rumble of the engine and the swish of the tyres, "A university researcher and old acquaintance of mine, with a special interest in the Old Ones."

"A pleasure to meet you, Ma'am," he replied, touching his hat politely.

"Hi," she said, smiling sweetly.

Gumshoe really is quite sharp. Very few humans would have been able to determine Doonira's gender from the clues available. I thought it best to keep quiet about our previous relationship, just to be on the safe side.

*

"This journey will take several hours," I said to Doonira, "I suggest you get some rest."

"I'll be fine, thank you," she said primly.

She did look entirely alert, even excited by the prospect of an adventure. I guess I must have felt like that myself once upon a time.

"Suit yourself."

In truth, I was feeling more than a little tired. I had had almost no sleep the previous night, followed by a long day of rather frustrating study, then a large meal accompanied by half a bottle of wine. Perhaps a little nap would do me no harm.

The next thing I knew Doonira was shaking me.

"Wake up, sleepy-head," she whispered in my ear.

I shook my head to clear it. The car was stationary and there seemed to be a blanket over my head.

"Keep still," Doonira hissed softly, "We're at a gas station in the middle of nowhere. Mister Gamshack is refuelling the car. He wants to know what direction to head in next."

"I need a map."

"Mister Gamshack said he would pick one up when he paid for the gas."

A couple of minutes later, Gumshoe got back into the car, slammed the door and casually tossed a new map book onto the blanket on the back seat. I'm sure he didn't intend to hit me on the head with it. He started the car and pulled out of the gas station. A few moments later, Doonira pulled the blanket off both of us.

"Thanks," I said, "Okay, where are we, exactly?"

Gumshoe gave the name of the little settlement that included the gas station. I unfolded the map and found the town quickly. I spent a much more difficult twenty minutes, helped by Doonira, trying to transpose the features named by the Old Ones - in the Goblin tongue, of course - onto the place-names in English on the map. Finally I got it all sorted out.

"Right," I announced, "There's a right in about fifteen miles we need to take, and then there's an observation point about twenty-five miles after that. We should stop there."

The only response was a surge of acceleration as Gumshoe pressed his foot more firmly on the gas pedal. I stretched up and looked out of the side window. It was a clear cold night, not yet freezing at these altitudes, but it would be higher up. A full moon lit up the mountains and canyons and glaciers brightly; even Gumshoe would be able to find his way by moonlight tonight.

Findo Gask - Dragon Sleuth

Chapter 5 – Deceptive Bends

The three of us stood in the deep snow on the edge of the little parking area, looking along the high valley surrounded by high peaks on all sides. Glaciers clung to the mountains and the valley between was a blanket of unbroken snow shining bright in the moonlight except where some rocky outcrop was swept bare by the winds.

It was a genuinely awe-inspiring sight, if you like that sort of thing; this was of course why there was an officially-marked observation point for lazy tourists just here. In this season, it was also an isolated and desolate place, inhospitable for humans and Goblins alike, and therefore the ideal spot for a huge flying lizard to blow off a little steam.

It felt bitterly cold with the strong breeze blowing in our faces, laden with razor-sharp ice crystals. I held the unfolded map firmly in both hands.

"This is as close to the point the Old One told me about that we'll be able to get to by car," I announced, shouting over the wind and the fluttering of the map.

"Are you suggesting we should walk from here?" Gumshoe yelled back, sounding extremely doubtful and squinting down the valley, "We're not equipped for a hike in this weather."

"Trust me, we're not walking anywhere tonight," I reassured him, "I just wanted us all to take a look at exactly where we are."

I turned around to face the road, the others following suit. The tar-macadam itself was clear enough - the snowplough had been along recently and the snow had stopped falling long before that - but to either side the drifts were a foot or more high. I gestured them closer with my hands; Gumshoe crouched so that we could all bring our heads close together. It was the only easy way to make myself heard.

"That valley must be thirty miles long and half that wide, and there's just this one easily-accessible route in," I explained, "This stretch of road that we're on, maybe no more than two miles long, is the only place where it is possible to see into this valley without flying or walking in. And there are all those twists and turns along the route, cuttings and tunnels in the rock, stands of trees."

A dirty pick-up truck with misted-up windows rumbled past, throwing up a small blizzard of snow with its passage. We lifted our heads to watch it pass. It was the only moving vehicle we had seen in more than an hour.

"So, this is the only place we can easily see into this valley," I added after the noise of the vehicle had subsided, "Which is why we're here now."

"All very interesting," Doonira said pointedly, "But we're freezing our butts off in this wind."

"Right," I agreed, grinning, "Let's get back to the car to get warmed up, and then we can go exploring."

*

We scrambled back into the car. Gumshoe slammed the door behind us, started the engine and set the heating on high. I wriggled my toes in the warm air from the vents for a few minutes then, when I thought I could once again trust my fingers to do what I wanted, I dug deep into one of the many pockets inside my coat.

"So, how about using this?" I said to Doonira.

I presented her with a small and brightly-coloured cardboard box. A human might have mistaken it for a curiously-designed matchbox, but then again a human would have thought the box to be empty when they opened it. In fact, this kind of container is conventionally used to house inexpensive mass-produced glammers which can easily be bought on various open markets.

Doonira took the little box and studied it closely for a few moments. Then she suddenly handed it back to me with an expression that could not have expressed more distaste if I had given her a maggot-ridden corpse.

"That must be illegal!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, well, maybe, perhaps," I said noncommittally, "But you'd agree it might be useful just at the moment."

"What is it?" Gumshoe asked casually from the front seat.

"Just a little glamour that we might use," I replied, "Instead of walking for hours in the snow."

"A black market glamour," Doonira chipped in, sounding outraged.

"But what actually *is* it?" Gumshoe insisted.

I handed the box back to Doonira. She wrinkled her nose, then read something from the cover in the language of the Goblins which Gumshoe probably didn't understand.

"The best translation, I think," she added, sounding a trifle uncertain, "Is 'An Eye in the Sky'. It allows you to see things at a distance, as if you were hovering overhead."

"So we can explore this whole area without actually leaving the warmth and comfort of the back seat," I added smugly.

"Sounds good to me," Gumshoe affirmed, "So how do we make it work?"

