

# Findo Gask Goblin Detective



**A Fantasy Detective Novel by  
Trevor Hopkins**

## **Contents**

Chapter 1 - A Small Problem.....	3
Chapter 2 - Glittering Assembly.....	12
Chapter 3 - Cat and Mouse .....	20
Chapter 4 - Chase the Lady .....	29
Chapter 5 - Granny Knows Best .....	37
Chapter 6 - Take the Case .....	45
Chapter 7 - A Trip Topside .....	53
Chapter 8 - Bright and Beautiful .....	61
Chapter 9 - Alliance of Equals .....	69
Chapter 10 - Père et Fils.....	76
Chapter 11 - Will and Testament .....	83
Chapter 12 - A Family Affair.....	91
Chapter 13 - Return Visit.....	98
Chapter 14 - Malice Aforethought .....	106
Chapter 15 - Situation Reports.....	114
Chapter 16 - Way Back When .....	123
Chapter 17 - Arm of the Law.....	132
Chapter 18 - Friends Reunited.....	139
Chapter 19 - Missing Person .....	148
Chapter 20 - Protection Racket.....	155
Chapter 21 - Accidents Happen .....	163
Chapter 22 - Cover Story .....	170
Chapter 23 - Follow the Money.....	179
Chapter 24 - Fat Lady Sings.....	189
Chapter 25 - Police Showdown .....	197
Chapter 26 - The Lady Gets It.....	203
Chapter 27 - Distant Friends .....	210

## Chapter 1 - A Small Problem

City back alleyways are the same the world over. This one was in New York, as squalid and uninviting as any I had experienced. I looked over my sunglasses down the short passage, lit solely by broken shards of sodium lighting from the street behind me. I scanned the shadows, distracted only momentarily by the busy rustle of rats investigating the contents of the foul-smelling bin I was leaning against.

In the gloom I could make out a quivering punk cowered at the end of the alley, a short gaunt figure in an oversize anorak with a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. He was trapped by the featureless brick walls on either side and the high wire fence blocking the end of the passage.

"You're going down," I snarled, standing up straight and putting my hands in my trench-coat pockets.

"No," he quailed, "You won't make me. You'll never take me alive."

The perp pulled a black automatic from under his coat and waved it around in a fashion that suggested he wasn't exactly sure what to do with it.

"Punk," I spat, "Don't make me do this the hard way."

I walked steadily towards him, my eyes fixed on his face, not even glancing at the ugly black pistol. He was a weedy little specimen, half my weight and a head shorter. He looked nervous, twitchy; he might do anything.

The gun wavered more wildly, then clicked once, twice. No shots. That was the result of one of my better investments: a glamour that disables firearms close to me. True, it was a cut-price job, purchased mail-order from a company that advertised in the Classified Ads sections of the trade press, one whose reputation was more spotty than saintly. I try not to rely on it but, right now, my desire to collect a little eating and walking-around money overrode my worry that the cheap magic might fail me.

I reached forward suddenly, my long arms taking him by surprise, and snatched the inert weapon from his grasp. I casually tossed the toy aside, then picked him up by his shirt front and held him against the featureless brickwork.

"Say goodbye to your surface friends," I said softly, my face close to his ear.

The wall opened suddenly behind him, much to his surprise. But not to mine; I had spotted the faint outline and cryptic runes - often mistaken for graffiti by the surface-dwellers - that marked an entrance to the Lower Realms. It was a vertical transit. We fell together at the same speed; he was going nowhere fast. I bounced off the landing mat and grabbed him again with one hand before he could move more than three feet.

Three border guards approached, hands already reaching for their stun-sticks. With my free hand, I flipped open my wallet and showed the buzzer to the police, the licence badge gleaming gold in the dim light, then pointed at a dog-eared "Wanted" poster pinned to the notice-board behind them.

The guards looked at each other, then grabbed the punk by the arms. In short order we were wheeled off to see the shift Captain, the punk already handcuffed and snivelling, and escorted between two of them. The cops had evidently decided it was not worth their while even trying to cuff me.

The perp had skipped bail on a felony rap and had made it to the surface using one of the tunnels the cops still haven't shut down. Probably some brown envelopes of anonymous cash changing hands somewhere. Still, I was comforted by the fact that he had probably done it the hard way: walked up miles of stairs unaided. Serves him right.

An hour later, I emerged from the Captain's office, stuffing a very decent wad of folded green bills into my pocket. Once on the street, I stopped to take in the atmosphere, tapping a cigarette from a crumpled packet I managed to track down in the pockets of my raincoat. I scraped the match, lit up and tossed the flame in the gutter where it flared blue for a moment. I adjusted the brim of my hat to a more rakish angle, turned up my collar and walked quickly away.

Another bounty successfully collected. Just another day on the job.

\*

Perhaps I should introduce myself. Findo Gask, at your service: Private Eye, Discreet Investigator and (occasionally) Bounty Hunter. Let me present my card. You might think it's blank, although it's actually printed in old-fashioned goblin lettering only visible in moonlight. An affectation, a little quirk of mine, I admit, but a useful precaution for one who visits the surface more often than he might like.

I am indeed a genuine private detective, licenced for both the underworld and the surface by the corresponding District Attorney, although the human authorities don't quite know to whom - or what - they have issued the licence. The work is erratic, to say the least, but mostly interesting, and keeps me (mostly) legally employed.



I am large for a goblin, grossing one-twenty pounds and four feet ten in bare feet. I can pass for human above-ground, if I have to, although the lift shoes are a pain, quite literally, in the ass and in the thigh muscles too. With a long coat to disguise my elegant goblin body - humans would think my legs too short and my arms and torso too long - and a turned-up collar and brimmed hat to shadow my face, I can get by on the surface, at least in the dim light that surface dwellers think of as darkness.

Contrary to popular opinion, goblin skin is not actually green - except occasionally, when too many alcoholic beverages have been consumed. Normally, it is a dark chestnut brown, slightly shiny like stained wood, and smooth and polished when young, although growing increasingly gnarled after two or three hundred years.

By the way, goblins do not have pointy ears or noses; it's just that humans have such stubby excuses for these appendages. My teeth are indeed sharp and pointed - goblins are carnivores, like most humans - but not the drooling fangs that overheated imagination would ascribe to them. My eyes are, in fact, green - but that's just a coincidence, my mother's eyes were a deep purple - and I usually need to wear sunglasses on the surface, the glare of the sun being far too much for my sensitive eyes.

I made my way downtown, taking a crowded transit tube and practically elbowed my way through the crowd to the exit. From there, it was just a ten minute walk to my low-rent office, off a side-street of a warren built against one side of a less-than-fashionable cavern. I collected my mail from the box by the front door, then walked up four flights of stairs - there are no lift-tubes here, sonny.

It seemed I had a visitor. The office door stood open; I don't bother locking it - this saves on door repairs and, besides, anything in the least valuable is stored elsewhere. A pair of highly-polished black wingtips, crossed casually at the ankle, were adorning the worn green dragon hide of the desk. They were resting next to a burgundy briefcase, both self-evidently locked and sparkling with the kind of anti-tamper glamour likely to explode in your face at the slightest provocation. A pawl of smoke crossed the desk from out of my line of sight, some of which was emanating from the bowl of a long thin pipe of white clay.

I stepped over the threshold, my own threshold - or at least the one for which I was usually able to pay the rent - and made a show of not noticing the visitor for a moment. He coughed carefully, once, and I turned around slowly, a smile crossing my face - or at least showing my teeth.

The stranger wore a well-tailored doubled breasted grey pin-stripe suit over a severe white shirt with diamond-studded gold cufflinks and an old school tie of sober colours held in place by a matching tie-pin. His face, the full face of a healthy and well-fed goblin still in his second century, wore an expression of permanent and rather smug self-satisfaction, an impression enhanced by the gold and diamond studs in his earlobes. Only his eyes looked out of place, cold hard grey eyes that had seen a lot, and weren't telling, with just a hint of worry tingeing their corners.

Accountants, I thought, they think they own the world.

I tossed my un-opened mail on the dragon hide surface next to his shoes and sat down heavily in the squeaky swivel chair on my side of the desk.

"Good afternoon," I said politely, "How can I help you?"

"Hmm," the stranger responded, removing his shoes from my desk and sitting only slightly less casually in my guest chair, "I'm not yet sure you can."

He looked around my office with an expression compounded of mild disinterest and vague distaste. I followed his gaze, glancing over the desk, the three four-drawer filing cabinets pushed back against the rock walls on one side, and a coffee table and two slightly saggy easy chairs lining the other side. All were plainly visible to goblin eyes in the gently glowing illumination from the airshaft and the bioluminescent fungi which grow everywhere down here.

"All right," he said finally, dragging his attention back to me, "What's your rate?"

"I get twenty-five dollars a day," I replied levelly, "Plus expenses. Take it or leave it."

He snorted, as if suppressing a laugh, and took a long pull on his pipe and let out the white smoke in a thin stream directed at the airshaft.

"I could probably find the dough somewhere," he said sardonically, "But can I trust you to keep your trap shut?"

"Sure, if you pay me," I said, "So quit wasting my time and tell me what's your beef?"

He snorted again, then took a slim pocket-book of black leather with gold fastenings from his jacket pocket, flipped it open, pulled out a couple of bills, leaned forward to place them carefully on the desk, returned the wallet to his pocket and sat back as casually as before.

I looked at the money, didn't touch it or reach for it. Two C-notes.

"Okay, you've got my attention," I said levelly, "So tell me what I have to do to earn that money?"

\*

My visitor stared back at me with those haunted eyes for a moment. Suddenly, he leaned forward, dropping his smouldering pipe into the ashtray and placing his large hands on the edge of the desk.

"This goes no further, understand."

I swivelled about in my chair to bring myself closer to the desk.

"You're the boss," I replied, looking at him across the wide green surface, "I've heard of client confidentiality, know what it means, even. You level with me, I'd do the job and keep my trap shut. You hold out on me, I'll walk away, and I'll *still* keep my trap shut. Just don't expect to hear from me again."

He regarded me for a long moment, then tossed a business card - a much more finely-made one that I could afford - across the desk. I picked it up and read: "Merton Vale, Senior Partner, Vale, Madderfy and Logan, Accountants." Good guess, I thought, but said nothing. I tossed the card back onto the desk.

"So what's your problem?"

"I'm being blackmailed," he aid simply.

"How so?" I replied, my best professional detachment coming to the fore, "What have they got on you?"

Merton Vale looked moderately embarrassed, a tinge of puce suffusing the brown skin of his face. He looked away for a moment, then took his wallet from his pocket again. He pulled out a small photo and looked at it, then placed it carefully in front of me. It showed an elegant female of middle years, with the polished looks of one who has the time and money and inclination to indulge in the finest health and beauty regimes.

"Look, I'm a married guy," he said, returning his full attention to me, "Happily married. Nearly seventy years. I love my wife but a guy has temptations, you know, a desire for the taste of unfamiliar and forbidden fruit."

"So you cheat on your wife," I replied, shrugging, "Who's the floozy?"

"Her name's Clunie - don't know her last name," he said carefully, "She's a hostess at the Starfield Club. Do you know it?"

I did. It was a sleazy nightclub just off one of the upper caverns, so close to the surface - and its associated frisson of risk and excitement - that natural starlight provided much of the interior illumination. It was a Gentleman's Club and Casino, a place where a guy could go to lose his shirt in at least two different senses.

While he had been speaking, I had reached for my own pipe and pouch, filled the one with the contents of the other carefully and lit the bowl with the desk lighter. I nodded through the smoke.

"Go on," I said non-committally.

"This appeared on my desk at work yesterday."

He drew a large brown envelope from his inside pocket and put it carefully on the desk next to his business card. I picked it up, pulled back the flap and withdrew a handful of photographs and a scrawled note. The note read: "Be in touch soon."

The pictures showed two figures, one of which was a striking female goblin. I looked over the photos, admiring the smoothly polished dome of her head and her shapely ears. She had other shapely and polished parts, too, and it was perfectly clear that she was entirely naked. The other figure was Merton Vale, equally naked. In truth, there was not much detail to be seen, although of course it was evident exactly what was going on. Her face was turned away or obscured by other body parts - mainly his - in all of the pictures, although his face was clear enough. A classic photography shoot for the divorce courts.

"Okay," I said, slipping the pictures and note back into their brown paper container and returning them to the desk, "So you've been stupid. I can understand that. What do they want, these blackmailers?"

"I got a second note, pushed through the door at home, yesterday evening," he said, "Mercifully, my wife didn't take it into her head to open it."

He put a second envelope, this one small and white, on the desk. I picked it up. The envelope was addressed to Vale in a neat, old-fashioned style, completely different from the scrawl on the other envelope. I opened it and pulled out a single sheet of white paper, on which was written in the same careful hand: "You



will provide us with a copy of these accounts. No police." It was followed by a short list of ten digit account numbers.

"Who owns these accounts?" I asked.

"I can't tell you that," he exclaimed, "Professional confidences."

"Then I can't help you," I said, a hint of a snarl in my voice, tossing down both letter and envelope, "Like I said, you level with me and I'll keep your secrets safe enough. But I can't do my job, doing your dirty work, without it."

He nodded morosely, rubbing his forehead as if his skull pained him.

"Ever heard the name Monzie Hosh?"

I nodded. Vale's client was someone who has been investigated by the police, although never been arrested. He was reputed to be a racketeer, and was definitely the owner of the Starfield Club.

"I've not met him," I said, "You know this Monzie Hosh personally?"

"Sure. He's one of our best customers," Vale replied, adding, "It was at his invitation that I was at the club in the first place."

"So how are you supposed to deliver these details?" I enquired, picking up the letter again and waving it at him, "It's sure to be a big stack of paper."

"I got a call on the phone, yesterday morning. It was put through by my secretary," he said, "They said I should wrap the papers well, in a stout parcel and await delivery instructions. And said again, no police. He said he's got contacts inside the force, bent coppers."

"Have you spoken to anyone about this?" I demanded, "Hosh? The floozy herself?"

"No!" he exclaimed, surprisingly loudly, then continued softly, "I know I've been foolish and I just want it to go away, to get back to a normal life."

"Okay, okay" I said, sweeping up the two bills that still lay on the desktop, "I'll drift over to this Starfield Club later on this evening, and interview this Clunie. Find out what she knows. Maybe I can shake a few leads loose."

He nodded.

"You've got no more than forty-eight hours," Vale said, "Probably less. I'm stalling at the moment. I told the voice on the phone that the details for some accounts aren't available yet, that

they're being worked on others in the office. But I don't think I can hold out much longer."

"Okay, I get it, it's urgent" I replied, "Now run along and let me do my job."

He nodded again, wordlessly, picked up the envelopes and stuffed them back into his pockets, stood up and left the office. I sat smoking my pipe and looking at the business card on the desktop for a long time.

\*

I had a couple of hours before it was sensible to go to the Starfield Club. There was nothing to hold me in the office other than the mail, which took all of two minutes to open and sort into junk (straight in the waste-bin) and bills. I put the latter into the desk drawer to deal with later, although the urge to make them follow the junk into the waste paper basket was almost irresistibly tempting. I wasn't planning on squandering any of the bounty reward or the two hundred Vale had pressed on me on paying bills or my overdraft at the bank.

I went back to my apartment, detouring via a all-day diner on the corner of the block for an early dinner. The diner was already busy even at this early evening hour, but David the patron recognised me and beckoned me over to a small booth by the kitchen door. The owner was a short and exceptionally rotund Goblin in a spotless white apron, all bustling bonhomie, but nevertheless somehow managed to move as if he was a barely tethered helium balloon.

"What'll it be today?" the patron demanded without preamble, knowing of old that I would want to be served quickly.

I ordered from memory. From long experience, I knew this place did a very passable rat kebab, which today I decided to compliment with a side order of sauted mixed fungi and - a luxury I allowed myself in celebration of my recent riches - a small portion of imported potatoes. All this was washed down with a glass of goblin beer, strong and flavoursome; here, I could be assured that the beaks and bits of twig would have been filtered out before the glass arrived at my table.

After eating - the food arrived in minutes - I dawdled over my beer for a while, then tossed a few bills on the table before sauntering out. Then David hustled up and held the door open for me - I guess he knew I'd be back for more of his rat-on-a-stick real soon.

Back at my apartment, it was time to freshen up and put on a change of clothes. I'd like to tell you that I slipped into something

more suitable, perhaps, for a sophisticated watering-hole. Actually, I just changed into a fresh shirt, dusted off my other suit and fastened the least bedraggled-looking of my ties around my neck. The raincoat and hat I wouldn't be without anywhere.

I stood at the window, looking down over the illuminations of the district in which I live. It seems to me that humans persist in having the wrong idea about goblin caves and caverns. No doubt they've been in some rocky hollow near the surface they think of as a cave, and jump to the conclusion that living underground must be crowded and damp and claustrophobic.

The truth is far from this. Our caverns are vast majestic affairs, and it is barely possible to see one side from the other - indeed, in some cases, this is literally true, although it is a toss-up whether this is because of the size of the enclosed space or the quantity of smoke that obscures the view. Invariably, the ceiling is supported at regular intervals by soaring stone columns, solid and reassuring in bulk, designed (and, more importantly, looking as if they have been designed) to support the unthinkable mega-tonnage of rock above our heads.

Unsurprisingly, given the sometimes crowded living conditions underground, these columns have become the secondary support for various kinds of vertical housing in a style that humans, perhaps, would think of as skyscrapers, although ceiling-scrapers might be more appropriate. Even when a support column is not conveniently available, we have a natural tendency to build high; after all, real estate is at something of a premium down here and our caverns are always vast and airy.

Over the centuries we have acquired a certain amount of technology from the surface (telephones and cameras, for example) and developed yet more engineering techniques of our own (such as the high-speed mass-transit tubes which link the major caverns together). This sophistication, combined with the kind of old-school charms and glammers that humans insist on calling "magic", supports a rich and vibrant society and, inevitably I suppose, one which harbours a fair number of crooks, shysters and racketeers.

Time to go and meet a varied cross-section of all three, I thought.

## **Chapter 2 - Glittering Assembly**

The Starfield Club was alive with coloured lights and music and raucous voices when I arrived. I had no trouble with the bouncers on the door, although I was not sure whether they were so named for their ability to act as giant beach-balls; under their tuxedos and darkened glasses, they were so corpulent and well-padded that they were practically spherical.

Tipping my hat politely to the nearest of the oversized doormen, I slipped inside, investing in the entrance fee using a worryingly large fraction of the advance Vale had given me earlier. Electing to retain my hat and coat, rather than trusting to the dubious care of the hat-check goblin, I made my way along the back of the room. It was a cavernous, well, cavern, semicircular in shape, the perimeter lined with efficiently-manned bars and cloakrooms interspersed by murals executed in a mixture of garish colours and mirror tiles. Spotlights were trained on the stage at the end of the room, presently empty save for a bored-looking and tuxedo'd dance band filling the spaces between a thousand conversations with innocuously bland music.

To the right of the stage was an area separated by an ineffectual-looking low balustrade and a small jungle of potted ornamental fungi; a much more effective bouncer stood at the gate. Bouncer and balustrade divided the poor from the - currently - rich, at least, those currently rich enough to play at the Roulette and Blackjack tables for the stakes this joint demanded.

I found an unoccupied table near the back and sat heavily, casually tossing my hat down and pulling the ashtray towards me. I took my cigarettes from my pocket - why do the packets always get crumpled like that? - and lit one with a match torn from the matchbook the management had provided. I read the cover idly. "Sophisticated Entertainment in Stylish Surroundings. The Starfield Club." I snorted, then stuffed both cigarettes and matches back into my pocket.

I was still not sure I would be able to recognise Clunie. The photographs that Vale had shown me had carefully obscured her face and I doubted that, even here, her other notable features would be on immediate display. I sat back and blew out a cloud of smoke, and glanced around at the other club patrons at their pleasures. There was a group of giggling females at one table,

wearing skimpy sparkly outfits and party hats. Hen parties, I grunted, trouble for someone waiting to happen. At a table beyond, another group - this one all male - ignored the glances of the ladies off the leash for the night, and spent their time looking around suspiciously and nursing bottled beers and club sodas. Someone's private army, I concluded, and not locals - they looked too nervous to be the Club's enforcers.

The actual "Management Team", if you will pardon the euphemism, was fairly easy to spot. Not the uniformed bouncers, of course - they were just there for show. Here and there, around the room, leaning casually on a bar or pillar, hard-faced individuals in well-tailored suits - with extra space under the armpits - were too obviously watching the room and the punters. They didn't seem to be paying me any attention. I wanted to keep it that way.

Another solitary female, obviously a bored working girl, looked sullenly at the hen party and twirled a glass of transparent liquid which was more likely than not pure iced water. My assessment was confirmed - as if it really needed to be - by the appearance of a well-dressed male in a pin-striped suit clutching an over-sized cigar and a large glass of iced whiskey. At his approach, she turned to him, her face brightening with a professionally welcoming smile on her lips, one which did not quite extend to her eyes.

"Hi," a bright voice said behind me, "What'll you have to drink?"

I turned instinctively, coming face to - well, waist, more or less - with an attractive female goblin, young - probably not yet even fifty - and with curves in all the right places.

"Bourbon and branchwater," I replied, my mouth on automatic pilot.

My eyes, also on automatic - evidently much to the amusement of the waitress - roved over her short skirt and plunging cleavage. She seemed somehow familiar, although I could not place her face. My eyes finally came to rest on a tiny badge pinned to the flimsy material covering one of her more-than-ample breasts. "Hi, I'm Clunie," it read. Problem solved, I thought. New problem, more likely.

"Say, why don't you fix me that drink then rest yourself here for a moment?" I asked, pulling a twenty from my pocket and holding it flat against the table, "Take the weight off your feet, have a drink yourself, that style of thing?"

She looked at me sharply for a moment, her head cocked to one side, then bent forward to sweep up the bill.

"I shouldn't really," she breathed in my ear, "The management, they don't like it. But for you maybe I'll make an exception."

She winked at me, then moved off in the direction of the nearest bar. I watched her swaying ass for a few moments, then dragged my attention back to my cigarette. It had nearly burned down to my fingers. I stubbed it out and lit a replacement. No wonder Vale had trouble keeping his hands to himself.

Clunie came back a few minutes later, two drinks balanced professionally on a tiny circular tray that left just enough room for a bowl of bar snacks. She distributed the goods deftly, then sat down across the table, crossing her legs in a way which was at once both prim and provocative. She toyed with her tall drink, which looked as clear and pure as water, although the smell suggested that just a teeny measure of vodka had been slipped in. She didn't drink. I sipped the bourbon - not bad, they weren't skimping on the booze here, at least.

"So, mister," she said, leaning forward, "Haven't seen you around before. You here for the show, or the tables?"

"The show," I said, eyeing her levelly, "Although I've seen an amazing sight or two on the floor already."

"I'd noticed," she giggled, "Are you always this obvious?"

"Maybe," I said, "Actually, I was looking for you, specifically."

"So you found me, baby."

I stared at her. She looked confused. I guessed I wouldn't have been the first sucker to sit all night buying expensive drinks just to catch a glimpse of her breasts.

"I wanted to talk about Vale," I said.

Her face fell, suddenly looking sad and serious and somehow even more alluring. She sat up straight on the chair, knees primly together, reached for her glass and put down about half of it in a lump.

"I miss Merton," she said simply, "What's happened to him?"

\*

Clunie suddenly seemed like a child, shy and nervous, such a contrast from her pose as flirtatious hostess a few moments before.

"He's alive and well," I said, carefully not adding, well, he was this afternoon, "When did you last see him?"

"Nearly a week ago. He used to come in all the time."

"To see you, especially?"

"Yes," she said. She seemed genuinely fond of the accountant. Maybe he had a soft side he didn't want to show me. How would I know?

"Merton's one of my, umm, *special* friends," she continued, "He treats me very nicely, like a lady. And he buys me little gifts, clothes and pretty things to wear."

She raised one hand to her ear, where one of a pair of large and slightly vulgar-looking gold and emerald earrings dangled. A little over the top, maybe, but they sure looked expensive.

"And I suppose you treat him especially nicely, too?" I said.

Clunie blushed deeply, a red-brown tinge spreading over the glossy skin of her pretty face. She nodded, once, clasping and unclasping her hands in her lap.

"Where do you go, to treat him so *very* nicely?" I said.

Her blush deepened, reaching to the very ends of her pointy ears.

"Sometimes I take him home with me, if I get off early," she replied softly, eyes downcast, "Then there's a little room at the back, beyond the storerooms. I don't think many people know about it."

A private little room here in the Club, quiet and out of the way, with infrequently-occupied rooms on either side. Perfect for a nice little sting like this, I thought.

"If people don't know about it, how did you find out?"

"One of the other waitresses told me. Made me swear not to tell any of the others."

Her resolve seemed to tighten, the innocence in her face leaching away like milk emptying from a glass, to be replaced with the brassy front she had exhibited earlier.

"Who are you anyway?" she demanded, her eyes narrowing, "And why are you asking all these questions?"

I drew a business card from my suit pocket and threw on the table in front of her. She picked it up, studied it for a second or two, then put it down on her tray.

"Gask is the name, Findo Gask." I said, "I'm a private dick. I'm working for Vale. Someone's found out about you and your special friend, and is blackmailing him."

"Blackmail?" she squeaked, "Who?"

"Keep your voice down," I growled, "To answer your questions, yes, blackmail it is. Someone's threatening to tell his wife about your cosy little arrangement."

"He said he was going to leave her," she said in a more subdued voice.

"Not just yet, evidently. And I don't know who's trying to pull this stunt. Got any ideas?"

I became aware that I was being watched by a goblin in a very sharply-tailored pinstripe suit, who was leaning against the bar not so far away and regarding me with grey patient eyes. Clunie also saw him, glanced away and stood up hurriedly. She snatched her tray and made to rush off, but I grabbed her arm before she could take more than a step.

"Any ideas," I growled, "About Vale's blackmailer?"

She shook her head hurriedly, tugged her arm from my grasp and scurried away.

\*

I glanced again in the direction of the goblin with the grey eyes, those eyes that had seen too much over the years. He was watching Clunie closely, then his head swept back in my direction. I ignored him, finished my cigarette and took another swallow of the bourbon. Clunie didn't know about the photographs, I was sure of it; no-one can act that well. She might know more than she was letting on, and Vale could have told me where the photos had been taken, if he could have been bothered. I stared at the drink and wondered what to do next.

The band ceased its production of wallpaper music abruptly, and struck up a much louder and jazzy piece. The lights went down and two spotlights roved over the tinsel curtain at the back of the stage. Suddenly, the curtain was swept back, and the limelights bracketed the club's torch singer.

As the band worked their way through the introduction with much robust blaring of saxophone and trombone, the entertainer wiggled and strutted up and down the stage, waving to a few - probably imagined - fans in the back rows, and acknowledging the hand-claps and wolf-whistles from the closer tables.

She wore one of those "less" dresses - a backless, strapless affair in electric blue, sparkling with sequins, slit nearly to the waist up her leg and down to her waist between her breasts. Large earrings sparkling with what were probably supposed to be mistaken for diamonds glittered from her fetchingly pointed ears. It made the outfit the hostess had been wearing look prim and positively dowdy. Even so, her looks weren't a patch on Clunie's.



Call me an old-fashioned guy, but I prefer the goods presented just a little less overtly.

She could sing, though, and she proceeded to belt out a couple of old favourites to the very evident approval of the - mostly male - clientele. The band kept it together, never quite overpowering the husky throaty voice of the singer. I could see why some people would return night after night, drink too much and send flowers backstage in the forlorn hope of meeting her in private. Poor saps.

"Mind if I join you?"

The gravelly voice at my ear was not really a surprise, but I affected a slow twist of my head, drawing back and looking quizzically at the speaker. It was the well-dressed goblin with the grey eyes who had been watching us earlier.

"Sure," I drawled, waving a nonchalant hand at the chair opposite.

He sat down, not taking his eyes off me, and signalled a waitress - not Clunie - who brought a glass immediately without bothering with an order. Scotch whiskey, single malt, a large measure. He was part of the management, then.

"Findo Gask," I said, extending a hand over the table.

He looked at my hand for a long moment, then took it in his own disdainfully.

"I know who you are, Mister Gask," he said, "What I don't know is why you're here."

"Well, a guy's got to get out and about, you know," I replied, "Enjoy the show, meet some ladies. Might even chance my luck at the tables later on."

He said nothing, just stared at me levelly.

"So who are you, then," I added.

"The name's Hosh. I run this joint."

"Pleased to meet you. So what do you want?"

He shook his head slowly.

"Wanted to make sure you're enjoying yourself. You need anything, just ask for me."

"Sure thing," I said.

Hosh turned and snapped his fingers for the waitress, who hurried up with a bright smile on her face, one which masked an underlying worry.

"Another drink for Mister Gask," he said, "On the house."

The waitress disappeared. Hosh put his hands flat on the table and levered himself upright.

"See you around, Mister Gask," he said, leaning forward, "Don't be a stranger."

\*

The band and the singer were still belting out the numbers as Hosh strolled off among the tables. Seconds later, the nervous-looking waitress returned with my second drink, plonking it down and scurrying off without making eye contact. She was skinny and plain, with no earrings or jewellery of any kind, with a kind of harried look that was compounded of one part tiredness to two parts fear. I thought I would recognise her again if I had to.

I drained the first drink, then sniffed hesitantly at the second. It did not smell spiked, but I decided to leave it alone just out of general principles. I stood up, picked up my hat and arranged it carefully on my head. On a whim, I swept up the fresh glass and carried it with me as I walked back towards the exit. On route, I passed an overweight and middle-aged goblin who was clearly already in his cups. An open fifth of bourbon - a cheap brand - stood on the table, now mostly empty.

Eve so, the drunk was alert enough to be tapping along - nearly in time, mostly - to the jazz beat from the band and watching with intoxicated fascination the sensuous movements of the chanteuse on the stage. I slipped an arm around his shoulder in a friendly fashion and slid the bourbon onto the table in front of him.

"Here you are, buddy," I said, "A drink on the house."

He grunted at me with some semblance of acknowledgement, although he did not take his eyes off the pouting singer who was nearly wearing the sparkly blue dress, just launching into another jazzy number.

"You're welcome, pal," I said, then set off unhurriedly for the doorway where I had come in.

Just as I reached the exit, which was still guarded by the same two rotund bouncers, a commotion reached my ears. I turned around slowly, feigning surprise and curiosity. As far as I could tell, someone had stood up, flailed around, then collapsed unconscious onto the drink-stained carpet knocking a tray of drinks from the hands of another of the waiting staff. A couple of the tuxedo'd bouncers were closing in, although the pair at the doorway made no move to assist.

It was the drunk to whom I had presented my second drink, of course. As I watched, the bouncers scooped him up by the elbows and shook him to wake him up. Then they escorted him forcibly,

his own legs struggling to keep up, in the direction marked "Fire Escape" where, no doubt, a swift exit into a scruffy back alley awaited him. I hoped they didn't treat him too roughly; after all, it was hardly his fault.

I turned to leave, readjusting my hat to an even jauntier angle. The door guards made no move to stop me, although I was nearly convinced that one of them caught the eye of someone behind me. No doubt I should expect nothing less.

I stood in the street for a moment, then turned left and strode towards the transit tunnel which I had used to get him earlier. The arch of the cavern overhead was dimly visible and, by goblin standards, the evening's passing traffic was well-illuminated by glowing streetlights.

I looked around as I walked, as if taking in the sights and sounds on the bustling boulevard. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a shadow emerging from the alleyway entrance behind me, beyond the club entrance; no doubt the same alley where an unfortunate and overweight drunk was currently sleeping it off behind some garbage bins. The shadow kept pace with me, neither gaining nor retreating as I varied my pace to avoid the pedestrians coming the other way. It seemed I had just acquired a tail.

## **Chapter 3 - Cat and Mouse**

So, someone wanted to play, did they? I know those games, too. I'm *good* at those games.

My tail seemed to be using some kind of cheap glamour which made them more-or-less invisible when looked at directly, but somehow the movements still caught the edges of vision. Someone less familiar with the workings of the underworld might not have noticed the subtle signs. Most humans would have just become aware of an uneasy feeling of being watched, something to cause them to glance nervously over their shoulder but keep finding there is nothing to see.

I sauntered along the streets, pausing to look in the shop windows as if considering the purchase of the goods they advertised. Furniture, female undergarments, fake fur clothing; I must have appeared to have suddenly acquired a window-shopping habit. My tail was smart enough to keep out of the reflections - the effectiveness of some glammers is reduced in a mirror - but the sense of a dark shadow following me did not abate, getting stronger as I reached the archways and flight of steps which marked the entrance to the transit tube system.

The travel tube system is one of the oldest parts of our world; people get bored with their buildings after only a couple of hundred years, and there are always works going on to extend the caverns. But, for the most part, the tubes run under the common level of the caverns and have been unchanged for millennia. Inevitably, there are forgotten side-tunnels and alcoves everywhere, ideal for the pursued private eye to duck into unobserved.

Invisibility glammers only make you invisible, obviously, you still have to move quietly to avoid detection. My tail was not an expert in walking softly and breathing through an open mouth. In the stillness of the tube entrance, away from the passers-by in the street, the approach of my shadow was clearly audible. I lunged forward, using the open-armed grab necessary to catch an invisible person. Fortunately, the figure within the glamour was slight and bony - grabbing an invisible person who is twice your height and weight engenders its own problems, of course - then the glamour wrapped itself around me too, and I could finally see my pursuer.

"Gotcha," I said.

The response was an inarticulate squeak - a distinctly feminine inarticulate squeak. I resisted the gentlemanly urge - I'm trying to wean myself off those - to release the lady from my close embrace: my arms clasped at her back and my chin practically resting on her domed head. Instead, I leaned back to get a better view. It was the other waitress from the Starfield Club, the one who had brought me the second bourbon.

"So, try to slip me a Mickey Finn, would you?" I growled.

"I had to," she replied in a panicky voice, "Otherwise Hosh would have beat me again."

There was a soft pop as the glamour extinguished itself, so that we would both be visible to any passer-by. I took the risk of releasing her - damn those urges - but she made no attempt to get away. She just stood there, not looking at me, like a schoolgirl expecting a dressing-down, or worse, from the teacher. Goblins don't bruise easily or, more precisely, we don't show marks like a human would do, but the girl's careworn eyes and cringing manner made it clear she had been beaten up more than once in the recent past.

I put two fingers under her chin - she barely flinched - and lifted her face so I could look into her eyes. Nice eyes, lilac, perhaps eyes to enjoy if she wasn't so tired and frightened. I steeled myself and glared at her.

"Who are you?" I demanded, "And why are you following me?"

"Clathy Dupplin," she muttered in response, "Hosh wanted to find out where you live. He said you were a private dick, snooping around."

"If he wants to get in touch with me, he can look up my office number in the telephone directory like anyone else," I muttered, watching her warily in case he made a move to re-start the invisibility magic. She was attired the same short-skirt and open blouse uniform that Clunie had been wearing. The outfit was tautly, abundantly filled by Clunie; on Clathy, it hung loose, making her look like the schoolgirl her demeanour suggested. This close, her perfume was distinctively evident, a scent I didn't recognise.

"You might want to think about suggesting that to him yourself," she said, bristling slightly.

Evidently she had not lost all her spirit, just yet. But why her? Surely Hosh must have a whole string of tough hombres, tight-lipped hoodlums with much more practice in sneaking around. Hosh must have wanted me to catch the clumsy tail.

"If Hosh treats you so badly, why do you still work at the Club?" I said, more gently, "What's he got on you?"

"He wants people he can trust around him" - people he could frighten, more like - "It's my old Granny. She's housebound and very frail. I live with her, look after her. When I started talking about leaving, she had a visit; a scary bunch, she said. All very polite and soft-spoken, but she was terrified."

I was aware that we were getting curious looks from the late-night travellers entering and leaving the transit tubes.

"Look, sister," I said wearily, "You could just scoot off now, report to Hosh - although I doubt he'll like what you have to say. Or, you could come have a drink with me."

She looked at me wide-eyed for a long moment.

"Drink," she said, so quietly I barely caught the word.

\*

There was a bar across the street, not a popular one; just a few regulars occupying their usual spots on the too-tightly-packed barstools and getting off their faces. I drew up a couple of stools at the only open spot at the bar, separated from the drunks only by an unoccupied stool and several inches of expensive air-gap.

"What'll it be?" the bartender growled, wiping his plate-sized hands on an already grubby cloth. He looked like he didn't often get unfamiliar faces in the joint, or at least mostly sober ones.

"Scotch on the rocks," Clathy breathed, "Make it a double."

"Same for me," I added in response to the barkeep's glance. I put my hat on the bar and dragged my cigarette packet from it home in my coat pocket. She shook her head when I waved the pack in her direction.

The drinks arrived in record time and I paid for them - those gentlemanly urges again. The bartender disappeared to the far end of the bar to shoot the breeze with one of the more articulate regulars. Clathy reached for her glass and put down about half of the scotch in a lump, wincing only slightly as the almost undiluted liquor hit the back of her throat. I sipped at my drink, wincing for a different reason - I try and avoid cheap scotch as a rule.

I stared at Clathy, saying nothing. She took another gulp from her glass, slammed it down so hard I'd thought she'd have broken it, then rested her head in the arms on the edge of the bar.

"I'm in such a mess," she wailed, "I should never have gone to work at that bloody club in the first place, and now I'll never get away. And, yes," she added, glancing up at me, "My grandmother did warn me about it."

She sobbed for a moment, attracting exactly no attention from anyone else in the bar. She made a visible effort to pull herself together, sitting up and wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands. Tear-streaked and reddened, they were still very nice eyes.

"Anyway, what's your angle?" she asked, sniffing, "Why are you interested in Monzie?"

"Client confidentially," I replied, "Can't tell you a thing. Besides, it's not really Hosh I'm interested in."

"So who are you interested in? Clunie?"

"I do have an interest there. What do you know about her?"

"New to the club. Only been there a few months," she replied, "Popular with the regulars - too popular with some of them, if you know what I mean. Keeps herself to herself, don't gossip with the girls much. I hardly know her."

"How long have you worked at the Club?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm an old lag. Eight years. Seems like a lifetime."

I sipped my own drink.

"Why does Hosh hit you?"

"He's only done it twice. Once when I refused to," she paused, again drinking deeply from her glass, "I refused to go home with a customer, when Monzie wanted to impress."

"And the other time?"

She hesitated. "I refused to sleep with Monzie," she said finally, "I think he tries it on with all the girls. Most of them say yes, I think. He only asks once."

"You should have left."

"I didn't have any choice. I needed the money anyway, and then Monzie's boys visited Granny."

I stared at her in silence. The low rumble of chatter from the bar swirled around us, as tangible as the cigarette smoke and aroma of stale beer.

"Okay, Clathy, I'll buy it," I said. "Monzie Hosh has got you on a string. I can see that. You bounce and dangle at his whim. Maybe I can't help you there, maybe I can. And maybe you can help me help you. Maybe Hosh sometimes lets things slip, things that would get the cops interested. Or get me interested."

I fished in my coat pocket.

"Take one of these" - I handed her a business card, one printed on plain card without the lunar visibility magic - "Now, you do

whatever you want, but this is what I think you should do. Go back to Hosh, tell him the truth. Say you tried to follow me, but I spotted you, grabbed you. Say you sweet-talked yourself out of the situation. Go back to your life. If you want to talk, call me."

She nodded wordlessly at this, swirling the dregs of her drink around in the glass.

"Okay, I'm going home. I've had enough for tonight. Now beat it."

"Thanks," she breathed, "You're a gent."