"Well, first we all need to be able to see the map."

Gumshoe turned off the engine, then tugged on the front passenger seat so that it tilted forward and twisted his bulk so that he could see the map that I had smoothed out on my lap.

"Will you do the honours," I asked Doonira, "Or shall I?"

She instantly pressed the little box into my hands as if it was a hot toadstool.

"Suit yourself," I said, "I'll do it myself then."

I focussed on a likely-looking area of the map, then opened the box and spoke the activation phrase - a spell, if you like - printed in undisguised runes on the outside. As is the nature of almost all Goblin magic, nobody other than me could hear the words I used and I too forgot them in an instant. The writing on the outside of the box faded as I spoke. All this, of course, is to make sure that such glamours remain single-use, which is very important if you are in the business of manufacturing such items.

As I uttered the last word, a gently-glowing globe appeared with a quiet pop, suspended in mid-air over the paper map. The glow was moonlight; within the sphere we could all make out a view of a snow-covered mountainside.

"Presto," I said ironically, "Let go take a look at this mysterious valley, shall we?"

"Better hurry," Doonira advised, "These cheapo glamours don't last for long."

I threw her a glance. She was right, of course; these magics rarely last for more than a few tens of minutes.

*

"Sing out if you spot anything," I instructed. There was no response: both Gumshoe and Doonira were already bent forward over the glowing globe, squinting at the scene being presented.

Guided by movements of my hands, our point of view traversed the centre of the valley; with Gumshoe, Doonira and myself surrounding the floating eye, we could effectively look in every direction at once. Not that there was much to see: snow fields, pine trees with their boughs bent under the weight of snow, crags and corries outlined in cracked and splintered rock.

"What's that?" Doonira said suddenly, pointing.

I swung the point of view around as quickly as I could so that all of us could see whatever it was that she had spotted. In the shadow of an overhang in the rock face edging one high corrie, we could make out quite clearly some marks in the snow. Marks which would rapidly be obscured by any light snowfall, or even wind-blown drifts.

Just at that moment, a pick-up truck thundered past. It was the *same* pick-up that had driven past not half an hour ago, now travelling in the opposite direction. According to the map, there was no habitation for fifty miles in any direction. Somebody was watching us.

"Gumshoe," I said warily.

"I saw," he replied, "We should get out of here."

Doonira looked from one to the other, confusion on her face. The glamour, which had already started flickering and jerking, suddenly extinguished itself with a pop. That was another expensive magic I wouldn't see again.

"Detective's instincts," I said by way of explanation, "Best not to question it."

Any further explanation was curtailed by the headlights of a vehicle approaching, a heavy four-wheel-drive. This time, it slowed right down and turned into the parking spot, then pulled up right behind us.

"Best to hide, right now," Gumshoe said, "Under the blankets, quick."

Doonira and I scrambled into the foot-wells and pulled the heavy and, it must be said, not particularly clean blanket over us. Gumshoe pushed the front passenger seat back into place with a thump.

I could tell from the sound that it was a different pickup. It turned out to be driven by some human law enforcement officer - a Ranger or Sheriff or something. The engine died but the lights stayed on. I could hear the thump of a car door being opened and shut. We lay on the floor as quiet and still as only a Goblin can be. Gumshoe wound down the window as the policeman approached.

A powerful torch swung over the blanket hiding us and the worn leather of the back seats, then back to concentrate on Gumshoe's face.

"May I see your driving licence, sir?"

"Of course, officer," Gumshoe said in his best talking-to-police-officers voice.

He pulled his licence card from its place in the sun-visor and handed it over for a close inspection in the torchlight.

"A cold night to be out and about, sir."

"On my way to Vegas," Gumshoe said casually, "Just stopped to take a look at the view."

"Going to get colder, sir," the trouper replied, returning Gumshoe's driving licence with a flourish, "I'd keep going if I were you. Wouldn't want to get stuck up here."

As the Ranger spoke, a second vehicle approached. I recognised the sound. It was the pickup we had spotted twice before. At first it sounded as if was going to stop but, the driver having spotted the police vehicle, apparently changed his mind and kept going.

"Good idea," Gumshoe replied to the policeman, "I'll get going immediately."

The officer returned to his vehicle, restarted the engine and pulled out, turning in the direction that the other pickup had come from. Gumshoe wound up the window again then turned the key in the ignition. The engine turned over without firing for a few anxious seconds, then started with a roar.

To be honest, I had hardly been paying attention to what was said. My mind was filled with a memory of the marks in the snow we had glimpsed, high up on an inaccessible ledge in a difficult to reach mountain valley. Marks that looked suspiciously like those which might be made by the claws of a large flying lizard.

*

It took Gumshoe a minute or two of spinning tyres and slithering sideways to get the Oldsmobile back onto the cleared tarmac. Finally, we set off in the direction in which we had been travelling previously - performing a U-turn would have been difficult at best - which was the opposite direction to that which the trooper in his four-wheel-drive had taken.

"All clear now," Gumshoe muttered, glancing back over his shoulder.

Doonira and I burrowed our way out from under the heavy blanket and sat on the cold leather seats.

"Did you see those marks in the snow?" I asked.

"Yes," Gumshoe replied, "but what were they?"

"They were the footprints of an Old One," Doonira said, with all the authority of a university academic who had been studying this subject for a hundred years, "One walking, not landing after flying."

"Yes, that's what I thought," I agreed amiably, "And in this weather they couldn't have been there long."

"So the Old One is still in the valley then?" Gumshoe asked, squinting through the dark at the road ahead.

"So it seems," I replied, "We may have solved the mystery of the location of the missing Dragon" - Doonira snorted derisively at my use of the word - "but we seem to have uncovered a larger problem. Why couldn't the other Old Ones find their missing compatriot?"

Gumshoe didn't answer. He was concentrating on the driving. The headlights picked out the two-lane blacktop between the snow-banks left by the plough. The road twisted and turned as it rose up to the edge of the valley, then descended in swooping hairpins on the other side. At least the snow should thin as we got lower, I thought.

"We've got company," Gumshoe said sharply.