She drained the last of her scotch, then leaned forward suddenly to give me a peck on the cheek. Then she slid down of her bar stool and slipped out of the bar, not looking back. I sat quietly for a while, lighting and smoking another cigarette, toying with my own drink and letting the ice cubes slowly melt, thinking over what Clathy had said.

Despite what I told the waitress, I went on back to my office rather than heading home. I had a hunch niggling at me and it took me ten minutes to confirm it. There was still some movement behind me, some shifting of the shadows. Now I had a proper tail, someone who really knew how to work within the glamour's limitations, one who knew how to stay out of the line of sight and away from reflective surfaces, one who knew how to walk softly and make only noises which blended with the sounds of the night.

I guessed that was Hosh's real purpose in sending Clathy, to give me a easy-to-spot tail while the real one lurked out of sight. This one would be harder to catch, and difficult to shake off - or, at least, be sure that I'd shaken him off. By the time I stepped out of the travel tube in the downtown cavern, I wasn't sure. Maybe I lost him in the crush of the tubes, maybe not. Whoever it was, they were pretty good. I'd have to try a few of my old tricks later on.

I reached my office on the seamier side of the cavern, collected the mail from the box, walked up the stairs and let myself in. Again, Merton Vale was waiting for me, slumped in the visitors chair on the public side of the desk. The difference was, this time, he wasn't breathing. A tumbler stood on the worn green hide, nearly empty. A bottle of a very decent scotch stood uncapped next to it. It looked like my office bottle, the one I keep in the deep drawer of my desk for emergencies and the less unwanted of my visitors. I left bottle and glass well alone.

I stepped over lightly, trying to avoid even pressing deeply into the pile of the carpet, and felt for a pulse in his neck. Nothing. He'd been dead for an hour, more or less. Maybe if I hadn't dallied with Clathy, I might have been able to do something about it. Or



maybe not. I was hard to tell. There wasn't a mark on the body that I could see. I went through his pockets quickly - a dirty job, but someone's got to do it - but found nothing I would not have expected. He still had the envelopes with the photographs and the notes in his pocket. Time to call the cops. Oh well, so much for the early night I had promised myself.

\*

Inspector Harriet Luncardy screwed a long thin cigarette into a long thin holder with rather more force than was absolutely necessary. Everything about her was long and thin. She was nearly as tall as me and about half my mass, but she made up for it with an intimidating attitude that also somehow aspired to ladylike elegance. She wore a tight narrow skirt with matching jacket in understated - and probably hugely expensive - grey. She was painfully honest and a stickler for the procedures - an all-round pain in the ass - but I could think of a lot worse Homicide cops that could have been assigned to this one.

I was sitting in my own office chair with a burly uniformed copper at my shoulder. I had been here two hours already and the ashtray was getting worryingly full. The inspector stood and watched the coroner's team bag the body and lug it away on a trolley. The nervous little creature in a white coat who had been fussing around for ages, taking samples from the bottle and glass, swabbing the desk and dusting all the obvious surfaces, finally finished and packed everything away in his bag. Left in the room there were a couple of uniformed types standing around looking bored, me and the inspector.

Luncardy lit her own smoke with an elegant silver lighter then dropped it into her elegant little purse. She drew smoke from her holder and blew it out with a calculated nonchalance and a flagrant disregard for the rules of forensic evidence. She had been ignoring me for the last twenty minutes, in a transparent attempt to intimidate me. I didn't think it was working. Earlier, I had tried my masculine charm on her. That hadn't worked either.

The inspector finally deigned to notice me.

"You sure know how to pick your clients," she said, with a trace of ironic weariness, "OK, let's go through it again."

I had already been through the entire story once, leaving nothing out but my own suspicions and the part about Clathy tailing me, badly. I didn't see why her life had to be made any harder than it was.

"I've told everything already," I said, "When are you going to let me out of here?"

"Hah," she retorted, "Don't think that I like hanging around in this dump."

She swung around to face me, bending forward to look me in the face.

"You admit it was your whiskey bottle?"

"Yeah."

There was no point in denying it. It was the one that had been in the desk drawer, and no doubt my fingerprints were all over it.

"And you say you didn't spike it?"

"No," I said wearily, "Whiskey's expensive enough without wasting it."

"Hah," Luncardy said again, without amusement, "And you hadn't agreed to meet Vale here this evening."

"Certainly not."

"Hmm. Well, your story checks out," she said, sounding vaguely disappointed, "You were at the Starfield Club at the time of death. You seem to have a way with cocktail waitresses. Vale might have come here to kill himself, what with the blackmail angle and all, and there's no sign that anyone else has been here."

Privately, I doubted it. No doubt Hosh knew quiet men, killers who knew how to walk softly and wear gloves. No doubt if I had taken that drink at the Starfield Club, then I'd have woken up here, in an incriminating position, with the police all over me. Or maybe I wouldn't have woken up at all. I must have touched a nerve with Hosh. What was in those accounts that worried him so much?

Or maybe it wasn't Hosh at all. Maybe it was the blackmailer, unless Hosh himself was trying some wacky double-bluff on himself. Someone close to Hosh, in his organisation, someone who knew his way around the Starfield Club, someone who wanted to get rid of Hosh, to bring him down.

"Okay, you're off the hook, for now," Luncardy went on, looking at me coolly, "Come downtown tomorrow, make a statement. And don't try going anywhere, if you value your PI licence."

She flicked a card onto the desk. I looked at it, then back at her.

"Yes, ma'am," I said quickly. There was no point in aggravating the law any more than necessary.

"Now get out. And don't even think of asking when you can have your office back," she added as I opened my mouth again, "It'll take as long as it takes. Understand?"

I nodded, picked up my hat and the card from the desk. Thrown out of my own office, even though the rent had been paid. On the way home, I stopped at a liquor store, one that I had never been to before, and bought a fifth of rye. I sure needed a drink, but I wasn't going to trust any bottle that had been opened, not for a long while.

At home, I stood for a long time in the shower, trying to wash away the scent of death and homicide cops. Then I sat around in my dressing-gown for a long time, trying to make sense of it all. There were just too many possibilities, and no way of telling them apart. Finally I went to bed full of whisky and frustration and dreamed about cocktail waitresses with lilac eyes and plunging cleavages plying me with drinks, the un-drunk glasses piled high on a table, while I ducked and weaved to avoid an invisible tail, all under the baleful dead eyes of Hosh and Vale.

\*

I woke up with what felt like a toadstool farmer's glove in my mouth, drank two cups of coffee and went through the morning newspapers. I didn't find any reference to Mr Merton Vale in any of them. The cops must be sitting on this one. Suits me. I did have a few contacts in the more salacious and less reputable elements of the newspaper business, and I could put in a call if I wanted the focus taken off me for a time. Besides, it would really piss off Miss Tight-Ass Luncardy. But not now.

The sensible thing was to walk away. I had been paid, in advance, a very tidy sum, then I had been warned off in no uncertain fashion. I didn't even have a client who was in a position to moan about my lack of progress any more. The right decision, the obvious course of action, was to chalk this one up to experience and leave well alone. I couldn't do it. Instead, I thought I could find out a little more, answer questions that piqued my own pride and my curiosity - although the latter is something which I knew had proverbially killed the cat.

Besides, there was something else I hadn't told the cops, something that had only occurred to me on waking, hangover or no hangover. Vale's burgundy briefcase was missing, the one with the elaborate and indecently expensive magical protections he had carried with him on his first visit to my office. It wasn't with him when I found his body. Sure, it might have been taken away by whoever it was who had poisoned the whisky - my whisky - assuming that it wasn't the simple suicide it superficially resembled. It might even be stolen by some chancing passer-by. There were plenty of light-fingered layabouts in that low-rent office building, although they would have had to be particularly brave, or skilled, or just foolhardy to tackle that kind of anti-theft magic.

The briefcase must have been important - no-one spends a fortune on active protection otherwise. Sure, he might have left it at home, under the no-doubt watchful eye of his wife. But on his first visit, he gave the impression that this was something that never left his sight, and in any case a short call on Mrs Vale would clear up that possibility. But I doubted it. His wife was probably somewhat suspicious and would regard an impenetrably locked case as deeply upsetting, a reaction that would almost certainly result in the kind of incessant nagging someone long-married would strive to avoid.

More likely, Vale would have stashed his case somewhere else, left it with a trusted partner. But who? It wouldn't be his business partners; they would be at each others throats with daggers drawn, or at least in a permanent state of armed neutrality. The trouble was, he might have trusted Clunie - who probably thought herself trustworthy but who was a naive child in the ways of the world. So, today's order of events: a visit to the Widow Vale, then back to the Starfield Club.

## Chapter 4 - Chase the Lady

*Ding-dong.*

I waited patiently on the doorstep of Merton Vale's homestead. I thought a visit to his widow in person would be best, since many people find it easier to brush off a phone call but are less likely to risk offence face-to-face. No answer. I rang again, then leaned against the frame of the heavy old-fashioned wooden door and took in the splendid view down the sweeping slopes to the floor of the cavern.

The Vale residence graced one of the finer parts of this up-market suburb. It was set up against the curving wall of white polished stone which bounded the cavern, closer to the top than not. Up here, the air is usually fresher and clearer, to the point where it is sometimes possible to see all the way over the far side wall.

The house itself was built of ornately carved sandstone blocks over two floors, with balconies accessible from the upper level and a decorative portico over the front door. It was adjoined to neighbouring buildings on either side and, in the traditional goblin fashion, the residents' privacy was aided by curving walls partially surrounding a paved courtyard. This private area was lavishly decorated with fungal gardens on the walls and in a variety of stone planters and urns. There were some outrageously exotic varieties of fungi, most of which would have been unfamiliar to surface dwellers, and all were clearly grown primarily for appearance and only secondarily as food.



I rang the door bell again. There was no response to the summons. The house was entirely quiet and still, the drapes drawn at all of the windows. It seemed that Mrs Vale was absent, taken in by relatives or neighbours for tea and sympathy, perhaps. Understandable, under the circumstances. Perhaps I should have relied on the telephone after all.

It had taken me an hour to reach the Vale homestead, including a ten minute stroll up-hill in the fresh air from the transit tube exit. I didn't have any kind of a feeling that someone was following me although my professional instincts were still on high alert. As I stood there, taking in the view, I caught a movement in the corner of my eye. I spun around. The twitch was from behind a closed

curtain on the upper floor. I could just make out the slightest movement, as if someone had looked out to see who was persistently ringing the doorbell and then carelessly leaving the drapes swinging.

Someone was in, but not answering the door, it seemed. I made a show of ringing the doorbell one last time, standing around looking irritated for another couple of minutes, then walking off with every appearance of frustration. As soon as I was out of sight around the corner, I slipped into a side-street and hung around for fifteen minutes or so. It's just as well this job makes you very tolerant of boring waiting.

Then, of course, I snuck back to the Vale residence, moving swiftly and silently and keeping to the shadows as much as possible. I made it under the portico without spotting any movement behind the windows. I'm big for a Goblin, and my reach makes it easy enough for me to climb places which most could not manage. It was the work of a moment to clamber up one of the stone pillars which supported the portico and haul myself onto the flat roof. From there, I edged my way along a protruding ledge and made a short jump onto the balustrade of the balcony around the window where I had seen the curtain twitching.

I froze at a crouch, breathing as quietly as I could through opened mouth. Goblin houses are well soundproofed - they have to be, since we have such sensitive hearing - but I had just heard a sound. It was a cry, not of pain or sorrow or fright, but one of pleasure - distinctly carnal pleasure. I crawled forward, keeping low, and found a spot where the drapes did not quite meet in the middle. I pressed my eye to the narrow gap. Within, despite the dimness of the room, I could see two goblins, both quite naked and clearly enjoying each other's most intimate company.

One, the female, I had never seen before in person, although I recognised her from a photograph. The tanned and trimmed form of Merton Vale's wife stood grinning widely, her eyes flashing with excitement and pleasure. The other I knew from a recent encounter. Monzie Hosh was being entertained by the lovely Mrs Vale, in her own home, with her husband barely cold in the morgue. It was an affair that had probably been going on for quite some time, while the cuckolded husband was being distracted by a floozy at the club.

Interesting development...

\*

Since Monzie Hosh seemed to be thoroughly distracted himself just at the moment, this might be a good moment to pay a visit to

the Starfield Club. Perhaps the staff might be a little less guarded when the boss is away.

I followed a winding boulevard back down the hill, walking past long rows of secluded residences solidly built of finely carved stone, surrounded by subdued but stylishly decorated courtyards and the occasional walled garden. Here and there, at the bends in the path, there were vantage points allowing a visitor to rest a while and appreciate the fine view out over the rooftops towards the cavern base. There was money here, lots of money; money which had been worked hard for, in mostly legal occupations, and with a strong suggestion that its present owners thoroughly intended to hang on to every cent.

We rarely get visitors from the upper world down here and, when we do, they are easy to spot. An unusually tall goblin like me can just about pass as a short human in a dim light, but most humans are so tall that they stand out, quite literally, in the crowd. Such a rare visitor might wonder, if they bothered to think about it, why goblin houses have roofs at all? In answer is obvious: there are flying creatures down here, bats and other animals that are known only in myth on the surface, and one would certainly need a degree of protection from their droppings.

Besides, most caverns are big enough to have their own weather - usually pretty mild and unvarying compared with most parts of the surface world - but rain and drizzle are common enough. The caves are also not entirely dark; some sunlight makes it way in from the surface cunningly channelled through the rock, enough to allow certain plants and fungi to grow, and also enough to give a sense of day and night.

I reached the more level part of the cavern and walked to the arched entrance to the transit tunnel system. The transit tubes are an old magic, one which allowed us all to move underground millennia ago, keeping out of the way of the swarming humans on the surface. There are far fewer of us; just a few million hidden away, for the most part, safely underground. There are Goblin caverns all over the world, linked together, although describing the connections as "tubes" or "tunnels" is a misnomer, of course.

Certainly, the appearance is that of a short tunnel. You walk in at a steady pace, then walk out in another cavern, which might be a thousand feet or a thousand miles away, or just another part of the same cavern. The entrances and exits are always underground, so there are steps down and then up at each end - but no Goblin is likely to be worried by two or three flights of stairs.

At busy times, there are lines of Goblins entering and leaving the archways. In the middle of the day, it was rather quiet with

just the occasional straggler coming the other way. The transit here took me to the main terminus for this cavern. From there, it was a short walk to a second entrance which delivered me to another cavern. One more change and I was on my way to the Starfield Club.

\*

The Starfield Club didn't look much different on the outside when I arrived, in what passes for daylight down here. I slipped inside, passing the same rotund bouncers - or at least ones that looked interchangeable - and paying a slightly reduced entrance fee. I was beginning to get fed up with transferring my funds to Hosh, whatever the excuse.

Even though it was only lunchtime, the Club was buzzing. There was a brittle feeling in the air, with more energy and bounce now than the previous evening despite it being the middle of the day and the room only just half-full. The roulette and blackjack tables were crowded - most of them were already in operation - and loud cheers and applause were centred around one player who seemed to be on a winning streak. The stage was empty and the lights were down low, but the dance band was belting out an up-beat jazzy number at high volume for the entertainment of a few couples dancing - or at least writhing rhythmically - on the dance floor.

I slumped in the same chair at the same table as last night. It might have been cleaned between then and now. It was too early to drink whiskey so I ordered a bottled beer from a uniformed waitress who barely acknowledged my presence. I lit a cigarette, again using the matchbook the Club provided. I slipped the matches into my pocket with the cigarettes. At least I'd get some value out of my entrance fee.

My beer arrived on the table a few moments later, plonked down with the minimum of ceremony accompanied by the bill. The waitress opened the bottle in front of me then made off with both bottle cap and opener as if I had intended to steal them as soon as her back was turned. I sniffed cautiously at the beer then took a tentative sip. It tasted all right, but I wasn't going to chug it here and now.

I could see Clathy working across the room. She seemed to be in high spirits. She darted across the floor with a loaded tray in her hand, winking and gossiping with the regulars while deftly avoiding the errant hands trying to pinch her bottom. I caught her eye; her face fell and she turned towards me carrying a tray full of empty glasses with looks like thunder. She bent down and hissed nervously in my ear.



"You shouldn't be here," she said, "It's too dangerous."

"For me or for you?" I countered, smiling up at her.

"Both. Go away."

"I'm here to see Clunie," I said calmly.

"She's not here."

I blew smoke over my shoulder. "Where is she then?" I asked.

"How would I know? She had hysterics when the cops came to interview her yesterday. I and one of the other girls had to help her home."

"Did the police talk to you too?"

"Yeah. Hosh was mad about that. Went on about paying us to serve drinks not talk to coppers. I didn't dare tell him that I'd gone in a bar with you last night."

"Did you tell the police that little nugget?" I pressed.

"I had to. They already knew."

It seemed that Luncardy was playing it straight. I breathed a sigh, which might have been of relief or maybe just cigarette smoke.

"Okay. So where's Clunie's flop then?" I asked.

She put her tray on the corner of the table and swept up the paper check. She took a pen from the tray and scribbled on the check.

"Here," she grunted, pushing the paper across the table at me, "Now pay for your beer and get out."

I looked up into her eyes - still lovely and much less tired than yesterday.

"You want to write your address on that paper too?" I enquired levelly.

She stared at me for a long moment, then glanced away. "All right."

She turned the check over and wrote again. I pulled a bill from my pocket and put it on her tray.

"Keep the change," I said politely.

"Get lost," she said wearily, "Don't come here again. Ever."

She picked up the tray and marched off. I watched her go all the way across the room.

\*

I seemed to have avoided the attentions of the Club management and I thought I'd like to keep it that way. Those sharply be-suited enforcers looked much less alert today, anyway: flirting with the waitresses and gossiping amongst themselves. I finished my cigarette and stood up casually, ignoring the beer bottle now warming on the table. Avoiding any flamboyant movement or any hint of sneaking - a sure-fire way of attracting unwanted attention - I strolled off as if I didn't have a care in the world. No-one noticed me as I slipped out of the front door. This isn't magic, just psychology; no-one really sees an anonymous body moving in an entirely ordinary way.

I reached the street door and stopped to take in the air and reach in my pocket for another cigarette.

"You move real nice, buddy," a voice said next to me.

I spun around. I didn't recognise the Goblin, but I did recognise the cut of the suit. I guess he had just stepped out of the shadows next to the door. He was as tall as me, but skinnier, rangy-looking.

"What's that, Bud?" I said as casually as I could manage.

"Huh," he snorted, "The name's Drummond. Don't think no-one's noticed you coming here. You should count yourself lucky the Boss said we should leave you alone. For now."

I stared at him levelly. I said nothing.

"Suit yourself," he said, "I've said my piece. See you around, or maybe not."

He turned and disappeared inside the club, the door being held open by one of the bouncers. He moved quietly, carefully; he could have been the professional tail last time I left the joint. Time to watch my back again.

Twenty minutes later I was standing outside the apartment building corresponding to the address that Clathy had given me. It was typical of old-fashioned Goblin construction. Rather than a free-standing block, this edifice was constructed from irregular holes cut out of the sides of the cavern, with the interior space enlarged by projections of arched ceilings and supporting walls constructed from squared-off pieces of the material excavated from the openings. There were windows at the front - tiny openings glazed with cheap glass and protected with iron bars and gratings - and doors of heavy dark wood that opened directly onto open walkways reached from a shared stairwell. Low-rent stuff; a huge contrast from the elegant sandstone buildings in Vale's neighbourhood.

I made my way up five flights of stairs and along the landing. Most humans would have been unnerved by the unprotected drop only a few feet to my left, but Goblins are naturally sure-footed and are not afraid of heights. Number 514 was distinguishable from its neighbours only by the carefully painted numerals on the door. There was no doorbell, so I knocked loudly: rat-a-tat-tat. The door was thrown open almost immediately as if she was expecting someone then partially closed again when she saw who it was. It was Clunie, looking red-eyed and dressed in a long silk dressing-gown - another present from one of her special friends, I supposed.

"What do you want?" she said without preamble.

"I want to talk to you about Vale," I replied, gently, "Can I come in?"

She nodded wordlessly and held the door wider. I slipped inside, entering a room that clearly did duty as kitchen and living-room. The walls were covered with pictures, posed photographs of Clunie with a variety of wealthy-looking gentlemen, taken in flashy night-spots and high-end restaurants - even a couple of places which looked suspiciously like they were on the surface. The room was scrupulously clean and tidy except for a pile of crumpled paper handkerchiefs. She had been crying. I couldn't imagine anyone faking that quantity of tears; she must really have been genuinely fond of Vale, which was touchingly naive given that she clearly had other gentlemen callers who lavished their gifts and attention on her.

She sat down heavily in one of the two lushly upholstered armchairs - obviously expensive but too big for the room - and tugged a clean tissue out of a box that stood on a low coffee table. She sniffed into it.

I sat in the other chair, across the table. I took off my hat and held it in my lap, then leaned forward.

"I'm sorry about Vale," I said gently, "I hardly knew him, just a client."

She nodded sniffed again, then dabbed at her eyes.

"He seemed a decent enough bloke to me, though," I lied.

She just stared at me, her hands clutching the damp tissue still in her lap.

"How long have you known Vale?"

"Hmmm, three, maybe four months," she answered, "Merton kept coming to the Club. At first I thought he was interested in

one of the other waitresses, but soon I felt his eyes following me everywhere."

She sounded so pleased to be the centre of even this little attention. I wondered what it was in her upbringing that made her so desperate for attention, even from old lechers like Vale.

"So I got to know him better," she continued, "He was so kind, so gentle."

She sobbed again, dabbing her nose with the tissue.

"And he used to come here, too?" I pressed.

"Yes, sometimes, in the mornings, before the Club opened," she replied, "He preferred to meet me at the Club whenever we could. He didn't want to be seen coming here."

I nodded sagely.

"Did he ever give you anything? I mean, something of his he wanted you to keep for him, safely?"

She thought about that one. I could practically hear the clockwork ticking in her head.

"Ye-es, he did," she said finally, "Just yesterday."

She opened a closet full of expensive-looking clothes and enough shoes to equip a number of distinctly female octopuses. More gifts from her callers. She reached inside with one arm, casually. Then she stopped and forced her head and shoulders between the hanging coats and dresses, pushing them around increasingly urgently, searching. She yanked her head back out.

"It's gone!" she shrieked, clasping her hands to her face, "The briefcase! It's disappeared."

I stood up, took a look in the closet myself. Nothing there, except perhaps a faint smell of perfume on the clothes, not Clunie's, a scent I thought I recognised.

"Any idea who's taken it?" I demanded.

She shook her head frantically. But I had my suspicions.

## **Chapter 5 - Granny Knows Best**

It took some time to calm down Clunie, who had seemed to be on the verge of hysteria even before the discovery that the briefcase was missing. While I searched unsuccessfully in the closet, she slumped back into the armchair, weeping inconsolably and hiding her face in her hands. I tried talking to her; dealing with hysterical females is not a particular skill of mine, although it is one I seem to need to practice far too often in this job.

She finally only became rational when I suggested I would investigate Vale's death further, in my professional capacity. It was something I uttered as a palliative, for reassurance, a throw-away remark not intended to be taken seriously. But somehow it struck a chord, some deeper desire or need in her.

She dried her eyes with another paper tissue, added it to the growing pile and then leaned forward over the table. Her pretty face was suddenly still with a determined set to her mouth.

"I want to engage your services," she said calmly, using a surprisingly formal tone of voice.

I nodded and grunted in acknowledgement, unsure how to respond. I briefly imagined that she expected my services to be covered by the money Vale had given me. I was wrong. Instead, she produced a crisply folded fifty dollar bill from between her breasts. It seemed to have been sitting there comfortably. Perhaps she was the kind of girl who gets folding money tucked into her underwear all the time.

"You find out what happened to Merton," she said earnestly, leaning forward still further and pressing the bill into my hand, "He was kind to me. He deserves better."

I took the warm and faintly perfumed note, unfolded it, smoothed it out and looked at it. It seemed I had a new client.

\*

My next port of call was downtown, to the 14th precinct, to present myself to the cops and make a formal statement. There always seems to be a huge amount of hanging around associated with any visit to a police station and I resigned myself to a boring afternoon in the waiting room after fortifying myself with a late lunch.

To my surprise, Inspector Harriet Luncardy appeared less than a minute after I had checked in at the front desk. She looked faintly harassed, a departure from her accustomed air of cool and unruffled elegance. If I could detect it at all, she must have been seething inside.

"Come on then," she said, gesturing irritably.

She led the way through to the usual interview suite: a table and two uncomfortable chairs in the exact centre of the otherwise bare room, bright lights set into the ceiling and a mirror running the entire length of one wall which was not, of course, in any way, actually a section of one-way glass.

I sat in one chair and dictated and recorded a statement. It was transcribed by a uniformed copper who seemed a model of stolid professionalism sitting on the other side of the table. I said what I said before, leaving out the business with the briefcase, and my more recent discovery of Hosh and the widow Vale making the beast with two backs. Luncardy stood behind me, leaning nonchalantly against the wall and affecting an air of boredom which was transparently fake. Something was eating her.

I hand-wrote the usual declaration of truth and completeness on the bottom of the statements, and signed them in the usual way. They were immediately counter-signed by Luncardy herself. She snapped off the recorder, walked across the room and opened the door, then waved the uniform out. He left smartly, clutching the signed papers. The Inspector sat down in the recently vacated chair, crossed her long thin legs and ran a hand over the smooth polished dome of her head, ignoring me, and stared at the wall for a long moment.

Finally, she turned to me. She really did look distinctly worried. She produced a packet of cigarettes and her holder from a pocket of her mannish jacket, screwed one into the holder, then almost as an afterthought offered the packet to me. I took one, lit first hers and then mine with a match from the book I had taken from the Starfield Club.

"We're writing this one down as a suicide," she said, blowing smoke, "We know he was being blackmailed. He must have seen no way out. If he handed over the accounts then Hosh would have had him rubbed out - there's no way a hoodlum in his business would let that one pass, and Hosh would be bound to find out what had happened and who had done it. If he refused, his wife gets to find out about his play-away activities. It would have ruined his personal life, and his professional career too."

I pricked up my ears - quite literally - at this last remark.

"How so?"

"Didn't you know," she laughed, "Alva is old man Madderfy's daughter; his son is the junior partner at the firm. The old man retired from active practice a few years ago, but you can bet your bottom dollar that he still keeps a close eye on what happens in those offices."

I nodded, digesting this nugget of information. Then I stared levelly across the table at Luncardy.

"I don't believe Vale killed himself," I said bluntly, "Sure, he was in a bind, but he struck me a fighter, not one to take an easy way out. After all, he hired me to track down his blackmailer."

"And much good it did him," she said in a tired attempt at a riposte.

I let that one ride.

"But why kill himself in my office?" I said, "And with my good scotch, too? No suicide note. I think it was an attempt to frame me in a murder. And I take that kind of thing personally."

Just at that moment the uniformed copper stuck his head back into the interview room.

"Boss wants to see you," he said to Luncardy.

She stood up.

"Wait here," she instructed me, then added to the uniform, "Keep an eye on him."

Five minutes later, she was back, looking conspicuously rattled.

"Come with me," she said brusquely.

I followed her through the open office area which was filled with police officers toiling at desks, grunting into telephones or losing a fight with a typewriter. As I passed by, one copper tore a sheet of paper from a typewriter with an oath that nearly turned the air blue, screwed it up angrily and hurled it forcefully into a nearby waste paper basket.

Luncardy's boss, one Fowlis Wester according to the nameplate on his desk, looked up at me and glared as I entered the office. Police captains have a reputation as unyielding bastards to maintain, likely to inflict a severe tongue-lashing for even the most minor of infractions. Wester was no exception to this rule. He was a grizzled veteran, about my weight but half a head shorter, bulky in the shoulder and bulging at the gut.

I was wheeled into the office by Luncardy and left standing on the worn and slightly sticky carpet. Wester came around the desk and pressed his face up close to mine.

He might have thought he was intimidating me, but I've been glared at by experts. My old granny used to try to put the fear of God into me when I was a child. By the time I was twelve I was already more-or-less immune to this kind of treatment.

"Why are you still sticking your nose into this business?" he thundered from point-blank range.

"I have a client," I replied calmly, adding with conscious irony, thinking about the bill that Clunie had given me, "A live one. Paid money up front and everything."

\*

Captain Wester looked as if he was about to explode.

"Who?" he bellowed in my face.

"That's my business, Captain. I know that. You know that. For the record, my client is convinced that Vale did not take his own life. My client wants me to find out the truth, and I intend to do just that."

He glared at me apoplectically and waved a finger under my nose.

"One step out of line, Gask," he growled, "Just one, and I'll have your licence. Now get out of my sight."

I turned and walked swiftly out, without answering, closely trailed by Luncardy. I stopped suddenly half-way across the outer office, so quickly that the Inspector nearly collided with me. I spun around to face her.

"Well, that went well," I said, "Is he always that charming?"

"You should consider yourself lucky you got off so lightly," she snapped. There was still a tension there, something just below the surface which was causing her sleepless nights.

"What am I missing here?" I asked her, "What are you all so worried about?"

"There's nothing to worry about," she replied defensively, not meeting my eye, "Vale killed himself, case closed. If your client - if he really exists - wants to waste their money, that's their lookout."

"Okay," I said, "That's your line. Now let me out of here so that I can get on with my job."

I turned around again and stalked off across the office, the outer door thumping behind me.

\*



With Clathy being on the early shift at the Starfield Club, I thought I could get to interview her Grandmother - and perhaps even get a sneak look at her apartment - without her being there. I hightailed it over, just a couple of trips on the transit tubes and fifteen minutes brisk walking.

Clathy's apartment was in a much more modern block than Clunie's, a high-rise built in the human style of stone blocks piled up and mortared together. It was a much more well-to-do neighbourhood - indeed, one which I would be pleased to be able to afford myself. All very aspirational. No chance for an honest Joe like me, not in this racket.

I strolled in through the lobby as if I owned the place, casually catching the self-closing door just as a well-dressed and portly female pushed her way through clutching an oversized and assertively fashionable handbag and a small and nearly hairless creature I hoped was a Chihuahua. I nodded to the matriarch, catching her eye flirtatiously, causing her to look away and sniff dismissively, her chin in the air.

I stepped in smartly and headed for the elevators, trying to look as if I knew where I was going. The building super's office door was shut, and the lobby was unoccupied and quiet. Clathy's apartment was on the 14th floor, close to the top but not penthouse territory. I pressed buttons and the door closed silently, opening with a *bing* a few seconds later, with no perceptible sign of movement in the interim. Human elevators are just so slow.

I stepped out and turned left, following the apartment numbers until I reached 1412. I knocked on the door, *rat-a-tat-tat*, then stood back, taking off my hat and holding it respectfully in front of me. There was a series of soft sounds from within, sounds that might have been inaudible to a human and barely detectable even by me. They were the sounds of someone moving slowly and carefully, not in order to be stealthy but simply because their ancient limbs were paining them.

There was a soft scrape of the cover for the peephole being moved aside, then a long pause while, presumably, the occupant took a good long look at me. I managed a cautious smile, trying to set my facial expression into one of professional and trustworthy resolve. It's an expression I use all the time.

The peephole cover flicked back, then the rattle of chains and bolts being inexpertly fumbled came clearly from the other side of the door. It swung inwards, slowly, pulled by a hand bent into a twisted claw by old age and arthritis. A wizened face appeared around the edge of the frame belonging to a female of advanced years who moved with the aid of a stout stick.

"Mister Gask, I presume," she said in a voice now quavery with age but still carrying the undertones of intelligent resolve, "Clathy told me to expect you."

\*

"I'm Gask," I said.

"I don't doubt it. Come on in, son."

I stepped forward slowly, waiting patiently while the old creature shuffled her way across the carpet.

"Shut the door behind you, if you would be so kind."

I complied. She hobbled back towards an upright armchair set close to a miserly fire that burned low in an old-fashioned fireplace set into one wall. She eased herself into the chair, carefully arranging her stick so that it was immediately to hand and fussing with a blanket over her knees.

She must have been at least four hundred, her face gnarled as an ancient tree root, and the cartilage of ears and nose swollen with age and infirmity. She smiled in a friendly kind of way, revealing a mouth full of teeth missing or broken, the inevitable result of genetically strong teeth which nevertheless are not replaced during a long lifetime.

I looked around. The apartment was small and tidy, furnished comfortably enough with more flair and taste than with the brute application of money. I had entered a living area with a kitchen annex set into one corner, and with various doorways which no doubt led to bedrooms and bathrooms to left and right.

Opposite the entrance were a pair of french windows, now firmly closed to keep in the warmth. Heavy curtains in a sombre shade were drawn almost all the way across, and only a little light filtered through the gap. The room was dim, lit mostly by the low flames of the fire and by the focussed beam of a reading lamp which highlighted a small table upon which a volume lay open.

In another wall, bookshelves filled the space between the two doors. They seemed to contain an eclectic mixture of well-publicised and well-thumbed modern novels, interspersed with worn volumes of classic poetry and works of literature. Presumably, this reflected the different interests of the two females who cohabited here.

Now seated, the ancient turned her bird-like grey eyes on me.

"I'm Argaty Dupplin, Clathy's grandmother," she said, "Take a seat, Mister Gask."

I settled myself on a davenport opposite her chair, shoving aside numerous artfully mismatched cushions. I kept my hat on my lap. The room was stiflingly hot, sweltering. I made no move to take off my coat. I had too many things concealed in my pockets for me to feel comfortable otherwise.

"I know why you're here," she said calmly.

"You do?"

"I do," she responded primly, "And it's to do with that thing there."

She nodded in the direction of the kitchenette. A familiar object sat in the centre of a small dining table. It was Vale's burgundy briefcase, its protective glamours glowing visibly even from this distance.

I got up suddenly and stalked towards the case. The magical protection flared as I approached, but didn't do anything overt. I kept my hands behind my back and leaned forward as far as I dared to take a closer look.

"I wouldn't touch it, if I were you," Grandma admonished.

"I won't," I said with complete conviction, "But how did it get here?"

She snorted, a minor explosion in the gloom of the room.

"My granddaughter did a stupid thing," she admitted, "She stole Merton Vale's briefcase from that tart Clunie."

"Why?" I asked, professionally curious. In my experience, people don't usually volunteer that they, or a close relative, have done something potentially illegal.

"Oh, it was just an act of mischief," she answered airily, "A whim."

I wasn't convinced. But I didn't see any advantage to pressing on that point just now.

"So how did she bypass the glamours?" I asked with genuine curiosity, not just changing the subject.

I strongly suspected that, if I made a move to pick up the briefcase right now, I would end up being thrown halfway across the room by the protective magic.

There was a pause while Argaty stared into the fire. I resumed my seat on the worn davenport.

"Clathy was once friendly with Vale," she said hesitantly, "At the Club. Until Clunie came along."

"Ah." That might explain the tension between the ladies, at least.

"I want you help me, Mister Gask," she said, with growing conviction, "I want you to get that case out of our lives."

I hesitated. Before I could answer, there was a sound at the door.

## **Chapter 6 - Take the Case**

There was a series of clattering rattles as the locks were deftly disengaged from the outside. The door swung open and Clathy herself stepped into the room. She was wearing the skimpy outfit the Starfield Club provided for this particular class of employee, with a light coat in a deep shade of purple thrown on over the top. She looked tired and a little care-worn, moving as if her feet hurt from standing up all day.

As she entered, I stood up and half-raised my hat, not so much as an expression of solidarity with her aching feet as a recognition that I had not yet mastered those tendencies to politeness drummed into me a century or so ago, and the reaction was mostly automatic. I am not always much of a gentleman, although I guess I could still pass for one if I put my mind to it. Even so, the reaction is one which, in this day and age, attracts more attention - mostly positive, I think - than many people realise.

Clathy stopped dead, halfway to the coat-stand with her macintosh in her outstretched hand. Her lilac eyes flashed in my direction, not so much in recognition or even displeasure, but a curious mixture of smouldering anger and another smouldering emotion which left me very slightly worried about the long-term impact.

She hung up her coat and kicked shut the door, the locks snapping back into place with a sound like metallic jaws closing.

"So why am I not surprised to see you here?" she said with resignation.

"You shouldn't be. You left a trail a mile wide, anyone could follow."

One side of her mouth lifted in a wry twist, most unladylike by any convention I knew but with a certain allure I found I could not deny.

"So you're a smart guy," she countered, "It happens."

Clathy threw herself into a chair on the other side of the fireplace and kicked off her shoes. She stretched out her stocking'd toes to the fire and wriggled them to get warm. I sat down again on the davenport, my hat returned to my knees. I

waited. With the air of one putting off the inevitable no longer, she sat up straighter in her chair and looked across at me defiantly.

"You need to tell me why you took Vale's briefcase," I said gently.

"I know I shouldn't have," she said, "But Clunie wouldn't have known what to with it anyway"

"Perhaps," I acknowledged, "But it was given to her for safe-keeping, not you. So why take it off her?"

"But it should have been me," she exploded, "He used to trust me, before that over-inflated bimbo arrived at the Club."

"You mean he'd left things with you for safe-keeping before?"

"No, not *things*. Just that blasted briefcase. Didn't want anyone to know about it, he said. It used to live at the back of my closet, unless he wanted me to bring it to him. He'd let me know at the Club, and we'd meet somewhere - in a hotel, usually. He was always so kind, so gentle, so generous. Then it stopped, all of a sudden. It was weeks before I found out that he had taken up with that bitch Clunie."

Tears stood out shining in her lovely eyes. I put my hat on the davenport and stood up. I took a clean handkerchief from my pocket and unfolded it, handing it to her wordlessly. She took the white cotton cloth and dabbed ineffectually at her face.

"What's in the briefcase, Clathy?" I asked softly.

"I don't know," she wailed, "He always faced it away from me when he opened it, and I never saw him put anything in, or take anything out. He just lifted the lid and looked at the contents, perhaps touched them briefly, then closed it up as if he didn't have a care in the world."

She wiped her eyes more carefully and handed the handkerchief back to me with a sniffed "thanks".

"I used to tease him about it," she went on, wringing her hands in her lap, "It's nothing, he used to say, nothing to worry about. Just some ancient history I want to keep safe. But he would never tell me any more."

"And you don't know how to open it?"

"I've never tried. He said the magic wouldn't let me. He said it would blow up if I tried, and that I mustn't risk it. Whatever it was, it was precious to him. I didn't want to damage something he thought was that important."

\*

Our exchange was being followed closely by the gimlet eyes of the grandma from her perch by the fireplace, sitting so quiet and still that I had almost forgotten about her. Now, Argaty coughed discreetly to get our attention. Clathy sat up straight in her chair, hands on her lap, once again looking like a schoolgirl in the headmaster's study. The grandmother caught and held my eye.

"That case has got to go," she reiterated, in a voice that was as firm in tone as her infirmities allowed, "I want you to take it away with you. Now."

I looked at Clathy, who glanced at the elder, then back at me, and nodded.

"Please," the younger Goblin added imploringly, "Just get rid of it. I want it out of my life, out of my home."

"But I can't even touch it," I protested.

Clathy sniffed and cracked a weak smile.

"I'll transfer it to you," she said simply, adding, "I did it all the time with Vale."

Bowing to the inevitable, I stood up and took the few steps to the table in the kitchenette. Clathy slid lithely from the chair and padded up beside me on bare feet. The glamour surrounding the briefcase became alert, flaring for a moment in warning.

I looked from the corner of my eye at Clathy. She seemed calm, back in control of herself. She lifted her left hand, palm outwards, and uttered several syllables of esoteric power which sounded, as is the nature of Goblin magic, completely unintelligible to even the closest bystander. There was a flicker and a brief subsonic rumble, felt rather than heard.