I stretched up and looked out of the back windows. We were being followed by a vehicle with its headlights on full beam. It had another bank of lights at roof level, also blazing brightly. It was difficult to tell, but it could easily have been the pick-up truck which had passed us several times already.

At most times, and in most places, the old but powerful car would have given almost anything on four wheels a run for their money, especially with Gumshoe at the helm. But here and in this weather, it was all he could do to keep the vehicle on the tarmac. We were creeping along, keeping the speed low on the downhill sections for fear for skidding out of control into a snow-bank.

"We're not going to be able to outrun them," Gumshoe warned.

"Just keep going," I said grimly while I unlimbered the large automatic I keep holstered under my coat.

Doonira's eyes grew wide when she caught sight of the weapon, then her eyes narrowed as she watched me check the ammunition - something I have been trained to do entirely automatically.

"You do know how to use that thing?" she asked quizzically.

"Yes," I replied, not taking my sunglasses off the truck tailing us, "And I've got a licence for it too."

As far as I could see, the vehicle behind was just keeping pace with us; not attempting to catch up, but seemingly content to follow at a distance which made a shot from a handgun rather unlikely to hit. Not that I intended to open fire just yet. There could be an entirely innocent explanation, although none was occurring to be at the moment.

As it happened, the truck following us didn't need to catch up with us. It was just there to make sure we didn't turn around. A few miles further on, somebody had set up a roadblock. There was nowhere for us to go.

Findo Gask - Dragon Sleuth

Chapter 6 – Combined Forces

Or, more precisely, there was nowhere for Gumshoe and his beloved Oldsmobile to go. Goblins, especially ones experienced in the ways of the surface world like me, always have a few options up our sleeves.

The presence of a roadblock was a worrying development, even though it was entirely a human affair. I could tell this from the profusion of powerful and brightly-coloured lights. It was manned, it was becoming obvious, by an eclectic collection of agents from a variety of law enforcement forces. The blockage itself was formed from an equally esoteric assortment of vehicles, including at least one those black unmarked vehicles with obscured windows where it is best not to enquire too closely exactly what agency the unsmiling personnel actually represent.

"Get your bag," I instructed Doonira, "Time to bail out."

She nodded in quick understanding, then pulled together her pack. I stuffed the folded map into one of the inside pockets of my coat. I might need that again soon.

Gumshoe also knew what I was planning. There were far too many humans around for any disguise to be effective for long. And hiding in the car wasn't an option either; any serious search stood a good chance of locating one of us regardless of whatever glamour we might employ. Doonira and I had to get out of the car.

Goblins are instinctively good at hiding, and at moving quickly and silently in the darkness. In so many human myths, we are famous for it. Besides, I had in my pockets certain glammers which are particularly effective against observation by humans. I wouldn't have been surprised if Doonira also had a few useful little magics in her rucksack either.

"When I get clear, I'll wait on the other side," Gumshoe muttered, barely moving his mouth, "Park up as close as I can. Somewhere discreet. Until it gets light."

"Thanks. But if they pull you, arrest you," I said sincerely, "I'm not going to be able to help much. At least immediately."

"Don't worry about me," Gumshoe said, nodding sagely, "There's too many of them for any serious bending of the rules."

My paperwork's good, up to date. So we'll be in touch. The usual methods. Okay?"

Generally, Gumshoe could look after himself. A grown man and an experienced PI to boot. I should not have to worry too much about him. But there was so much manpower deployed here, which could mean one of two things: something entirely unrelated and just a coincidence. Or, some human with some influence had taken an interest. I don't believe in coincidences.

"Okay."

Gumshoe slowed his vehicle steadily, giving every impression he was driving extra cautiously given the weather conditions. He pulled up thirty yards short of the roadblock, tucked inelegantly into a drift at the side of the road just where a stand of trees came within ten yards of the kerb. The pickup behind us also slowed, keeping well back, and stopped when we did.

Gumshoe killed the engine. The headlights went out as the engine died. Just as the lights dimmed away to nothing, I activated a cheap invisibility glamour I had pulled from my pocket. I'd already given a second one to Doonira. We were also holding hands; all very romantic, I'm sure, but just at the moment, this was simply to avoid losing each other when we couldn't see one another.

Gumshoe got out of the car slowly, leaving the door open for just long enough for two Goblins to sneak out at his feet. He shrugged up his overcoat collar, adjusted his hat so that the wind didn't whip it away, then slammed the door closed. Keeping his hands clearly in sight - a sensible precaution in the presence of so many trigger-happy cops - he walked slowly towards the lights.

*

I wasn't in a position to see what happened to Gumshoe after that. I was too busy trying to avoid leaving hard-to-explain marks in the snow. Much later, he would tell me about what happened, at some considerable length - and volume, too.

Gumshoe had been around in the law enforcement world for a long time. True, us private investigators - even those who were once police officers - are regarded as the lowest of the low, residing somewhere below the bottom rung on the scale. But PIs are still recognised as one of the White Hats, one of the Good Guys. And there's a certain shared camaraderie in the trade: the way coppers talk, the jargon and slang they all use, the shared acquaintances and similar experiences, all make it very quickly clear who is, and who is not, one of the brotherhood.

So Gumshoe quite reasonably expected to be recognised for what he was: an experienced agent of the law. Once his formal credentials had been rapidly established - he had all kinds of documents, certificates and licences in his wallet - he expected he could spend some time shooting the breeze with the boys and, from snippets of gossip here and casual chit-chat there, glean some idea of what was really going on.

The reality was nothing like that. Even though Gumshoe approached quite openly and calmly in the glare of the headlights, he was immediately the focus of undivided attention of several dozen armed policemen, not to mention the business end of their firearms.

A voice rang out: "Stop right there!"

Gumshoe complied. Sensible people tend to do this when a small arsenal of weapons are being aimed in their direction.

"Lay down on the ground. Now!"

He lowered himself slowly to the ground and spread out, face down right in the middle of the icy tarmac.

A couple of burly uniformed types rushed up; he couldn't make out any details from his prone position, especially with the lights in his eyes. He was professionally cuffed and patted down, and his automatic was taken from him. As he put it later, it was an especially fine weapon, although not particularly new, and it was one that he would resent not being returned to him.

With his hands handcuffed behind his back, Gumshoe was bundled into the back of an unmarked car and whisked away. His attempts to ask questions like: "what's going on?" and "why are you arresting me?" were met with polite but icy silence, and he soon took the hint and shut up. Whatever was going on would take time to make itself clear.

It wasn't a legal arrest, he noted, with no declaration of his rights or any of the usual form of words. Whoever was directing this operation had no interest in complying with the law of the land in any detail. But they seemed to be convinced that Gumshoe was the one they were looking for, although for what crime they wouldn't say, and his Private Investigator instincts gave no clue.

The thing that most struck Gumshoe as he looked around at the assorted representatives of law and order; to a man, they were tight-lipped and wide-eyed, almost as if they were terrified. Everyone watched him warily all the time, as if they expected he would suddenly sprout wings and fly away, or metamorphose into some ghastly monster and bite their faces off.

*

Doonira and I made the cover of the trees. Nobody shouted, nobody shone a light in our direction, nobody shot at us; whatever unexpected footprints we left behind would be obscured by drifting snow soon enough. A near-perfect getaway. Or so I thought.

As soon as we were well out of sight of the road, we turned downhill, heading in the same direction as the road and parallel to it. It was much easier going under the shelter of the trees: the snow cover was thinner and more compacted, and we were able to make steady progress.

"Where are we going?" Doonira hissed.

It's always slightly disconcerting to be talking to a person who you know is right next to you, where you can feel their hand in yours, but you just can't see them. This wouldn't have been the first time I had attempted this feat, but somehow it never felt entirely natural. I guess I rely on non-verbal clues in social interactions much more than I realise.

I turned in what I thought was her direction.

"We've got a few options," I whispered, "Maybe we can regroup with my friend Gamshack. He's pretty reliable. We'll need to keep going in this direction to do that."

"But what if he's not there? If we can't find him?"

It was a good question. But we Goblins are tougher creatures than most humans: less sensitive to extremes of heat and cold, although we prefer cooler rather than warmer conditions as a rule. We can walk for days on end, go without food for a long time - although personally I very much prefer not to, thank you very much - and I, at least, was equipped with a variety of spells and glamours which would variously direct, protect and conceal us both.

"We'll have to walk for a while," I told her, "To the nearest town, which is also in this direction."

Which is where we would find, concealed under the graffiti that litters urban areas in the surface world, an entrance to the Lower Realms.

"How far is that?"

I still had the map that Gumshoe procured in my possession, although I had long since memorised most of the salient features.

"Two nights," I replied, "We'll have to rest up during the day, get some sleep."

"Tedious," Doonira said laconically. She didn't seem particularly fazed by this possibility. I was beginning to suspect that she had

spent a certain amount of time on the surface, and that she had engaged in all sorts of expeditions in search of evidence as to the behaviour of the Old Ones.

Just at that moment, the invisibility glamour that had surrounded me extinguished itself with a soft pop, followed a few seconds later by the concealment around Doonira. These cheap magics never last very long. But it wasn't a problem. By now, we were miles away from the roadblock and any sign of human activity, and all we had to worry about, I thought, was a long walk. We had nothing better to do than set off downhill.

Over the years, my instincts for survival have been honed on a myriad of city streets and underground pathways. Perhaps they were not quite as sharp as they might be in the rather alien landscape we were walking through just at the moment. The winter wonderland of snow and fir trees deadened all sounds around us, other than the irregular shift of ice on the branches and the occasional gust of wind.

Yet I was beginning to feel a prickling on the back of my neck. I glanced around, as cautiously as I could, using all the tricks I had learned over the years. Nothing to see anywhere. Still, I was convinced that eyes, and other more occult senses, were tracking us through the silent frozen forest. Wise old eyes, attached to a body which knew how to move as stealthily as I did.

I touched Doonira on the arm to attract her attention, then beckoned her close.

"We're being followed," I said grimly.

*

"Yes," Doonira said warily, "I thought so too."

"And about time."

The voice came from an indistinct figure who had just emerged from behind a tree a dozen yards away. It was a Goblin, I was immediately sure, one warmly dressed in an oversized thick Parka which looked as if it had been made for a human child. The hood was up, partially obscuring his face but leaving plenty of room inside for his ears. He wore no gloves and a pair of serviceable Goblin-made boots could just be seen below the lower rim of the coat. He carried no pack, either.

"Do you have to point that thing at me?" he added, sounding mildly peeved.

At the first sound of his voice, I had instinctively pulled my automatic from its holster under my coat and I was now pointing it unwaveringly at the newcomer. His hands were in plain sight and

quite empty, and there was no sign of anybody else around. I sighed, clicked the safety back on and returned the gun to its hiding-place.

"Who are you?" I demanded, "And what are you doing out here?"

"I've been following you even since you got out of that car," he replied smugly, "Whatever do you think you're doing associating with humans like that?"

"I think *some* humans can be trusted," I said cautiously, "At least sometimes."

"Maybe," he snorted, sounding amused.

The stranger made his way across the snow to where we were standing, then flicked down the fur-trimmed edge of his anorak. I could now see he was old, even by Goblin standards; wizened and tiny, although with the bright gleam of endless enthusiasm in his pale grey eyes.

"I know you," Doonira said suddenly, her eyes narrowing.

"You do?" I said, puzzled, "How so?"

"The good Doctor Quaig," the other Goblin interjected, sketching a bow ironically, "Pleased to meet you again."

"It was at a conference, at the University, on the social habits of the Old Ones," she said, studying him closely, "After my presentation, you buttonholed me. Told me I was wrong, in no uncertain terms. You were very vocal about it. Wouldn't leave me alone."

She turned to me.

"He's an amateur," she continued dismissively, "A dragon stalker." She didn't add, he's a nutcase.

"Bragrum, at your service," he said, bowing in my direction this time and smiling sardonically, "And I've been studying the Old Ones for longer than either of you have been alive."

"But what are you doing wandering around in this wilderness?" I demanded.

"Didn't you know?" he said with a maniacal grin on his face, "Here be Dragons."

Findo Gask - Dragon Sleuth

Chapter 7 – Force of Nature

"Well, yes," Doonira said irritably, "We know that. But how do *you* know?"