"There we are," she said, "All done. You can take it away now."

"Want to tell me the keywords for the glamour?" I said, raising an eyebrow.

"I can't," she admitted, "I've already forgotten."

I frowned, turning to face her.

"It's part of the spell," she explained, "Once I hand over control, the words just disappear from my head. Only Vale had the full set of powers, as far as I know. Only he could open the case safely."

"So you can't tell me?"

"No. Sorry. Oh, I know that I once knew them," she went on, sounding as if a great weight had been removed from her shoulders, "And I know that I have forgotten them several times in

the past. But I can't tell you now what they were - and I could only speak those words once, anyway."

Great, I thought, the deviousness of the finest Goblin magics. Vale must have forgotten to remove those limited powers from Clathy when he transferred his affections to Clunie. So now, I was supposed to be able to carry the briefcase safely, but I wasn't able to open it, nor was I able to allow anyone else to take it from me - at least, no-one who didn't want to be blown up with very limited warning.

I wondered who else was able to pick it up, or open it. Magics like this typically limit the number of people for whom any particular action was safe, usually to no more than a handful. Maybe Clunie could safely touch it but, if Clathy's experience was anything to go by, she probably had no way of opening the thing, and had probably never seen inside it, either. This was going to take a certain amount of careful handling.

With the same nervous care that a human would adopt when carrying a ticking bomb, I reached out with my left hand and picked up the case by the handle. The glamour didn't change, didn't react at all, although I was doubly careful I kept away from the locks that kept the briefcase securely closed.

"I'll be going then," I said, addressing Clathy and her grandmother equally. Argaty nodded gravely at me, grudging approval etched in the set of her ancient shoulders.

I collected my hat from the davenport and jammed it on my head with my right hand. I stepped towards the door but before I could reach the handle, I was intercepted by Clathy.

"Thanks," she said, then added almost in a whisper, "Maybe we could get a drink sometime?"

I looked her directly in the eye. She stood on tip-toes, reaching up to my face and planting a kiss on my cheek. It was all very demure and friendly, but I could not help but suspect that there was just a little warmth behind it, a promise of something more. Threat, more likely.

"Well, perhaps we could, at that."

She opened the door for me, smiled again and ushered me out, the locks clattering behind me.

\*

There had been an almost palpable sense of relief in the room when I agreed to remove the briefcase. Clathy and her grandmother were afraid of something, something they had not told me, perhaps even something they could not even articulate,



but I would bet my bottom dollar that it had something to do with the death of Merton Vale. It was a Clue, a Clue so big and obvious it could mean one of a million things. The kind of Clue that attracts attention, advertises itself, warps people and events around it. A dangerous Clue. No wonder the ladies wanted shot of it.

The briefcase felt unnaturally light in my hand, almost as if it was empty. I tried swinging it around and shaking it - gently, naturally enough, I didn't want the glamour to think it was under attack - but there was no evidence of movement of the contents. Perhaps there really was nothing in there, but then why bother with the elaborate protection?

Even though I had agreed to take the damn case off their hands, I was not yet sure what to do with it. I could return it to the widow Vale but I reasoned that, if Merton had really wanted his wife to have the case, he would simply have left it at home. Besides, her liaison with Hosh was worrying, especially if the briefcase did turn out to contain papers relating to Hosh's accounts - the very material that the mysterious blackmailer was trying to extract. Difficult questions would definitely be asked, probably by some of Hosh's less friendly associates and possibly with the aid of sharp instruments.

Alternatively, I could take the case to someone associated with Vale's firm. The obvious candidate was Old Man Madderfy himself, but the links to Mrs Vale (nee Alva Madderfy) and the younger Madderfy in the office also worried me. It might be nothing, it might be something. And I might be able to find out more, without getting myself killed in the process.

I strode back in the direction of the transit tubes trying to look assured, even nonchalant, as I marched along swinging the expensive-looking case in my hand. I couldn't decide on the course of action. I needed to think it over and, in the meantime, I need to keep the thing safe.

My office was still out of bounds, probably for a week or more given the lazy nature of Homicide cops. They might spend an age there, investigating every little detail, prying into my files and sneering at my cheap furniture and cheaper booze. More likely, they would have given the place a cursory once-over, but would not be bothered to tell me they had done until I badgered them a time or two.

I never kept anything important at the office anyway and I certainly didn't want to turn up there clutching the case, on the off-chance that Luncardy or one of her cronies were still hanging around. Indeed, the cops would doubtless take a less than rosy view of my omission of the briefcase from my statement. They would want to retain it as material evidence, no doubt, but I was

was pretty certain that if the cops got their sticky fingers on it, it would never see the gloom of day again.

I could take it back to Clunie, which is where Vale had left it, in her supposed safe-keeping. She was probably still able to handle the briefcase, although I was not so sure that it would be particularly safe there. Perhaps that's what I should do anyway, but it might not get me any closer to discovering who killed Vale, and who had been blackmailing him.

The only real option was either to take the case home with me, which seemed too obvious, or to ditch it in one of those hideaways both secret and secure that I use to retain certain personal items in long-term storage. I decided on the latter, at least for a few hours. I had the acquaintance of one or two people who might help me find out more, perhaps even open the thing, one or two experts in that high art that humans insist on calling magic. Of course, anyone who might even consider dealing with me would have to be just a trifle shady, to have just a little skeleton in some corner of their closet. In fact, a few moments thought revealed to me, I knew just the one to help me out.

\*

I stepped lively, striding along swinging the featherweight burgundy briefcase jauntily, as if I didn't have a care in the world. No-one seemed to be following me, and I was careful to make sure that this actually was the case. I stopped at irregular intervals to admire the view, or to sniff at a particularly fragrant display of decorative fungi emerging from the walls and window-boxes of dwellings of the more house-proud local residents. I also stopped at a telephone box, not actually to make a call, although any bystander might have thought that I had spent several minutes in animated conversation.

In truth, for anyone I wanted to speak to right now I would have to do so in person. They would not be the kind of individual who would respond to a letter or even answer a telephone call. Appear in the flesh and they might consider talking to you, if they felt like it; if they didn't feel like it, then you wouldn't see them at all, or even realise that someone actually lived at that particular address.

None of my senses indicated that anyone was following me or giving me anything more than the most cursory of glances. It was time, I thought, to stow the bag in some secure repository and then go see someone I could rely on, someone who owed me a favour or two.

Some of my best hidey-holes are well out of the way of everyday Goblin territories, or even awareness. The one I had in

mind was actually in the surface world, the human world. Transport to and from the surface is easy enough to arrange, for those with the right level of clearance. This is something that goes with the territory in my case, as well as with the official Private Investigator's badge I carry in my wallet at all times. The vertical transits are commonplace, being just a re-oriented version of the transit tubes used to link the populated caverns together. Of course, you have to pick the right exit point.

I made my way swiftly through a couple of the entrances and exits of the everyday transit system to the exit I had in mind, flashed my badge casually at the two uniformed border guards and stepped into the opening that would magically - and swiftly - propel me to the surface.

I emerged in a quiet corner of an otherwise bustling concourse, the clatter of wheels and the buzz of conversation echoing off the concrete arches of the ceiling. The noise and movement served to mask my sudden arrival from an unremarked area of blank wall. I slipped on my sunglasses and pulled my hat down over my eyes and ears, and buttoned my coat up to the chin. I stood as straight as I could, hunching my shoulders to shorten the appearance of my arms, and moved swiftly across the open-plan plaza of the Swiss railway station terminus.

It was a roofed space that a human would probably describe as 'vast', although it was a pale shadow of the truly huge caverns which make up the lower world. No-one was paying me any particular attention as I stopped in front of a bank of left luggage lockers, the triple row of stainless steel doors stretching away on either side. Some years before, I had surreptitiously modified one of the secure lockers in this bank with a couple of items of Goblin magic. The first replaced the crude human-made mechanical lock with a much more cunning magical one, although of course it appeared identical from the outside. The other glamour added a degree of reinforcement that made that particular flimsy metal locker highly resistant to attack from jemmy or crowbar, or even oxy-acetylene torches.

I took a small flat piece of polished metal from my pocket. It might have been a key of some sort once, although nothing to do with locker in front of me. It was just for show, in case some inquisitive human glanced in my direction at the wrong moment. The lock opened as it recognised my hand, and I swung up the briefcase and slotted it neatly inside. I pushed the door closed, listening for the triple click that indicated that all of the protections had re-engaged themselves, then strode back to the hidden exit I had used just a few minutes before.

Oh, and perhaps I should mention, that expression about the Gnomes of Zurich? It's not just a metaphor, you know. Goblins do indeed have interests, even now, in human financial circles. But that must be a story for another time.

Now it was time to see a man about a proper key.

## Chapter 7 - A Trip Topside

My next port of call was also in the upper world but it would have taken half a day to get there by surface transport. It was much quicker to return to the caverns below, take the transit tubes to a closer point, then return to the surface. Human transportation is just so slow.

Even so, it would be a long journey for me today. My destination was a long way from the nearest egress from the lower realms, a fact which would make many Goblins - even those intimately familiar with the upper world - think twice about undertaking such a journey. I wasn't looking forward to it much, myself.

The one I was intent on visiting had deliberately shunned society, both human and Goblin. Urquhart Garrick was an artist and a scholar of the old school, a school where the search for truth always outweighed such transient fidelities as good taste, political correctness or even legality. He was one of the very few Goblins who had elected to live permanently top-side. This was not something that was itself actually illegal, as I understood the law, but somehow a thing so strange, so out of line with societal norms that no-one had quite gotten around to legislating against it.

I emerged from the exit hidden in the weatherworn Victorian brickwork of an arched railway bridge, in a run-down industrial area of a city somewhere in the northern part of England. I looked around cautiously but there was, as I had expected, no-one about. It was already dusk, the waning light punctured by the yellow glow of streetlights turning themselves on. A human would have thought it dark and spookily unnerving under the arch - exactly the kind of place that is regularly chosen as a portal to the lower realms.

Water from a stalactite formed from a hundred years of seeping mortared joints dripped onto my hat then neatly ran down the back of my neck. I shuddered briefly, then tugged my coat collar higher and set off on the longer part of my journey.

I turned a corner onto a more populous street: stragglers from the rush hour on the way home in one direction, and chattering groups of youths on their way to the pubs and bars for a night out in the other. It was a brisk walk up the hill to the railway station. I purchased a ticket from the machine with a credit card - I'm sure

Visa has no idea just who they issue their cards to - and then made my way through the automated barriers.

I kept to the shadows and quiet spots on the platform, more from force of habit than anything, until the correct train pulled into the station. It was one of those modern diesel-powered motor-carriage sets that feel like a bus mounted on steel wheels, although without the benefits of spring suspension or a great deal of padding on the seats.

The carriage was not particularly crowded even after the station in the city centre and emptied steadily as the train clattered its way up into the hills, stopping frequently at places of increasing obscurity and desertion. Finally, I reached my destination and alighted, ignoring the only remaining passenger, an overweight human in a worn suit who was snoring in his seat.

The platform was dark and deserted as I made my way up the steps to the road. The place was tiny; just a pub called the Strawbury Duck, and a grand total of five houses - all once barns and farmhouses, but now of course tastefully converted into homes for those who like to view their countryside from the inside of large and expensive four-wheel drive vehicles.

It was now truly dark, any moon or starlight hidden by low stratus, but the soft glow in the sky formed by the clouds reflecting the distant lights of the city was more than enough for me to see comfortably by. My target was a cluster of tumbledown farm buildings a quarter of a mile along the winding lane from the hamlet which had somehow managed to resist the tide of relentless gentrification, no doubt to the disappointment of the well-heeled neighbours.

The old buildings were hidden from passers-by by thick and untended hedges which threatened to encroach on the road and were probably only kept in check by friction from the paintwork of passing vehicles. In a narrow gap in the hedgerow, a wooden gate was wedged slightly open, so entangled in brambles that I doubted it had moved in a decade or more. I slipped through the gap between gate and foliage. There was a soft noise, like an exhalation, right in my ear. I froze as what felt suspiciously like the barrel of a gun pressed against my kidneys.

\*

"Hello, Garrick," I said calmly.

"Gask! I thought you could move quietly."

"I can, if I need," I replied, "But I didn't want you to think I was sneaking up on you."

The pressure on my back ceased and I took this as my cue to turn around slowly.

Urquhart Garrick was old, very old, even for a Goblin - at least four hundred years - and had lived for the last century or so on the surface, here in this forgotten corner of the planet. Age and experience had turned the polished mahogany skin of the younger generation into something that resembled the cracked and sea-worn tree-trunk found beachcombing which had then been treated to several coats of old-fashioned Creosote. Deeply seamed lines criss-crossed his face, although his eyes retained a look of penetratingly clarity which would not have seemed out of place on a Goblin half his age. Although he was stooped and bent, he still managed to look spry and was certainly agile enough to catch me from behind, even if he did have the advantage of knowing the lay of the land.

"You're looking well," I said.

"Ha!" he replied, "No need to try buttering me up, youngster. I know exactly how ancient I look, thank you very much."

He held an old-fashioned revolver loosely in one hand. When I glanced in its direction, he stuffed it in the pocket of the waxed green jacket he was wearing. The coat was in a human size, and it hung in folds to below his knees. He stepped back a pace and looked me up and down warily.

"Long time, no see, son. No doubt you want something from me," he said steadily, a wry grin twisting his leathery face, "Why not come inside and tell me about it."

Without waiting for an answer, Garrick turned on his heel and strode off towards the darkened and abandoned-looking farmhouse at the end of the short path that led away from the gate. I followed, shaking my head at the old one's perspicacity. The building in front of us showed no lights, and boarded-up windows and missing roof-tiles sent a clear message of advanced decay. The house was flanked on either side by buildings even more tumble-down in appearance; the barn to the right appeared to have no roof remaining at all.

He ignored the human-sized front door and skirted the farmhouse, weaving between mouldering piles of metalwork that were once probably farm machinery. Either that or he had bought up a scrap-metal merchant's entire stock sometime in the last fifty years. At the back of the tractor's graveyard, a cellar door was just visible at the bottom of a short flight of steps. I followed him down the steps and through the incongruously heavy and well-fitted door.

Inside, well, it was a different world entirely.

Garrick had once been a Professor in one of the more recondite Schools at my old University, which was where I had first met him. It from his tutorials that I first really picked up the ability to look at a problem from all sides, to question everything, and to not accept untested assumptions, my own or those of others. Ultimately, I had heard, it was his own testing of assumptions, way beyond breaking-point, that had led to his current exile.

We had entered a large basement, larger by far than the entire house above it; it looked as if extended far underneath the outhouses on either side. This part of the expanse of the cellars had been converted into a close facsimile of the Professor's old office, all lined with dark wooden panelling and floor to ceiling bookshelves. The space was set around a large desk at one side and a pair of comfortable overstuffed leather armchairs in front of a welcoming fire on the other. I could just glimpse other sections of the accommodation through open archways to either side. These appeared to be fitted out as laboratories, although for what obscure branch of the sciences or arts I could not immediately tell.

Garrick stripped off his waxed jacket and tossed it casually at a coat stand by the door. He wandered over to the fireplace and stretched out his hands, warming himself by the fire for a few seconds. He turned to look at me, still standing by the entrance.

"Well, dear boy," he said affably, "Come take a seat and tell me what great and mysterious errand has compelled you to seek out your old teacher."

\*

"Nice place you've got here," I remarked casually, taking off my hat and moving over to the fire to warm myself.

"It suits my humble needs," Garrick replied with obviously false modesty.

Without asking, he moved to a side table, lifted a decanter and poured a generous measure of whiskey into each of two cut-glass tumblers. He handed one to me wordlessly. He did know me quite well. I took the proffered drink and sat myself in one of the two armchairs, placing my hat on the side table. I placed the whiskey tumbler next to it, on a dark leather coaster designed to protect the glossy French polish of the table surface.

The old Professor sat in the other chair. He looked me in the eye, raised his own glass and pointedly took a deep sip of the amber fluid within. Rebuked, I picked up my own glass, returned the salute and took a polite taste. The warmth spread down my throat and I nodded appreciatively. It really was particularly fine single malt, much better than anything I would normally have bought for myself.



"So why are you here?" Garrick asked.

"I have a locked box problem," I began to explain, "A locked briefcase, in fact, secured with what looks suspiciously like a very expensive set of protective glammers."

Garrick steepled his fingers and looked at me very directly, in the fashion I had always found so very disconcerting in tutorials. His long years of reclusiveness had evidently not diluted his penetrating stare.

"What's in the briefcase?" he asked.

"I have no idea," I admitted, "But it's gotta be important. And it might just lead me to a killer."

"Indeed. Very moral, very worthy." He raised an eyebrow. I sipped again at the very fine scotch, which was warming me up as much as the fire blazing in the hearth.

"Well, in these circumstances, there are three possible ways forward," he said after a few moments reflection, "One, find someone who the glamour will recognise as authorised."

"Not possible," I said, "The only one who I know has access is dead, in what I think are suspicious circumstances."

"Never impossible, dear boy, never actually impossible," the Professor admonished gently, "But I'm willing to accept that you think the prospect is remote. But the dead owner, did he not have a last will and testament? Conventionally, such documents include either a key or the name of a person who can take on ownership of such elaborately protected property, do they not?"

I nodded in agreement.

"But such an approach," the Professor went on, "Would necessitate engaging with relatives of the deceased, or the police or, still worse, lawyers. And I imagine you have reasons not to engage with at least one of these groups."

I nodded again. The old boy had certainly not lost any of his marbles since I had seen him last.

"Two, you accept that it is not possible to open the box. Therefore, you will have to solve your case without the aid of any information which might be contained within, or appreciate that the case cannot be solved. And to forestall your next remark," he continued, holding up his glass with a slight smile, "The fact that you are here suggests that you are otherwise out of options."

"You're my only hope," I said.

"Which leads me to option three. You find someone with the necessary skills and expertise to open this locked box. Someone

with a deep knowledge of glamours of all kinds, somebody expert in disarming and defusing protective spells, and someone who will perform these difficult, nay, dangerous tasks for only fifty percent of the reward money."

"Twenty percent," I said automatically. There was a faint creak from the doorway that led to the laboratories, barely audible over the crackle of the fire.

"Thirty-five," the Professor insisted.

"Okay, okay," I said, "So will you open the damn thing for me?"

"Of course, dear boy," Professor Garrick, "That was never in question."

"Just whether I was willing to pay for it, I suppose?"

"Filthy lucre, of course," he replied with a wider smile, "But I do have certain expenses to find, you understand."

I understood all too well. Maintaining this joint would cost a lot, especially since he evidently wanted to remain out of sight, hidden from the common view. But I really didn't have much of a choice at this point.

\*

One of the reasons that Urquhart Garrick found it necessary to hide himself away from Goblin society is that he applied his very considerable intellect to problems that certain very powerful individuals and organisations would much rather remain unsolved. Magical locks and barriers, and security glamours of all sorts, had been considered inviolate for millennia, mainly because, it seems with hindsight, that nobody had really understood how they actually worked.

As a much younger person, Professor Garrick had become fascinated in an intellectually curious kind of way with some of the less well understood areas of magic. He had established a new way of thinking, an intellectual framework, a unifying theory, if you like; one which was not, as I understood it, accepted by the general establishment. Nevertheless his approach was one which had the unlikely advantage of correctly predicting certain rather curious results, observations not easily explained with the more widely-accepted theories.

All this might have remained nothing but an academic curiosity; the kind of thing debated earnestly by the more studious of undergraduates - I was never one of those - or with more understanding by the seven or eight specialists that actually comprehended the details. But it turned out that the one area where Garrick's theories really showed their worth was in

interactions between magic and the mind. Specifically, it showed in the kind of magic which either deluded the observer or interacted powerfully with them, in a fashion determined beforehand, unless the observer was specifically recognised as an exception. Of course, this meant illusions and glamours of all kinds, a class of spells which were - and still are - widely used to hide objects and individuals from prying eyes and to protect property from thieving fingers.