"I've been watching, always watching," Bragrum replied mysteriously, "I've seen things you can't imagine. Or are prepared to accept, maybe."

His bright eyes twinkled enigmatically from their setting in the folds of ancient skin of his face. Then he straightened up, rubbed his hands together and looked around at the snow-covered forest, and went on in a more conversational tone: "But it's damn cold out here. Why don't we go and chat somewhere warmer?"

I glanced quizzically at Doonira, who just shrugged. It seemed she was prepared to trust this oddball, at least enough for the moment.

"Fine," I said, "Lead on."

The wizened oldster flicked his hood back over his head and turned on his heel without another word. Doonira and I hastened to follow him. Despite his age, he set a fast pace, moving swiftly in a direction not very divergent from the one I would have picked anyway. Not that there was much of a choice of route. This strip of forest was bordered on one side by the road and the steep cliff which had been formed when the route was hacked and blasted through the mountains, and on the other by exposed snowfields and steep drops.

After twenty minutes our mismatched party reached a point where the strip of woodland narrowed and we drew close to the road again. For a few moments, I thought we would have to expose ourselves to the risk of observation, although we hadn't heard any moving vehicles for quite some time. But Bragrum directed us to a culvert, human made, that led under the roadway. It was a circular tunnel of reinforced concrete intended as a storm drain but in this season was quite dry apart from a little wind-blown snow.

On the other side, we found ourselves in a narrow valley with steep sides of broken rock, which would be a foaming rush of water when the thaw came but now just treacherously slippery with ice. I could see that other feet - other Goblin feet, I should make clear - had been here before, although I suspect few humans would have

spotted the signs. To the trained eye, there were scrapes plainly visible on the ice at intervals that would correspond to a short-legged gait and occasional scuff marks in the snow which had not been entirely obscured by a careful traveller.

So I was not at all surprised when Bragrum approached a flat and suspiciously smooth-looking vertical rock face set half-way up the side of the little valley. As we got closer, he waved casually, no doubt activating the secret magic that clung to the opening as a disguise. The rock face melted in front of us, to be replaced by a narrow irregular opening that looked, ironically, rather more natural than the concealment that had preceded it.

In single file, we followed Bragrum. There was just enough room for a Goblin to pass through; my size meant that it was just a bit tight for a moment. But few humans - or at least adults - could have made their way inside without the aid of explosives or power tools.

Once within, we were presented with a scene that my great-grandmother would have found entirely familiar. It was very much a traditional Goblin homestead; all a bit old-fashioned by modern standards - that is, the standards of the last few hundred years - but nevertheless quite comfortable, especially compared with the snowbound woodlands outside.

There was a small fireplace built of roughly-mortared stone blocks - Goblins are nervous in the presence of fire more than enough to light a cigarette or lightly cook a meal - but big enough to cast warmth and light throughout the rocky cave. A bedroll was folded neatly on a low pallet along one wall, and a stout chest bound with iron reinforcements was set against another. Between them, a folding chair had been placed so that the occupant could keep his feet warm on one of several boulders that emerged from the floor in front of the fire.

I looked around smiling wryly. I sat down heavily on one of the fire-warmed rocks and drew a half-empty cigarette packet from my coat pocket. I loosened one and fumbled it to my lips, then offered the packet to Bragrum. He accepted one, which he then lit with a splinter from the fireplace. I used a match from a half-used matchbook I picked up at some sleazy bar - I forget exactly where.

Bragrum looked around proprietarily.

"Welcome to my humble abode."

*

I glanced around at Doonira. She was standing in the entrance, taking in the scene with a quizzical look on her face while I was busily making myself at home.

"Well, this is all very cosy," she said finally, "How long have you been staying here?"

"Off and on, about six months," Bragrum replied vaguely, adding, "Come in, come in, make yourself comfortable."

He emphasised his welcome by brushing some miniscule amount of dust off the canvas seat of the folding chair and looking encouragingly at Doonira. She took the hint. As she was settling herself, she caught my eye with a puzzled expression. She was right to be unsettled: the dragon-stalker had been hanging around for half a year, he claimed, but there had only been a missing dragon in the vicinity for a few weeks. Was he suffering from some undiagnosed case of premonition?

In case you don't know, premonition is regarded as a disease and seems to be an occupational hazard for some Goblins. Predicting the future, to a limited extent, is perfectly feasible with the inexpensive glamours available to denizens of the Lower Realms, and some of us find ourselves to be naturally adept even in the absence of specific commercial magic. The Old Ones are reputed to have even more abilities in this area, of course.

For well-defined futures - like those indicated by the roll of a dice - these predictive capabilities work well. The trouble is that, unless the outcomes are rigidly constrained, the user of such a spell is likely to sense a shifting fog of probabilities and maybes, different from moment to moment. And, if you have a predilection for premonition, you don't need a glamour; this murky knowledge can fill your head day and night with dark images and obtuse possibilities. Incessantly, without surcease. It is, unsurprisingly, a condition that can lead to madness, an insanity from which few recover.

Still, Bragrum seemed to be functioning at a social and intellectual level - if a trifle intense, even manic on occasions - and was far from being a gibbering wreck. He seemed to have his condition under control, more or less. I wasn't too worried. At least for the moment.

"Six months? So you knew that one of the Old Ones would hide hereabouts?" I asked gently.

"Of course," he replied, looking mildly affronted, "But this is not an original insight. Even the humans have sensed it. Why else would this area have been known for centuries as *Valle los Dragones*?"

He was right, of course. I had spotted that name on the map that Gumshoe had bought. But I had considered it just a name, until the meaning of the Spanish phrase had been pointed out to me.

"And you've been watching the Old One?" Doonira interjected, "Recently?"

Bragrum turned in her direction, his eyes gleaming with an interior fire.

"That is my life's purpose," he replied airily, "It's what I do. And, yes, there is an Old One is close by. Perhaps closer than you imagine."

The combination of the glamour which protected the entrance - which had reactivated itself automatically after we had entered - and the rawhide curtain hanging in front of it meant that the little cave was warm and comfy enough. It would be entirely possible to live here even in the depths of winter. But there was still a draft - one which didn't seem to originate with the doorway, but appeared to emanate from somewhere deeper in the hillside, from someplace hidden in the gloom in the darkest recesses.