When the University authorities finally realised just what the brilliant young researcher's work really implied, a certain amount of pressure was rapidly yet discreetly applied to both him and his academic superiors. By all accounts, the younger Garrick was initially rather shocked by the suggestion that he desist from his endeavours in his understanding of the theoretical principles behind this abstruse technical subject. Eventually, however, his reaction was to set aside the contentious research, and to apply himself elsewhere. For many years, he concentrated his very considerable intellect on other areas, publishing numerous papers and reports that led to his meteoric rise to the rank of full Professor at the unprecedented young age of one hundred and thirteen.

Now it seemed that when he reached a position where he felt secure - a tenured Professor at a respected University - Garrick began to drop hints in the detailed sections of his more recondite papers and the seminars at other research institutions. It turned out that the Professor had never really abandoned his ideas about the metaphysics of glamours and that he was determined to return to his speculations and equations on the topic.

Over the next dozen decades or so, it seemed that Garrick's behaviour became increasingly erratic. He was shunned by most of the students and almost all of his so-called academic colleagues. He was eventually forced from his chair at the University and, soon afterwards, disappeared from the public view.

What very few people knew was that, in later years, he had turned from pure theory to practical, experimental descriptions of the processes his equations suggested, techniques which he had once hinted to me in one of the wide-ranging tutorials I had attended, being one of the few students that found Garrick's reputation attractive. Not that it did my own academic achievement any favours, of course, but then, who ever heard of a Private Investigator with a good degree?

\*

"So where is this expensive case?" the Professor asked, with not quite the right degree of casualness.

"Oh, it's in a lock-up," I said, toying with my drink, "Somewhere out of the way, somewhere few Goblins would think to look. I have the key right here."

I pulled out him the flat piece of metal which I had used as a decoy when I deposited the briefcase and waved it in his direction. He inspected it closely.

"Hidden on the surface, I suppose? A railway station locker, I'd guess. You astound me, old son. Well out of the way, indeed."

There was another creak from the doorway behind me. It took all of my willpower not to twist my head or my ear in the direction of that slight sound.

"Well, I'd better go and get the thing," I said, draining the last of the Scotch and standing up, and taking my hat from the side table.

"Fair enough, dear boy. But don't rush back. I'm off to bed soon; promised myself an early night."

I smiled without feeling, setting my hat on my head at a rakish angle.

"I'll be back soon enough," I replied.

Garrick showed me to the door with exaggerated politeness. Once outside, I shrugged my coat collar up against the cool evening breeze and made my way down the overgrown path to the rickety gate when I had entered. It was all quiet and still. As I slipped through the gap between hedge and gate, a dark figure appeared behind me. I spun around but before I could turn more than a fraction, the figure reached up and struck me with some heavy object, a sap of some kind. I had the stunned moment of shock when the lights danced and the visible world went out of focus but was still there. Then there was nothing, just darkness and emptiness and a rushing wind and a fall as of great trees.

## Chapter 8 - Bright and Beautiful

It's not a coincidence that, these days, most entrances to the Goblin world are in human cities in cool northern climes. Left to chance, of course, most entry points would be in prairies or jungles or farmlands. We'd hate that: the profusion of vegetation in these places would confuse and overwhelm most Goblins used to being surrounded by damp stonework. Tropical locations or, still worse, deserts are far too hot - Goblins really can't stand the heat in these places. So, long ago it was decided that we had the best chance of handling the transition was if our first entry point was a damp dark human city, where the smog and noise would both conceal and reassure.

So of course Goblins go AWOL from time to time, trying to hide from angry debtors or aggrieved spouses in the teeming upper world. Sure, we have enough contacts in the usual places - the police, the hospitals, the morgues - that the authorities can usually spirit away any vagrant Goblin accidentally discovered by human society. But they prefer not to take the risk, which is why the bounties offered to recover those who skip to the surface are so generous. For me, it's a profitable little sideline, a real money-spinner for the underpaid and overqualified PI from the Lower Realms. As a bonus feature, this policy also means that there is a pool of experienced star-siders - as Goblins who frequently visit the surface are called - who can generally be relied upon to carry out the occasional stealthy commission from wealthy patron or government agency.

\*

I woke up in a damp field at dawn, surrounded by a herd of vast creatures with luminous eyes and steaming mouths and bucolic natures that I belatedly recognised as cows. I was lying on my back on the dewy grass, the early sunrise beginning to warm the trees and rouse the birds to their noisy chorus. The presence of the cows had led to a strong stench that I do not want to describe, one that would probably affront many humans but, to the sensitive noses of a Goblin, reeked with such utter offensiveness that I jerked awake instinctively.

Feeling my skull, I found I had a lump the size and hardness of a snooker ball on the back of my head. Someone skilled with a sap had knocked me out cold for a couple of hours, long enough to get

me out of the way for a while without actually killing me. As I sat up, I realised that my body ached in several places, bruised as if I had been unceremoniously dumped in the back of a van.

I picked up my hat which some thoughtful soul had deposited nearby, very nearly missing the closest cowpat. I brushed it off as best I could, stuck it on my head and pulled it low over my eyes. It was rapidly getting to be what humans would call daylight - to me, a dazzling brilliance which was already hurting my eyes. I fumbled for my sunglasses in my pocket, pulled them out. They were crushed and broken, probably where I had fallen on them. They were utterly useless, so I stuffed them back in my coat, then turned up my collar for the minuscule amount of extra shade it provided.

There was a five-bar gate a few yards away, filling the only gap that I could see in the overgrown hedgerows that surrounded me. I staggered towards it, dodging the beefsteaks inexpertly, head throbbing. I clambered over the gate inelegantly, then stood in the road looking left and then right. There was nothing to advise me which way to go, which direction would take me to something resembling civilisation, to somewhere I could get to a phone.

At random, I chose left and set off walking. There seemed to be no motorised transport at this early hour and I wondered just what kind of a backwater I had been dumped in. Twenty minutes later, I was still walking. It was already getting warm and dazzlingly bright. I was beginning to think I would have to take shelter somewhere cool and dark, and wait until nightfall.

\*

I heard a rattling of metal approaching from behind me, punctuated by the splutter of an ancient engine and the crunching of equally ancient gears. As it approached at what seemed only slightly faster than walking pace, I stuck out my thumb in the time-honoured way. The agricultural vehicle rattled to a halt next to me. The contraption might have started life as some kind of Land-Rover from four or five decades before, but now with so many bits bolted or welded on in random places it was difficult to be sure.

"Need a lift?" the driver asked through the open window with the kind of superfluous vacuity demanded in these circumstances.

I nodded, carefully, in case my head fell right off.

"Going into Ducksford," he said in a low monotone, "Can take you there."

I mumbled some thanks and opened the door. The owner's modifications - or maybe just repairs - extended to the interior as

well. The driver's seat might have been original, although visibly patched with gaffer tape in several places. The passenger's chair was just that: a superannuated armchair wedged into the space between transmission tunnel and door frame.

I pulled myself over the arm and into the seat, looking around automatically - and unsuccessfully - for a seatbelt.

"Shut the door," the driver instructed, his warbling voice barely audible above the rumbling idle of the engine.

I reached over - my long arms coming in handy, if you pardon the pun - and grasped what looked like the strongest of the protuberances screwed, glued and bolted to the inside of the door. I tugged firmly and the door swung closed, harder than I expected.

"No need to slam," the driver admonished gently.

He wrestled with the gear lever for a few moments, provoking a series of loud graunching noises, then the vehicle lurched into motion.

The driver looked about as old as I am, but achieved entirely without the advantages of Goblin genetics. He was wizened and scrawny, short for a human and nearly as bald as I am. A few strands of greying hair blew in the wind from the never-closed windows, failing to conceal any portion of his liver-spotted pate. He was dressed country-style in worn overalls and gumboots encrusted with authentic quantities of farmyard muck.

"In trouble?" he asked laconically, speaking from a lowered corner of his mouth.

I fumbled for a cover story.

"Stag party," I muttered in my best city-English tones and holding my head authentically, "Dumped me out here. Somebody's idea of a joke."

I didn't feel much like laughing and the old coot at the wheel wisely left me to stew in my own thoughts while we clattered our way along the winding lanes.

Thirty minutes later I was forcing open the door of the vehicle next to the village green in the tranquil English village of Ducksford, also colloquially known as "the back of beyond". My driver had pulled up at the entrance to the car park of the village pub, of course firmly closed at this hour. I banged the door shut, less hard than before, and thanked the old man through the open window. He grunted non-committally, then said, "Hope you get below soon enough," before slamming the vehicle into gear and roaring off in a cloud of partially-burnt hydrocarbons. So much for my disguise as a human, I thought.

The only telephone kiosk in the place stood nearby, its glass and apparatus miraculously unbroken by the local vandals. My wallet and buzzer was still in my pocket. Another of those cheap glammers I favour had concealed it from prying eyes, but everything else had been stolen, except for those broken sunglasses. I needed a smoke, badly, oh, and some change for the phone.

The pub being inaccessible, the only possibility was the village shop, open early for the purpose of flogging heavyweight newspapers to the English landed gentry and red-tops to van-drivers. I strode over the wet grass, adding more damage to my polished wingtips. I pushed open the door, the dim interior of the shop a relief to my eyes, although the tinkling bell was as offensive to my ears as it would be to any sane human.

My diminutive stature - by human standards - has occasionally given me trouble buying cigarettes in parts of the upper world. Here, the harassed woman behind the counter didn't give me a second glance as I ordered a packet of ten and a disposable lighter, and proffered a twenty pound note from the emergency stash in fifteen currencies I carry around with me. Presumably she was used to the local youths puffing their lungs out from the age of eleven onwards.

In case you're interested, cigarettes don't damage Goblins in the same way as they do humans. For us, they're more a tonic for the lungs, the smoke probably being cleaner than most of the air we habitually breathe. This is especially true in some of the deeper caverns, where it's difficult to see more than ten feet in the Stygian gloom and which are home to some *very* strange creatures.

\*

Back outside, my first smoke already halfway down to the filter, I sorted through the coins for enough silver to satisfy the phone company while I tried desperately to recall the number of the local contact point, the intermediary service who would forward a call to my client - for a fee, naturally enough. This was one of half a dozen numbers I thought I had committed to memory some time ago but now seemed to be eluding me. Perhaps that bump on the head was affecting me more than I realised.

The phone service was busy the first four times I dialled, enough to make me wonder if I had recalled it correctly. I slammed the receiver back on its rest in frustration and stepped outside fuming to light another cigarette. Thirty-five seconds of blowing smoke and I had calmed down a little and was back into the kiosk to make another attempt. This time the call went through, and I gave the operator Clunie's name and her home



cavern. After what seemed like an interminable delay, there were a series of clicks and the ring tone sounded out again.

I hoped that Clunie was at home, although I had no idea what time it was in that part of the Lower Realms. The phone rang and rang, then a sleepy voice answered: "Hello-oo?"

"It's Gask. Listen carefully."

"Findo!" she exclaimed, sounding suddenly much more alert, "Where are you? The police have been looking for you."

"Kincardy been sniffing around, has she?" I snarled.

"The police inspector? Skinny bitch," she sniffed, "Strolled in here as if owned the place. Asked me all sorts of questions which were none of her business. But mainly she asked where you were."

She waited for me to say something but I was still fumbling for another cigarette.

"So, where are you, exactly?" she added plaintively.

"On the surface," I said.

There was an audible gasp. So many Goblins are terrified of being in the open, with no ceiling over their heads, just empty space all the way to the stars.

"The surface! What are you doing there?" she squeaked, sounding alternately terrified and intrigued.

"Nursing an aching head," I answered, "Someone tried to split my skull open last night. Dumped me in a field."

There was another gasp, accompanied by some suspicious clicks that I did my best to ignore.

"Now, just listen, will you?"

I rushed to convey everything I had to say before my credit vanished into the ether. I advised her to stay calm and tell everything she knew to the police. Not that she knew very much. Nor did I, but I had a truck-load of suspicions that I couldn't prove and in some cases barely articulate. And in case someone else was in fact listening on the line, no-one could say that I wasn't cooperating fully with the cops.

My last few coins I retained for the second call, the one that would at least get me below ground again, although probably not so very comfortable once I got there. But at least it would be a public return. No way did I want Kincardy or anyone else spiriting me away, never to be seen again.

Up here, there's a number - several numbers, in fact - which all connect through to the lower realms cops, and it was this one that I dialled now. The police telephone operator must have received special training for talking in unintelligible monosyllables, but I managed to convey the urgency of my situation and the details of my location. The phone beeped and swallowed the last of the coins, then it went dead with the subtle finality of a Telco determined to extract the last penny of profit from their investments and their customers.

I took yet another cigarette from the fast-depleting pack. Perhaps I should have bought a larger packet, but I didn't have very much local currency left, and I might yet need the money. I leant nonchalantly against the phone box watching the ducks exploring the shallow muddy puddle that no doubt some people thought of as a picturesque feature. Otherwise the village was still and quiet, the human population still clinging to their duvets and dreaming of cafe latte in bed.

I didn't have long to wait. A yellow Mini Traveller with blacked-out windows screeched to a halt in the pub car park twenty minutes later. It contained two people, obviously Goblins both to the trained eye, who emerged from the car in a low roll that said they expected to be shot at.

I recognised the smaller of the two as he picked himself cautiously from the ground. He was a snaggle-toothed veteran who had been doing this job for forty years. He had the notched ears and scarred face of one who had had more than his fair share of narrow escapes in the line of duty. I guess I was responsible for at least one of his narrower escapes and quite possibly one of the scars as well.

"Hi, Tarsapple," I said.

"Gask! I should have known," he snarled. "Dragged from my bed at this hour to recover somebody who should know better. Typical!"

I didn't say he was a friend, mind you.

"It's good to see you too," I said, in as care-free a manner as I could manage.

The driver of the Mini was a big Goblin but still self-evidently wet behind his expansive ears. He followed this exchange with his mouth open, his head turning back and forth as if watching a ball game from the sidelines. These special corps cops specialise in the recovery of Goblins from the surface and they claim to have a good return rate. I'd say that they were generally only effective when the Goblin in question, like me, actually wanted to get below. After

all, we occasional bounty hunters wouldn't turn a profit if it was that easy to track down a skilful Goblin hidden in surface society.

Tarsapple turned to the junior.

"Glenshee, this is Findo Gask, a private dick and bounty hunter," he said with mock formality, "Also general pain in the ass. Watch out for him. He's trouble."

I stubbed out my cigarette under my heel and stood up straight, carefully showing my hands to the jittery policemen. Tarsapple opened the rear door of the vehicle he had arrived in and jerked his head to indicate his expectation.

"Get in," he said with his customary lack of civility.

I needed to duck a bit to fit through the Mini door but I soon settled myself reasonably comfortably in the back seat. Tarsapple scowled at me as he slammed the door shut before clambering into the passenger seat and bellowing through the window at Glenshee to get a move on. His junior scurried to the driver's side and got in, twisting the key in the ignition even before he shut the door. The engine roared to life and I was slammed back in my seat as the car jerked into motion.

\*

I had met Tarsapple before, in the course of various expeditions to the surface or, more usually, when hanging around the offices of the many and various law enforcement agencies that clutter up the human world as much as the caverns below. His distrust might have something to do with the time my unexpected arrival had distracted him, allowing the runaway he was attempting to persuade to come quietly - with the aid of a large pistol, of course - to escape his grasp. It wasn't quite my intent at the time, but the fact that I snagged the same perp a couple of hours later for a reward that kept me in whiskey and cigarettes for a good few months seemed to have soured any professional working relationship we might otherwise have established.

Goblins are generally awful drivers and the youngster Tarsapple had introduced as Glenshee was no exception. The Mini weaved its way along the back lanes with foliage scraping on the wing-mirrors and careering around blind corners as if the driver knew there was nothing coming the other way. There must be something about the sense of space and the need for speed which infects a certain minority of Goblin when they get behind the wheel of a car up here. Perhaps it is some reaction to the constrained spaces below; whatever it is, they become complete lunatics.

I gripped the seat fabric with grim determination as the vehicle slewed and slithered its way along the deserted country roads. I

tried to avoid thinking about what would happen if we encountered a juggernaut coming the other way, or indeed what the violent and unpredictable motion was doing to the ache in my head and the contents of my stomach.

I was barely able to pay any attention to where we were going. Almost the only thing I recall was the gated entrance to the grounds of what was once a grand country house and now one of those Institutes invariably known locally as Sleepy Hollow Research Centre, the kind of place where neckties are unknown, beards are mandatory and, in winter, open-toed sandals are worn *with* socks.

The surroundings steadily declined from rural green to post-industrial grey, and we were soon driving through an industrial estate so depressed that the only buildings showing any signs of life offered a choice of Blind Spring Rivets or Janitorial Supplies. It could have been in any forgotten corner of England, although I suspected it was somewhere in the People's Republic of West Yorkshire.

Without warning, the Mini swung into the open entrance of a warehouse which looked long closed down, the frontage decorated with a wind-blown sign that read: "Industrial Unit to Let. High Roof Loading Bay". I stepped from the car still clutching my belly. I so hate surface transport. I was as green as an unripe tomato, my skin adopting the colouration ignorant humans normally ascribe to my people.

I suppose I had expected to be driven to the nearest town of decent size, to some anonymous back alley conveniently close to a hidden entrance to the lower world. Through the haze in my head and unwanted movement in my stomach, I looked around for the tell-tale signs of such an entrance. Nothing.

"What are we doing here?" I groaned.

"Someone wants to talk to you, Gask," Tarsapple said, a nasty tone in his voice.

He shoved me in the back, hard enough to make me stagger, encouraging me towards an interior door that might once have led to an office. The door hung loosely on its hinges, a tremor of movement hinting at some hidden person within.

"Findo Gask, at last," a familiar voice said.

## **Chapter 9 - Alliance of Equals**

The speaker was Fowlis Wester the captain of police, although I had to check to be sure. His voice was calm and level, not the bellow I had experienced only yesterday, and he did not sound particularly angry - a state which hitherto I had assumed was a permanent condition.

"So kind of you to join us, Mister Private Detective," he added. His normal speaking voice, I was not surprised to learn, was a low growl, one which managed to convey more menace than when he was bawling in my face.

Wester nodded in the direction of Tarsapple, who grinned nastily; an expression, incidentally, which is particularly effective for a Goblin. It was the nod of a favour being acknowledged, the nod of one who appreciated that a quid pro quo would be forthcoming at some unspecified future time.

Tarsapple then turned on his heel and jerked his head at Glenshee, who was still standing by the open driver's door. The younger Goblin swung back into the vehicle and re-started the engine, while the other strode around to the passenger door. With much slamming of doors and a roar of the engine, the two Goblins drove off with a screech of tyres while watched unhurriedly by Wester.

I was still feeling extremely groggy, clutching my belly dramatically and wincing from the pain in my head. I'd like to be able to tell you that I was putting it on, exaggerating for effect, to unbalance my audience. Unfortunately, it wasn't true; I could barely stand and the riotous motion in my stomach was still threatening to overflow in an unfortunate fashion.

From the shadows further back in the room, another figure stepped forward. He was of medium height and with that portly appearance that often afflicts the well-fed Goblin in later years. The skin on his head yet retained the polished appearance that spoke of much expensive care and attention - oils and lotions carefully and frequently applied by young and tender hands, no doubt - but his face betrayed incipient wrinkles around eyes and mouth, lines which would soon deepen, if I was any judge.

The stranger was wearing a very well cut double-breasted suit - a good choice for one as rotund as he - with a low-key but

obviously expensive silk tie held in place with a diamond tie-pin. His shoes were polished to a high shine, his nails - a Goblin's long, strong nails are *not* claws, by the way - were manicured and buffed, and his eyes bright with intelligence and perhaps just a little mischievousness.