"So you could get us closer to the Old One?" I asked, affecting a casualness I did not really feel. Doonira was watching the old Goblin with an unwavering stare.

"I could," Bragrum said, returning Doonira's gaze challengingly, "But first I need to return to a debate we were having last time we met. Do you remember?"

She looked away, clearly puzzled. He shook his head, dismayed.

"You presented a paper," he said, his voice suddenly low and earnest, his eyes still boring into Doonira, "You claimed that the Old Ones had been in existence since the dawn of time, and that they must therefore be immortal. That the Old Ones live forever."

Her face wrinkled even more as she tried to recall.

"I don't remember. But it's obviously true, isn't it?" she answered eventually.

"Oh no," Bragrum said with another sad shake of his head, "They live for a very long time, but they do eventually die of old age. And they can be killed too."

"Yes, that's true," I interjected, "An Old One told me so himself."

*

Doonira swung herself around to glare at me angrily.

"Why didn't you tell me this?" she fumed.

"You didn't ask," I replied, shrugging my shoulders, "You did ask loads of questions, remember? I could barely keep up with answering them."

"You didn't question your own assumptions, did you?" Bragrum interjected, looking at Doonira shrewdly, "So much for the professional academic's disinterested viewpoint, then."

Doonira subsided with a modicum of good grace. It took a surprisingly short amount of time. Maybe she was learning just a little. Then something occurred to her – reoccurred, I should say.

"You said the missing Old One was close," she said to Bragrum urgently, her eyes bright with interest and some other emotion I couldn't immediately identify, "Can you get me close to him, let me see him?"

"The Old One has been expecting you," he replied mysteriously, "I can do better still. I can take you to the Old One's personal presence. In fact, I've been specifically..." - he hesitated for a second - "... *requested* to do just that."

Well, what are we hanging around for?" she said, standing up and swinging her pack onto her back with great gusto, "Let's get going!"

Without waiting for either of us to react, she stepped over to the entrance we had all used earlier. I was more canny. I glanced at Bragrum, who winked at me with a mischievous grin on his face, then nodded in the direction of the dark recess at the back of the cave from whence came a faint draft, the movement of air I had noticed earlier. He stepped confidently into the darkness while I struggled to my feet and screwed my hat back on my head.

"Come along, Doctor Quaig," Bragrum's head re-appeared just as she reached the heavy curtain, "It's much quicker this way."

"What?" she said, spinning on her heel.

"This way, please," Bragrum reiterated, beckoning her over, "More direct."

Doonira looked irritated again; she was good at that look and I'm sure that whole generations of students have quailed when frowned at in just that way in tutorials. Bragrum was clearly made of sterner stuff. He ignored the eyeball daggers with noticeable aplomb and beckoned again in a cheery fashion. Doonira stomped over, wisely saying nothing, and following the wizened old Goblin into the darkness. Grinning with huge amusement on the side of my face I hoped neither could see, I followed them both into a narrow dark tunnel.

I was expecting a second exit to a different part of the mountainside, in a place equally well concealed from any casual observers. No Goblin likes to be in a safe place with only one exit. You might need to get away in a hurry. That's just common sense. But the dark passageway - merely somewhat dim once my eyes had adjusted to the gloom - seemed to lead down rather than up, deeper into the mountains above us.

After ten minutes of brisk walking, I could make out a brighter light ahead. A few moments later, the uneven tunnel opened out into a vast cavern, many miles across. We came to a standstill on a ledge high up on the side, closer - if I could be sure of my judgement - to the roof than the floor. It was warm, much warmer than outside or even Bragrum's hideaway, and dimly red-lit as if by glowing rocks. It was an environment I recognised; it was exactly like the deep Hells where I had encountered the Old One on several previous occasions.

Bragrum turned to Doonira, who was looking around with a dazed expression on her face, and made a theatrical bow.

"Welcome to Hell," he said melodramatically.

*

"Well, one of the Hells," I added laconically.

"It's incredible," Doonira breathed, still trying to take it all in, her gaze darting here and there like a child in a toyshop, "It's like nothing I've ever imagined."

"Strange, though," I said to Bragrum, "I thought that the Old Ones didn't reside this close to the surface."

Bragrum looked at me shrewdly.

"Normally, that's true," he answered carefully, "But this is a special case, very special. I think you'll see shortly there's a particular reason for that, too."

We were standing on a wide ledge of smooth grey stone which appeared to spiral its way up and down the inside of the cavern. Presumably this was a feature to assist any poor unfortunate flightless creatures who happened upon this particular locality. It looked like we were in for another long walk, but at least this one would be warm and dry.

Doonira's eye finally alighted on one of the many illuminated red patches that decorated the walls. This one was eight feet high and half that wide, set just above the level we were standing on and seamless with the dark grey rock that lay to either side. It looked exactly as if a section of the surface had somehow been

made as transparent as glass, a window to a red-hot furnace of unimaginable magnitude.

She hurried over and rested her hand on the glowing stone surface.

"Barely warm," she announced, "But it is supposed to be a conduit to the centre of the earth."

I doubted that was literally true, although the source of the light was reputed to be the molten magma much deeper in the planet. Then she added, before either Bragrum or I could make a remark, "Just as all the reports say. Red light but almost no heat. But how do they do it?"

I had no answer. I doubt I was supposed to have one.

Bragrum seemed anxious to move on. He looked like a Goblin with an agenda, or at least a timetable.

"This way," he called to Doonira, "Won't take long."

She rejoined us reluctantly. The three of us set off in the direction which would eventually put us on the floor of the cavern. After a few seconds, the apparently solid floor under our feet started to move, sideways, so smoothly that I did not immediately notice. Bragrum held up his hand and we stopped walking; the movement of the floor accelerated so that the wind of our passage whistled past our ears. I put up one hand to hold my hat on my head.

"Hold on tight," Bragrum called over the noise, "This'll only take a few minutes."

He had obviously done this trip before. It looked like another example of the Old Ones' facility with fluid masonry. Very clever. But at least we got to see quite a lot of the cavern as we travelled. Not that there was a lot to see. The walls were irregular, and marked with shallow alcoves here and there; the glowing red patches were frequent enough to give plenty of light; the shelf with its mysterious moving floor continued steadily downwards.

We came to a halt right at the very bottom of the cavern. A smooth floor of pale grey lay to one side of us, gently dished and marked with the faintest of lines in vast unfathomable patterns reaching to the distant walls. To the other, an opening in the wall towering over our head, high enough to admit even the largest of the Old Ones.

A voice boomed from the doorway: "Welcome."

Findo Gask - Dragon Sleuth

Chapter 8 – Maternal Instinct

I had been half-expecting this eventuality, but it still made me jump. The Goblin tongue is a rich and immensely expressive edifice, full of sonorous complexities and subsonic tonalities. From the vast mouth and keen intelligence of an Old One, even our own language is transformed from everyday richness of expression into a towering and elaborate gothic construction of implicit references and implied commands.

So there was no way that any of us could not obey the summons implied in that single word. As one, we turned and walked into the open doorway without conscious thought, at least on my part. It was as if my legs were suddenly under the control of another. I shook my head and the feeling of remote control disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. I still wasn't going to walk in any other direction, mind you.

Inside the doorway was a large open space, roughly circular. It was not like the immense chamber outside, of course, or even one of the Goblin caverns, but still large enough to be comfortable for a creature that could fly. The walls and ceiling were of the same irregular stone as the cave outside, with red glowing patches dotted about irregularly. The floor was glassy smooth and pale, almost white in colour with an almost imperceptible translucency that hinted at some vast movement within, but didn't quite reveal it, and formed into a shallow bowl.

In the exact centre of the floor, as far as I could tell, was a dome perhaps a hundred feet across and half that high, a hemisphere apparently of the same material as the floor and with a raised dais merged seamlessly at one side. A large creature was lying on the platform; in the flickering red light, we caught our first glimpse of the missing Old One. It was curled up like a cat, with its tail wrapped around its haunches and its wings folded at its sides. Only its vast head showed any sign of movement and its alert eyes watched the three of us as we approached.

From my very limited experience, the Old Ones preferred a raised platform on which to rest, the rock subtly formed underneath them to align with their own contours, in the way that the very best mattresses formed themselves to bodily curves. This was an example of their astonishing ability in the arcane skill of

fluid masonry; any of their kind could cause solid rock to soften and flow to form plastic shapes at their command.

Why they like to rest on such a platform is a very different question. It's not like they need the extra height to look down on mere Goblins. Every Old One I had encountered was fifty feet or more from nose to tail, with a long and sinuous neck that would allow it to look down on almost any creature on or under the surface. Perhaps they just don't like the drafts.

There is no doubt that the Old Ones are always an awesome sight to behold. They are said to be difficult to tell apart, at least to Goblin eyes. This one might have been slightly smaller than the other one - or ones - I had encountered. The true colour of its scales was difficult to determine, glowing as they were in shades of red reflected from the walls. The curve of its neck and the set of its haunches might have been a little different from what I remembered. I couldn't be sure.

*

I stopped at what I considered a prudent distance, but neither Bragrum nor Doonira took the hint. Instead they both walked right up to the plinth, the height of which put the Old One's powerful claws about at the level of their noses. I shrugged and joined them. If the Old One really did want to cause us harm, a few extra feet of separation wasn't going to make much difference.

"Welcome," the voice repeated, more quietly this time, "Welcome to three seekers after truths, each in their own way."

It is considered very hard to hide things from the Old Ones and definitely best not to try. The standard advice is to listen carefully to any wise words cast in your direction, and to think carefully and speak politely when asking a question. Somehow I find that advice extremely difficult to stick to.

The vast head swivelled and two large eyes each reflecting the fiery red from the cavern walls focussed on Doonira.

"Doctor Quaig, the academic, her nose long since stuck in books and papers, now unexpectedly travelling the worlds again seeking an experience beyond her own library, if not her own imagination."

Doonira seemed taken aback by the perspicacious characterisations. She hung her head sadly.

The penetrating gaze turned to the wizened little Goblin at my side.

"Bragrum, the vagrant, always travelling the highways and byways above, and the tunnels and transits below, on a quest for

evidence, proof for his radical views and arcane opinions. But somehow never quite finding it."

Bragrum was unmoved. His own eyes glowed with an inner conviction, or maybe barely-restrained madness.

Finally, the Old One's attention rested on me.

"And Findo Gask, the reluctant detective," it said with a snort accompanied with a puff of smoke from its nostrils, "A cynical observer detached from the world below and unrecognised in the one above, and once again charged with a mission he does not fully understand."

All too accurate, I considered. The Old Ones were reputed to be good at this kind of thing. Then again, I almost always fail to understand exactly what is required when I am first engaged, my clients being invariably duplicitous in one way or another.

"And do you have a name?" Doonira demanded, suddenly leaning forward and showing just a little of her normal spikiness.

In my few fleeting acquaintance with the Old Ones, I had never asked this question. Everything I had heard suggested that their names were not to be shared with mere Goblins, and were likely to be angered by the enquiry. I stiffened instinctively. But I needn't have worried. The Old One's mouth bent into an expression that I was forced to think of as a smile, for all that it appeared on the face of a fifty-foot winged fire-breathing monster.

"My name is..." the Old One said, looking suddenly desperately sad.

Then followed ten seconds of soft susurrations, half-felt, half-heard echoes and fleeting sensations, pressures on nerve endings somehow not entirely connected to any one of the conventional senses. And with it came an aching sense of age, and power, and loss - and hope.

"But you can call me Madonna," the Old One added in the Goblin tongue.

The clockwork in my head started ticking furiously at that remark. Bragrum just nodded wisely. Doonira didn't seem to have noticed anything.

"And what is it you seek?" I asked brusquely, adding with a flash of insight, "You are a seeker too, are you not?"

Again, the Old One snorted, the sad eyes rolled and the face twisted. The Old One was laughing.

"Oh, I am a criminal, an outcast, or at least in self-imposed exile," it replied, "And what I seek is a quiet place to hatch my eggs and bring up my children."