"Mister Gask looks unwell," he purred, "Help him to a seat."

A couple of goons detached themselves from the shadows and moved cautiously towards me. The two silent and black-garbed Goblins caught me as I swayed, just before I actually fell over, picked me up under the armpits and deposited me with surprising gentleness on a chair in the centre of the inner room. They were private henchmen, I noted, not members of the police or the surface patrols.

"Better now?" Captain Wester enquired, with a noticeable lack of sincerity.

I grunted in the direction of Wester by way of a reply, unable to articulate anything more elaborate at the moment. I held my head in my hands, hoping against hope that the nausea would pass in a few moments. The pain came in waves, from my skull and my abdomen alternately. Eventually, I was able to look up groggily and take in more of my surroundings.

The office had been disused for months if not years, judging from the level of dust and dirt which had accumulated. Once, however, it had been a well-appointed workspace, with a large desk, new-looking filing cabinets and several of those modern complex-looking swivel chairs that are supposed to support all those body parts which needed supporting. Right now, one of them was supporting all of me.

The goons stepped back and stood silently and attentively, once near the office door and the other close enough to protect the older Goblin from harm even if I pulled a Uzi machine pistol from my coat pocket right this very second. Not that I could have aimed it straight anyway, in my current condition.

\*

The older Goblin moved into my line of sight and looked at me with faint interest, the interest of one viewing a dusty museum specimen now long dead.

"My name's Madderfy," he said calmly, adding, "I see you've heard of me" as I jerked my head up.

I suppose I should not have been surprised. The elder Madderfy had a reputation as a smart cookie and it stood to reason he would be interested in the death of his son-in-law. He also had a reputation as a mover and shaker, and therefore one with certain

contacts in the police, contacts that might be relied upon to furnish a little information in exchange for membership of the Country Club. Or maybe just an anonymous brown envelope of folding cash.

"My friend Captain Wester here has suggested that you can help me with a private matter," he continued, "A matter in which I suspect you have an interest yourself."

"I'm not sure I'm going to be much use to anyone just at the moment," I replied, with absolute honesty.

"He's got a thick skull, that one," Wester said with a flash of his usual bluster, "Doesn't take a hint no matter how it's delivered."

"Now, now, Fowlis, be gentle," Madderfy said calmly, "Mister Gask has had a hard night." He paused, then added, "Perhaps it is time you consider your other duties, hmm?"

Wester managed to take the hint without further advice. He squared his uniform cap on his head, pulling down the peak and glared at me through the narrow slit that remained between brim and cheek. He nodded obsequiously to Madderfy, then puffed out his chest and strutted out of the open office door.

With Wester out of the way, Madderfy leaned forward to take a closer look at me, wrinkling his nose at my pervasive odour of mobile cow-pat.

"Mister Gask, I feel sure we can help each other," he said softly, "We both want the same thing."

"And what's that?" I grunted, still barely able to speak coherently.

"We both want to know what really happened to Merton Vale."

"Why do you want to know?"

"He was my son-in-law, and my business partner." That sounded reasonable to me. Perhaps too reasonable.

"Maybe you should ask your tame police captain," I countered.

Madderfy snorted derisively.

"The police have their uses," he conceded, "But getting them to apply concentrated thought to a single objective is not one of their strong points."

He had a point there, I had to agree. That's why PIs exist in the first place.

"So what do you want from me?"

"Go home and get yourself cleaned up, get some sleep," Madderfy advised, "When you've recovered, you'll hear from me again."

He picked up a slim folder from the once-elegant desk and opened it, appearing to study it carefully.

"But while you're recovering," he continued after a few moments, "There's a curious police report you might want to consider. Something gleaned from our contacts in the Swiss Police in the Zurich Canton."

There was something about his voice that told me that I should pay attention, despite various parts of my body objecting vigorously.

"Sometime during last night, somebody tried to break open a left luggage locker using, of all things, shaped explosive charges."

That sounded like premeditated overkill, in normal circumstances. I knew that the opening of railway station lockers was usually a few minutes work with a decent jemmy. This was, of course, why I had put so much care and expense into glammers and other protections for that stash.

Old man Madderfy glanced in my direction, as if to be assured that he had my attention.

"An eye-witness reported that, a few minutes before, somebody tried to open the locker with a key, but failed. Apparently, he used some pretty, shall we say, heated language. According to the report, the somebody was tall and heavysset, with muscular arms and a thick neck concealed with shoulder-length hair, and wearing a tight-fitting tee-shirt and dirty blue jeans."

He didn't have to say: it was somebody who was almost certainly not a Goblin. Somehow, a human had become involved in this affair. This is almost always bad news, in my experience.

I could now barely speak with the pain in my head and grunted to acknowledge that some of the importance of his report had made it into my skull. Madderfy smiled briefly, without either humour or sympathy. He took out a business card and tucked it into my breast pocket.

"We'll be in touch, soon," he suggested, "Feel free to come and see me, anytime."

One of the goons stepped forward and helped me to my feet. He guided me out through the door of the office, across the dusty and oil-stained floor of the industrial unit, and out through a fire exit. Once the door banged behind me and I was on my own, I looked around blearily. I was standing in an alley bounded on one



side by the ribbed metal of the warehouse and on the other by a rusty metal fence, deeply entangled with briars and weeds.

The grey metal cladding has been extensively and imaginatively graffiti'd. I recognised in the swirling colours and the angular lines that represented old-fashioned Goblin runes, words that marked the entrance to a drop-shaft, one that returned me to the Lower Realms in a matter of seconds. From there, it was just a short trip by transit tube and a ten-minute walk - stagger, more likely - to reach my apartment. How I managed it, I'll never know.

\*

Much later, I awoke, on my own bed, still fully dressed including boots and overcoat, and with my hat looking filthy and crumpled on the floor beside me. I was still alive, at least, although I was not yet fully convinced of this fact.

I clambered to my feet and staggered to the kitchenette. I was parched with a thirst so terrible that I unhesitatingly drank a glass of lower realms tap-water, on the grounds that it couldn't possibly make my stomach feel any worse. Then I fumbled around in the further recesses of the kitchenette for tea-towel and ice-cubes, then returned to the bed to clutch the resulting ice-pack to my head for twenty minutes, until I could feel the swelling begin to subside, or perhaps that was just wishful thinking.

Finally, a sense of life began to return to my head and and my brain. I took a long hot shower and changed into fresh clothes, then bundled my suit and overcoat into a bag, placing my disgracefully stained hat on the top. I made coffee, the poisonously strong variety that I habitually concoct first thing in the morning which seemed somehow decadent at this early afternoon hour.

I visited a little place on the corner of the block that a human might think of as a Dry Cleaners. In truth, it was a magical cleaners, capable of removing dirt and stains from any garment with a one-hour turnaround, although they did charge a premium for swift service and especially soiled garments.

While I was waiting for my coat, I decided to call in at my favourite diner, conveniently sited on the opposite corner at the intersection. David, the rotund and avuncular patron, recognised me immediately and bustled up, then hesitated for a moment when he saw exactly what kind of state I was in. He swiftly ushered me to a table where I was presented within seconds with a glass of a thick and suspiciously glutinous liquid that the proprietor insisted was an old-fashioned tonic. I should drink it all in one go, he advised, down the hatch.

It tasted, well, just a little less revolting than I expected. The more identifiable substances in the preparation included eggs, chilli sauce and vodka. Heaven knows what else was in there somewhere. I sat with my head in my hands for a few minutes while the potion did its work, which it did with surprising efficacy. To my astonishment, I started feeling hungry, even ravenous.

I looked up to see David watching me.

"Feeling better?" he asked as he approached smiling faintly.

"Much," I confirmed, "And damn hungry too. I could eat a horse."

The patron whipped a notepad and pencil from his apron pocket.

"Horse steak and fries coming right up," he said, scribbling quickly, "All the trimmings."

\*

After a late and leisurely lunch, and the collection of my cleaned and refurbished clothes, I strolled back to my apartment. My stomach had settled completely after David's ministrations of food and medicine and the ache in my head had subsided enough that I winced only slightly when I placed my restored hat on my head.

I needed to think. I needed to get out and about, too. Hanging around the apartment wouldn't help. Besides, a walk would ease out the remaining aches from my body, aches caused by having lain all night on damp grass.

I slipped on my overcoat, then put a fresh packet of cigarettes in one pocket and my spare pair of sunglasses in another. I shook the disposable lighter - empty already - and threw it in the trash bin disgustedly. Then I realised I had no matches - the match-books from the Starfield Club and other detritus that I had collected over the last few days had been carefully removed by whoever had ambushed me. A short rummage in various drawers in the kitchenette turned up a half-used match-book, one I had forgotten about months before. I struck a match and lit a cigarette, blew smoke, closed the apartment door behind me and set off to take in the fresh air, or what at least passed for it down here in the lower realms.

Now that my brain was working again, I could think clearly about what Madderfy had told me. There was evidently something he wanted, something he thought I could provide, something that he couldn't get for himself - either directly or through his tame police captain - which may or may not be the identity of his ex-junior partner's killer.

Madderfy clearly knew where the briefcase was stashed, and also knew it was well-protected - protected enough that mere explosives wouldn't release it. If he really wanted the case, he could have just asked for it - or at least offered me money to bring it to him. I wasn't planning on moving it; it was probably as safe up there as it would be anywhere. In any case, bringing the briefcase back down here without an army to protect it would be a sure-fire recipe for being whacked on the head again, this time less gently.

On the other hand, I knew that Madderfy was also concealing the existence of the briefcase from the police. He had very pointedly got rid of the annoying Captain Wester before he told me about the explosion at the railway station lockers. Even if Wester had seen the report, he would not have understood the significance. That was something known only Madderfy and me, and whoever had followed me to the surface.

That deceit, that concealment, made us equals in my book. Both of us thought that wretched briefcase was important and, I suspected, neither of us could safely open it. I wasn't ready to return to Professor Garrick - who knew what games he was playing? But the old boy's analysis was still spot-on. Time to explore the legal route. Time for a return trip to see the Widow Vale.

## **Chapter 10 - Père et Fils**

I rang the doorbell at the elegant sandstone mansion that had belonged to Merton Vale. This time, the front door was opened almost immediately by an elderly but still spry Goblin whose black dress and respectful demeanour said "Housekeeper". To my surprise, she did not ask my name or my business, but immediately ushered me inside and gestured in the direction of a reception room off the entrance hall where from within came the low murmur of many voices.

The entrance hall itself was an ode to perfection in pristine white marble. Ornately patterned and highly polished tiles tessellated the floor, while serried rows of pillars in pale stone supported the gallery on three sides above as well as the curving staircase on the fourth side. Plush chairs with those carved wooden feet that look like dragon's claws gripping an egg stood here and there, separated by low tables with ashtrays and potted palms in stone urns. It didn't look if anyone actually ever sat there. Gaps on the walls were filled with oil paintings in an old-fashioned style, although I didn't recognise anyone. Grand double doors stood open on either side and at the end of the hall, and a smaller door discreetly hidden which led no doubt to the servants' quarters below.

I took off my hat and declined the housekeeper's offer to take it or my coat. I followed the old dear to the reception room door, whereupon she gestured again, bowed informally and turned back towards the hidden door. I stepped inside. This room was more intimate, but only by contrast with the grand hall outside. Wide windows framed with ornate drapes let in whatever light there was. The floor was muffled in a deep-pile carpet, and armchairs and davenports suffocating under a load of cushions and soft furnishings.

It was hard to see much of the furnishings, or even the walls. The reception room was almost filled with well-dressed Goblins of all shapes and sizes, the only common factor was that they were all wearing unrelieved black. It was, I quickly realised, a wake for the dear departed Merton Vale.

The room was buzzing with conversations the low voices which seem to be mandatory in gatherings of this sort. Many of the guests were circulating from person to person, no doubt making

polite small talk. Others were queuing to offer their condolences for the grieving widow, who was sitting prettily with her ankles crossed in a large chair close to the centre of the room, and lifting the black veil of her hat from time to time to dab daintily at her glisteningly moist eyes. It was hard to believe that this was the same female who was enjoying the carnal attentions of another not twenty-four hours ago, her husband dead just the day before that.

Other servants circulated carrying silver trays, most of whom were the kind that suggested that they had been hired for the day's work as part of a catering package. Some of the trays held titbits and canapes of the kind preferred by Goblins while others, reassuringly, appeared to include filled glasses. As I looked around, a young Goblin expertly carrying a tray with an ice bucket containing an open wine bottle and half a dozen tall glasses approached.

"Glass of Champagne, sir?" he murmured discreetly.

I nodded slowly. Champagne is not my favourite tippie, I'll admit, but I wasn't above accepting a free drink every now and again. The waiter poured the wine carefully, concentrating on getting the foam just right. They hadn't stinted on the quality of the Champagne, either. As my glass was poured, I caught sight of a vintage year and *Père et Fils* on the label. Father and Son. How very appropriate, I thought, looking across the crowded room at Old Man Madderfy, who was talking to several younger Goblins stood in a group by the fireplace.

I took the proffered glass and sipped, looking over the rim. Apart from Madderfy and the lovely Alva Vale herself, I did not recognise anyone in the room. Monzie Hosh, unsurprisingly, was absent. So too were both Clunie and Clathy. Mrs Vale clearly believed in keeping up appearances.

Even so, I wondered about one of the younger Goblins stood with Madderfy. I know that humans find it difficult to tell one Goblin from another - "you all look alike to me" - it struck me that one of the youngsters bore a striking resemblance to Madderfy. I thought I could guess who he was.

\*

I edged in the direction of the little group that had clustered discreetly around the fireplace at the end of the room, carefully skirting the groups and knots of guests in subdued conversation, and dodging the smoothly graceful movements of the professional waiting staff. Even so, my motion was not completely unobserved. Madderfy suddenly looked up from his conversation a few moments after I started to move in his direction, affected a reaction intended

to convey first puzzlement and then belated recognition, and waved me over with a languid swipe of his hand.

"Findo Gask, isn't it? The Private Detective?" he said affably, narrowing his eyes as if daring me to say anything that suggested he was less than sure of my identity.

I decided to play along. "You must be Madderfy," I replied, in a fair approximation of the same affable tone.

The ground rules established, he relaxed slightly. "That's me. I'd heard that poor Merton had engaged you. But I didn't expect you to be here today," he added in a less edgy tone, "Although I'm sure my dear daughter would be gratified to know of your presence."

He nodded in the direction of Alva, who was just in the process of graciously accepting yet another artfully worded condolence from a black-garbed visitor. She nodded daintily, her eyes demurely downcast, every bit the picture of the attractive widow mourning her dear-departed husband.

"I'll have a word when she's less distracted," I replied, "I dare say she's still a little upset, even distraught, by the sudden death in the family."

He nodded sagely, apparently taking my words entirely at face value. Maybe he didn't know what pastime his favourite, and indeed only, daughter had been indulging in recently. Maybe he didn't care. Or perhaps a lifetime in the professions had given him an impenetrable poker face. I couldn't tell.

I glanced at the younger Goblin that stood at Madderfy's left elbow. He followed my eyes, then turned and reached out a beckoning arm.

"Mister Gask," he said, pulling the youngster closer in a faintly proprietary way, "This is my son. Junior, say hello."

"Pleased to meet you, Mister Madderfy," I said politely, extending my hand.

"Call me Creagan," the younger Goblin said with entirely synthetic warmth and shaking my hand firmly, "Everyone does."

Creagan Madderfy was the image of his father in a younger mould, not yet as rotund but with a strong suggestion it was only a matter of time before he got that way. He exuded a degree of urbanity and self-satisfaction which eclipsed even his father's. He was a youngster on the make, not yet a century old and already a partner - albeit a junior one - in a respected firm. And no doubt all achieved with almost no help from Dad.

A third Goblin stood stiffly nearby, as if he wasn't sure he should actually be there.

"And this is Busby Logan," the elder Madderfy went on, gesturing in his direction.

Logan looked distinctly nervous. Whether this was the company or a more general condition I couldn't tell. He looked the nervous, edgy type, all twitchy movements and sidelong glances. He was taller than either Madderfy, as old as the father but so thin he looked as if he hadn't had a decent meal in several centuries. I extended my hand in his direction. He stared at it for a second, as if he had never seen anything like it in his life, then took my hand in the most limp-wristed handshake I had experienced in a long time.

"Well, gents," I said, my voice still dripping with bonhomie, "It's good to meet you all, it goes without saying, but I came here to talk to Mrs Vale."

"Of course, of course," the elder Madderfy said, "Let me take you over and introduce you."

He took me by the elbow and guided me across the room, leaving the other two Goblins standing by the fireplace looking very slightly nonplussed. I took the opportunity to drain my champagne flute and place it on a waiter's tray, declining the offer of a second glass. Madderfy nodded left and right as the crowds parted deferentially on either side, acknowledging the great man's presence without anything as overt as a bow.

"Alva, my dear," he said as he approached, "Can I introduce Mister Findo Gask?"

She looked up and started minutely as she recognised me. It must have been her, not Hosh, who had peeked from the window the last time I had visited this house. Madderfy too caught the almost imperceptible movement, even though she recovered almost instantly.

"Mister Gask is a private detective, who was working for Merton before his untimely demise," he added, frowning slightly, and glancing first at her and then at me.

"I'm so very sorry for your tragic loss," I said, oozing sympathy at every pore.

Mrs Vale extended a hand languidly. I took it, barely grasped in my fingertips, and shook it gently.

"So how do you know my late husband, Mister Gask?" she asked, pain and anguish artfully projected in her voice.

"He died in my office, I'm sorry to say," I replied, my best method acting coming to the fore, "Sitting in my best chair and drinking my best whiskey."

\*

Alva's eyes went wide.

"You were with him when he died?" she gasped, looking at Madderfy and then back at me.

"No, I wasn't," I replied, trying to let her down gently, "Maybe I should have been. But I was unavoidably detained."

She looked suddenly sad, nodding morosely.

"I'm trying to find out what happened, why he died," I added, "The police think he took his own life, but I'm not convinced."

I also glanced at Madderfy, but he seemed unperturbed by my pronouncement. Alva looked up slowly, tears in her eyes. She looked like she had been crying a lot recently.

"Perhaps you're right, Mister Gask," she said so softly I could barely hear her, "I hope you are. I would make a big difference to me. I just don't know any more."

Madderfy gripped my elbow again. I was beginning to find his touchy-feely personal style annoying, but I resisted the temptation to give him a smack in the kisser. Instead, I let him guide me away, towards the door I had entered a few minutes before.

We stepped into the hallway, now deserted. Madderfy's charm and bonhomie disappeared as if at the flick of a switch.

"What the hell are you doing here, Gask?" he growled into my ear, "Gate-crashing a private, family event?"

"I'm trying to find out what happened to Vale," I said, "As my client is paying me to do. And that's what you said you wanted, too."

"Well, there's nothing here for you, understand? Leave my daughter alone. She's upset enough as it is," he ranted.

Privately, I doubted it. I was pretty certain Alva Vale knew more than she was letting on, and I suspected there were many Goblins in that room who knew something, too. But perhaps now was not the time to press those particular enquiries.

"If you've got something for me," he went on, face like thunder, "Come by the office. Stay away from here."

"Okay, okay," I said, "I'm going."



I put my hat back on my head and moved towards the front door. One of the goons from before appeared at another open doorway, glanced at me and then looked at Madderfy, who shook his head. I let myself out, slamming the door behind me and stalking off down the hill doing my best to look frustrated and pissed-off. Of soon as I was out of sight, of course, I ducked into the shadows and waited.

It was a long wait, but this job sure does make one patient. In twos and threes, black-garbed mourners were shown out and made off in various directions. Creagan and Logan left together, early, apparently in animated conversation, at least on the younger Madderfy's part. He waved his arms expansively as he talked, like someone trying to convey a complex situation to the hard of understanding. Logan slouched, looking uninterested, although he did seem to occasionally contribute to the conversation. Madderfy and his two minders were almost the last to leave, and I saw his speaking at length to the old housekeeper, no doubt issuing instructions about looking after his daughter and making sure that she saw nobody.