*

The loudest sound at that second was Doonira taking a sudden sharp intake of breath, followed immediately by the clapping of her hand to her mouth. By contrast, Bragrum was delighted, even jubilant.

"I knew it," he cried, practically dancing a jig on the spot, "The Old Ones live and die like everything and everybody else."

Doonira was enough of a scientist to know how to give in gracefully when her argument was demolished. Or at least unwilling to be further embarrassed in this company.

"And so you breed your young to take their place, in the course of time," she said slowly, thoughtfully.

The Old One looked on impassively at this exchange, its - *her* - head swinging from side to side minutely as she followed the conversation.

"All this is true," Madonna said, "Surely you could not really have thought otherwise?"

Doonira was still stunned, frantically rearranging her mental world view to take into account what she had so suddenly been presented with. She didn't answer immediately.

My own reaction, unvoiced at this point, was one of frustration with my client. The Old One had been keeping things from me. Really important things. Things that would have made a difference. He must have known Madonna's gender. All he had to do was use the feminine personal pronoun, just once. But the thing I was really uncertain about was: whether it was an accidental oversight - maybe these things are not very important to the Old Ones - or perhaps it was deliberate. And, if it was the latter, then somebody was playing games. Just another thing I would have to work out eventually.

After a minute or so, Doonira's curiosity, something I knew she had in abundance, came once again to the fore. Even under Madonna's calm gaze, watching our various reactions with keen intelligence and the wisdom of experience measured in aeons, Doonira managed to formulate her thoughts into a question, one which was also about to percolate out of my head and, I suspected, Bragrum's as well.

"Madame Madonna, with your permission, could we see your eggs?" she asked, her eyes shining with emotion.

The Old One brought her head down level with Doonira, who stepped back half a pace. Madonna's nostrils quivered inches from Doctor Quaig's face.

"My clutch," Madonna said slowly, "Are as precious to me as life itself. And I will protect them with every power I have at my disposal. Are you still sure you want to see them?"

Doonira held up her chin defiantly.

"I do," she replied, "Quite definitely. As a scientist, I would very much like the opportunity to study your clutch, from a suitable distance, of course."

"As would I," said Bragrum respectfully, standing up straight and suddenly looking sober and serious.

I just nodded, not trusting myself to say anything just at the moment.

Apparently satisfied, Madonna swivelled her head to look directly at the great eggshell-white hemisphere next to her roost. She said nothing, made no movement or gesture that I could detect, but the opaque surface of the dome suddenly faded to almost transparent, with just a few reflected highlights to show that some protective enclosure was still present.

What was visible inside the transparent dome was utterly astonishing.

*

Without conscious thought - at least on my part - all three of us rushed over to the now near-invisible hemisphere. There was a moment's pause out of a re-emergent instinct for self-preservation that caused us to turn and check Madonna's reaction. She seemed unperturbed; presumably she was quietly confident that the resistance of the shield was proof against anything a few puny Goblins might try. We pressed our noses to the glass like children outside a sweetshop.

Within the protective casing were seven eggs: not oval eggshells like that of a chicken but almost spherical in shape. Each was two or so feet in diameter, each was set in its own individual shallow depression in the floor, and each depression was lined with one of the red-tinged windows into the deep fires far below us all.

The shells themselves were translucent, flecked with dark speckles and veined delicately. Being lit from below, it was possible to see indistinct dark shapes twisting intermittently within, and I could even see the occasional distortion of the soft leathery container caused by a particularly energetic movement.

Doonira pressed her face to the transparent protection over the nest - there was no other adequate word to describe the enclosure - and stared with intense fascination, her eyes wide and shining with emotion, almost in a state of rapture. Bragrum and I stood one either side, equally engrossed. The flickering red light and the movement inside the eggs were hypnotic. Somehow we just could not tear our eyes away.

I have no idea how long we stood there, transfixed. A minute or an eternity later, we jerked backwards when one of the eggs rocked in place, the unexpected violence of the movement dragging us back to what passed as reality hereabouts.

"They have been called 'Living Jewels'," Madonna said gently, adding more softly as if speaking only to herself, "Although I haven't heard that particular turn of phrase for a very long time."

Again, there was no movement, no gesture from the Old One, but the transparent cover misted up, exactly as if a thin film of milk had been poured over it from a hidden source at the top. The clouding thickened quicker than it takes to explain it, swiftly returning it to the smooth opaque condition which we had first experienced.

There was a long moment of silent contemplation, broken eventually by Doonira.

"When will they hatch?"

The academic Doctor Quaig seemed determined to push the bounds of politeness - long regarded as important in dealings with the Old Ones - to the absolute limit in the interests of scientific enquiry. Or whatever it was that drive her. But Madonna seemed inclined to humour us. Her gaze twisted towards the ceiling for a second, then turned back to face us all with that expression on her face I had previously and tentatively associated with smiling.

"Our young grow quickly, for all that we live a long time," the Old Ones said patiently, "Now the eldest of my children tells me she will be ready to break out of her shell in a little over three days time."

"You can talk to them already?" Doonira asked breathlessly, already ready with a follow-up question.

"Oh yes," Madonna said, sounding genuinely surprised, "A few days after I laid the eggs, I was already able to sense the new minds forming in their shells. Now all of them are fully awake, and I have been teaching them the basic tenets of our existence."

"Wonderful!" Doonira gushed. Bragrum's grin widened still further.

"That it is, deeply so," Madonna said, raising her voice and adding an extra measure of authority to her sub-sonic rumble, "But now that you know my all my secrets, or at least some of them, I have to decide what to do with you three."

There was yet another moment of stunned silence. It suddenly occurred to me - and, I suspect, the others - that the reason that the Old One had been so forthcoming with her answers was because none of us could expect to leave here in any state to be able to reveal those secrets.

"I have a question," I interjected, "Before you decide on what to do with us."

The Old One's face bent to show her teeth, impressively long and sharp that they were.

"Go on," she said with no expression I could determine.

"How have you managed to hide your presence here from all the rest of your kind, despite their frantic search for you?" I said promptly, "And, more importantly, why are your compatriots so totally opposed to your motherhood?"

21370 words

57 pages

04/12/2011 21:25