After all the guests had left, I waited on. Lights at the windows were extinguished, drapes were drawn and aq evening silence fell over the neighbourhood. The house was dark and quiet. Then there was a furtive movement at the door, and a dark figure slipped out, careful to close the door behind them silently. I hung further back in the shadows as the figure passed my hiding-place. It was Alva Vale, of course.

\*

I followed her. It was easy to do.

A real expert doesn't need invisibility glamours to tail people without being spotted. Most people just don't know what to look for, even if they were suspicious in the first place. Alva Vale showed no sign of realising she was being followed, or even that she had considered the possibility, but moved in that furtive way that so many individuals adopt when they don't want to be noticed - which stands out like a sore thumb to anyone who is watching for it.

Alva ducked in and out of the transit tubes, the unrelieved black of her garments standing out in the crowds of flamboyantly-dressed revellers. She knew exactly where she was going. At least she had ditched the artfully veiled hat and donned a headscarf. I hung back, as far as I dared, allowing the press of the crowds to conceal me in plain sight.

I didn't really need to follow her at all. I already knew where she was going. The Starfield Club. I watched her stalk to the front

of the short queue of would-be club-goers, one of the rotund bouncers first moving to intercept her then, recognition assisted by Alva sweeping off the concealing headscarf, beckoning her inside and ignoring the glares from the queuing clubbers.

I didn't follow her inside. There were too many people there who would recognise my face, and they might treat me less gently than before, which would risk alerting Alva to her tail. Besides, I was beat. Later, I would realise I could have saved myself a lot of pain and frustration if I had thought to ask myself exactly who she was meeting in the Club.

I turned on my heel and went home to my apartment. The day had taken its toll on me. The tonic that David had given me had worn off hours ago, leaving me sore about head and body. I undressed carefully, showered swiftly, poured myself a very small nightcap, toasted myself in the mirror and swallowed the whole tot in one lump.

I was asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow.

## **Chapter 11 - Will and Testament**

I slept soundly and late, the sleep of the exhausted, and would have slept later still if I hadn't been woken at 9.30 by the phone ringing off the hook. I tried to ignore it. It rang and rang, stopped, then began to ring again. Somebody really wanted to speak to me. Finally, I tossed aside the bedclothes, stamped across the apartment to the kitchenette, grabbed the receiver from the rest and barked "Yes?"

"Gask, it's Madderfy," came a familiar voice.

"You again! Now what do you want?" I'm never at my finest first thing in the morning even at the best of times. I'd been rudely awoken from a restorative sleep, and I hadn't had either a coffee or a cigarette. I toyed with the idea of slamming down the receiver and going back to bed.

"I may have been a bit hasty yesterday," Madderfy said before I could convert that thought into action, and with a hint of apology in his tone.

"Okay," I said, very slightly mollified, "I take it you do want something from me, then? Something else, huh?"

There was a grunt from the other end of the phone, and a pause.

"It seems that poor Merton wanted you to be involved," Madderfy said slowly, "I've just heard from his lawyers. They've been instructed that the will can't be read until certain conditions are met."

"I thought that would be another one of those private, family events you were telling me about yesterday?"

Madderfy grunted again.

"One of the instructions that Merton Vale gave his lawyers just before he died," he said, speaking slowly as if to a moron, "is that you are personally present when the will is read, together with his family and business partners. And another is that his private briefcase is there too."

I swore repeatedly under my breath. My hands were now tied in this matter. These conditions have the force of law in the Lower Realms. The existence of the briefcase was now a matter of public

record. Merton knew that I knew where it was. If I refused to cooperate, all he had to do was tell the lawyers, who would slap me with a writ so fast my head would be spinning for weeks. Any hope I had of using the case as some kind of lever or bargaining chip was now completely lost.

My best course of action was to accede as gracefully as I could.

"Gask? Are you still there?" came Madderfy's voice, now faintly tinged with anxiety.

"Yeah, yeah. Just trying to wake up."

"Good. So, you get the case and come to the probate hearing this afternoon. 2.30pm. Got that?"

"Okay."

"Be there." Madderfy hung up.

I shook my head and returned the receiver to the rest gently. It seemed I had been given my instructions. But nobody was suggesting that I shouldn't report to my client first.

\*

Showered, dressed, lightly breakfasted and heavily fortified with both caffeine and nicotine, I was making my way up the flights of stairs in Clunie's apartment block. I knocked briskly. There was no immediate response. Perhaps I should have phoned ahead, but I didn't have her number to hand and, for a girl like Clunie, I doubted this kind of information was available in any publicly accessible directory. And accessing less-public information would have used up a favour which I'd rather reserve for something more important.

I was just about to knock again when the door creaked open, a pretty feminine eyeball appearing at the slit so formed.

"Findo!" Clunie called out, relief sounding in her voice. She threw the door wide and tugged me inside, closing and bolting the door behind us. What was she afraid of? Perhaps I had rattled her with my call yesterday morning.

"I'm so glad to see you," she breathed, standing just a little bit too close for comfort, "I was so worried when you said you had got stuck on the surface. How did you get back down?"

"Oh, I have friends in high places," I replied, grinning slightly at my own sparkling wit. Clunie didn't seem to have noticed.

"Have you been to the police?" she wanted to know, "What did they say?"

"Well, yes. I've spoken with the Captain of Police himself. He didn't give me any particular insights, though."

She frowned prettily for a moment. Then her expression cleared, her thoughts evidently moving on to another focus.

"Where's Merton's briefcase now?" she demanded, "Is it safe?"

"It's stashed in a very safe place," I said, "But there's a problem."

"What problem?" she squeaked, grasping my arm and looking wide-eyed at me. She seemed intent on overpowering me with her personality, or something.

"Do you know what's in Merton's will?" I asked, gently disengaging myself from her grip and taking half a step backwards.

She looked confused. "Will? I didn't know he had a will. Why?"

I explained that there was, apparently, a will, and about the conditions for reading it, and the not-at-all-subtle pressure that had been put on me to deliver.

"I don't want you to give them the briefcase," she protested, once she had understood, after a little gentle repetition, just what I was being required to do.

"I have to do this," I said gently, "I've no choice. It's got to be in the Court of Probate this afternoon. Two-thirty. Otherwise they'll take away my PI licence and quite possibly throw me in jail."

All this was more or less true. It was hairy stuff, tangling with lawyers. Any direct opposition is likely to be buried under a welter of writs and injunctions. There were ways around, of course, but I didn't feel like trying any of them just at the moment.

"But I promised to look after it for him," she said, with a slight suggestion of a spoilt child being told that she couldn't play with her favourite toy.

"And now it will be safely in the hands of the lawyers," I told her, "And I expect his will contains a release for those protections. So you will have done what Merton asked."

And, I didn't tell her, it would be in front of a load of extremely reputable witnesses, few of whom truly trusted any of the others, so that nobody could deny knowledge of whatever it was that briefcase contained.

\*

The central courts are set in one of the quieter downtown districts. They are laid out around an elegant square, the plaza

itself beset with statuary, softly-tinkling fountains, and urns and plantings of exotic fungi pruned and topiary'd to within an inch of its life. The whole area was lit quite brightly - by Goblin standards, at least - by reflected and attenuated natural light during the day and elegant, although widely-spaced, streetlights at other times.

Court square is also dotted with benches and and stone seats. Elsewhere in these caverns, this area would be awash with Goblins of all ages taking the air, eating picnics or takeaway food, and talking to their companions at high volume. Somehow, nobody ever came here if they didn't have to, and those who did spoke in quiet voices and moved slowly and respectfully. For some reason, it was a restrained, even sombre place, despite the sunlight and the elegant surroundings.

The Court of Probate was set back from the square proper, as if slightly ashamed to be seen in the company of the more important establishments to either side. Even so, it was built to a grand scale, with a flight of stone steps leading up to an imposing portico supported by rows of stone columns which a human would probably describe as a Greek style, or perhaps Roman, although no human would ever think to ask just where did the Greeks and Romans get the idea from.

\*

I had collected the briefcase from its stowage without incident an hour or so earlier. The human authorities were apparently treating the explosion as some kind of botched terrorist attack, perhaps a bomb abandoned by somebody who had lost their nerve at the last moment. The area was still cordoned off, a couple of bored-looking Swiss policemen fitfully standing guard. Down the little passageway in what was normally a quiet part of the railway station, tiers of flimsy steel lockers were twisted and burnt, doors hanging off their hinges or entirely missing. One locker stood out at the end of the row. It was very obvious from afar that it had not been blown open, although the outside was scorched and blackened by the blast.

I slipped between the two policemen and ducked under the gently fluttering tape that marked the kind of police line that law-abiding citizens would treat as impenetrable. The cops paid no attention. I had deployed a little invisibility glamour of my own, one specially designed to work well in brightly-lit human conditions. This was one of a dwindling stock of such items that remained to me, expensive and specialist items I would find difficult to replace. I stepped carefully to the end of the corridor, placed my hand on the unopened door and was welcomed by a click so soft that even my Goblin ears barely caught it.

Then came the only iffy bit of the entire proceedings. I glanced back at the two policemen, who were watching the passers-by idly with their backs to me. As quietly as I could, I swung the door open, grabbed the briefcase and pulled it smoothly out of the locker. It couldn't have been visible for more than a fraction of a second before it disappeared into the coverage of the invisibility magic. I closed the locker door silently - I doubted I would ever be able to use this hidey-hole again, but you never know, do you? - then strode softly back between the dozy policemen and away to the hidden entrance to the Lower Realms.

\*

I walked up the steps swinging the light briefcase jauntily, nodded politely to the uniformed policeman at the door and strode over the well-maintained stone floor to the reception desk just inside the entrance. An older Goblin in a severe black business suit looked up as I approached the desk of highly-polished dark wood.

"Can I help you?" she enquired.

"Findo Gask," I announced, "For the last will and testament of Merton Vale."

She glanced over the tops of half-moon glasses at me, then carefully consulted a large bound book on the counter.

"Judge Kirkton's chambers," she said eventually, "Up the stairs here, right at the top, fourth door on the left."

I thanked the receptionist and followed the directions she had given. I made my way along a wide corridor of oak-panelled walls interspersed with doors in the same polished wood. The building smelt of beeswax and ancient books and money and justice.

The door was open, with Kirkton's name in gold leaf prominently displayed. It was a large airy room, high windows letting in more than enough light. The room was dominated by a large square table, set around with enough chairs to seat twenty or so. Most were already filled by Goblins in dark clothes. I recognised the elder Madderfy sitting next to Alva, with her brother on the other side. Logan was sat looking morose close to one corner. On the other side of the table, there was a distressed-looking older couple who I guessed were Merton's parents, supported by a couple of elderly females whose demeanour said "maiden aunt".

At the table edge opposite the door, and flanked by a couple of clerks in formal lawyer's wear, sat the Goblin who was quite evidently the Judge. He looked up at me as I entered, over half-moon glasses which I was beginning to suspect were mandatory wear for legal types. His eyes were a clear blue and looked

exceedingly sharp, and his nose was long and pointed - even by Goblin standards - all the better for poking itself into the tangled webs of other people's business.

"Mister Gask, I presume?" the Judge said with the kind of politeness exuded by one who did not suffer fools gladly.

"It is, sir," I relied immediately, "I do hope I'm not late."

"Not quite," the Judge replied, not even glancing at the wall clock, "And you have this briefcase with you, I see. Good. Now perhaps we can make a start. Please shut the door and take a seat."

I turned to comply but before, I could reach the door handle, a young female entered the room. She was dressed up to the nines, with tastefully simple but obviously expensive earrings, and the kind of makeup which leaves the impression that no make-up is being worn but somehow also emphasises both lips and eyes. She wore a clinging black dress that fitted where it touched and left no doubt as to her female nature as well as the fact she was wearing absolutely no underwear.

"And who are you, young lady?" the Judge intoned, giving her the over-the-spectacles eyeball treatment.

"Clunie Ford, your Honour," she replied, "I'm Merton's lover."

I had begun to wonder whether she had taken the hint.

\*

"'Sir' will do, here," the Judge admonished, but gently, without rancour.

Around the sides of the table, a commotion erupted. The Madderfys, father and son, stood up as one and started speaking together, objecting to Clunie's presence on numerous grounds, none of which seemed to be either clearly articulated or particularly reasonable. Between them, Alva burst into tears, pressing her hands to her face and wailing in a theatrical fashion.

Next to them, Logan just sat there, unmoving and carefully expressionless, although I thought I could just detect a faintly gloating attitude in the way his eyes glanced at the younger Madderfy. The Vale family seemed stunned, shocked into immobility, although Merton's father managed to stand, then just stood there with his mouth moving but no sound emerging. I did my best to look surprised, even shocked, at Clunie's arrival. I might even have fooled some of those present, although the elder Madderfy glanced at me though narrowed eyes.

"Sit down, everyone," the Judge roared, the clerks flanking him rising in their seats together like avenging Valkyries.



The clamour subsided slowly. Nobody seemed willing to be the first to silence their misgivings about Clunie's presence, or perhaps it was their moral outrage. I couldn't tell. The Judge glared around the room until the final murmurings ceased. The Madderfys returned to their seats, the father turning to comfort Alva while the son continued to look daggers at Clunie. Finally, everyone was seated, save for me and Clunie.

"Mister Gask, close the door, if you please."

"Yes, sir," I responded promptly. I pushed the door closed and moved to an unoccupied seat on the edge of the table closest to the door and opposite the Judge.

Kirkton indicated an unoccupied seat at the corner of the table with one hand and nodded to Clunie. She moved quietly around the table, the eyes of everyone in the room on her. She sat where she had been bid, with just a couple of empty chairs and one of the clerks between herself and the Judge.

"Why are you here, Miss Ford?" the Judge enquired in a low serious voice.

"I was a friend, a very dear friend, of poor Merton," she began, speaking quietly, her eyes downcast demurely.

The commotion threatened to erupt again, but Kirkton's glance was enough to nip it in the bud.

"Please continue," the Judge said to Clunie.

"Merton entrusted me with his briefcase," she said simply, "I think there's something important in there. I want to know that it's being properly looked after, whatever it is."

She paused, then added even more softly, "And I want to know what it is in there, too."

The Honourable Judge Kirkton was clearly warming to the pretty female with the quiet smile and subdued voice, one who seemed to genuinely care for the deceased, rather than the duplicitous in-laws or the grasping business partners.

"So how is it that you no longer have Mister Vale's briefcase?" he asked.

"Merton left it with me for safe-keeping," she started, "Just before he, he, ..."

Her eyes filled with tears. She took a tissue from her tiny and expensive-looking handbag and dabbed at her eyes daintily.

"It was stolen from me," Clunie continued, visibly pulling herself together, "And Findo here - I mean, Mister Gask - went to get it back for me."

"And you have the case now, I see," the Judge said, turning his attention to me.

I swung the briefcase onto the polished wooden surface of the table, setting it down carefully.

"Good. Now," the Judge pronounced, opening a slim folder on the table in front of him, "We can proceed with the reading of the will."

## **Chapter 12 - A Family Affair**

Vale's estate was represented by a youngster introduced as Millearme, a very earnest-looking Goblin in suit and tie from Pane and Pickles Associates, Attorneys at Law. He looked slightly uncomfortable in this company, or perhaps it was just that his collar was too tight.

Introductions completed, Millearme read aloud, sounding nervous and stumbling occasionally, from a document he produced from a folder. The Judge produced what I assumed was a copy of the same legal document from his own folder and made notes on a yellow legal pad.

"Additional Instructions on the Reading of my Last Will and Testament," Millearme said, emphasising the capital letters, "Before the will is read, my personal briefcase is to be opened in the Probate Court, in the presence of my family and Executors, and also in the presence of Findo Gask, Private Detective."

"And it's signed and witnessed," he added quickly.

"Who witnessed it?" the Judge asked.

"Well, um, myself," Millearme stuttered, "And Mister Pickles himself. In our offices. Just a few days ago."

"Indeed," Kirkton said, scribbling on his pad, "And how did Mister Vale seem when he wrote this document?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Well, did he seem in sound mind, for example?"

"Um, well, I suppose so," the youngster blathered, "He seemed to have a lot on his mind."

This would have been just after the time when he discovered he was being blackmailed, and after he'd come to see me. No wonder he was a smidgen distracted. All consistent with what Madderfy had told me, anyway.

"Well, let's have this briefcase open, then," the Judge sighed. I sympathised. I had been given quite a run-around over the last few days thanks to that damn case.

One of the clerks stood, walked around the table and made to grasp the case. There was a sudden howling noise like a klaxon,

accompanied by lights flaring up from the bindings as the magical protections came to high alert. The clerk jumped back about four feet, shocked - although perhaps not as shocked as if he had actually touched the handle. There was a shriek from Alva, and another from Clunie. Logan clamped his hands over his ears, wincing in pain. Then, the noise shut off abruptly, although coloured lights continued to flicker and pulse around the locks and hinges.

"Ah," Judge Kirkton said calmly, "Perhaps Mister Gask would be so kind."

"Of course, sir," I said, trying to keep the smirk off my face.

I brought the case around to the Judge's side of the table, placing it in front of him, the startled clerk keeping a safe distance this time. The Judge studied the briefcase for a moment.

"You have the key?" Kirkton asked the young lawyer.

"Yes, sir," Millearme replied.

He fumbled in his folder for a few moments then drew out a sealed envelope. He glanced at the Judge, who nodded, then slit the envelope open with a fingernail. Inside was a circular token whose surface seemed to shimmer and change from moment to moment, and a slip of paper. Millearme squinted at the paper, then held up the token and read aloud the spell. The words were inaudible, as is the nature of Goblin magic, but the double-click of the briefcase suddenly unlocking itself was heard by everyone. The warning lights flicked off at the same moment, followed by the tinkle of the token, now just a piece of inert metal, on the table-top.

"Let's see what we have here, then," Kirkton said.

The Judge reached forward cautiously, then with growing confidence lifted the lid of the case.

\*

There was a moment of complete silence, with everyone holding their breath, or so it seemed to me. There was a series of rustling noises as the Judge opened interior compartments and felt around the lining.

"It's empty," he exclaimed, his judicial detachment momentarily collapsing.

In anticipation, I was already scanning the faces, looked around the assembled company. Clunie's face showed a wide-eyed fascination, with collapsed to sulky sullenness in an instant, like a child being told there would be no Christmas present this year. Logan looked as if he wondered what all the fuss was about and

the Vale family seemed confused, unsure as the importance or relevance of the revelation. Madderfy senior kept a professional poker face throughout - I could read nothing from his visage - while his son looked distinctly relieved, although he made an attempt to conceal his reactions. A guilty coincidence there, I thought. Alva's reaction was the most interesting - she didn't react at all. No surprise, no alarm, not even any interest - quite a contrast to her performance when Clunie had arrived. It was almost as if she knew what to expect.

The Judge looked puzzled and faintly irritated, as if he knew that there was some hidden agenda here, but was powerless to discover what it was.

"Well," he said finally, pushing the empty case away and nodding to his clerk to resume his seat at the table, "Perhaps we should press on with the reading of the will."

The rest of the session was uneventful and the results unsurprising. The will and testament - dated several years before, apparently - was authenticated and the provisions read out. Vale's house, and most of the possessions and money, went to Alva, which would make her a rich as well as a merry widow. There were a few specific bequests to distant relatives and charities I had never heard of, and the interests in the Accountancy partnership were transferred to Logan and Madderfy junior, in line with their partnership agreement.

Clunie sat quietly, almost hunched in her chair and dabbing at her eyes, as the provisions were read out by Millearme. The Judge made notes and interrupted occasionally to ask for a repetition or to confer with one of his clerks. When the concluding phrases were reached, Clunie could contain herself no longer. She burst into a further fountain of tears and rushed from the room, slamming the door behind her.

I stood up and caught the Judge's eye. He nodded once without speaking, then returned immediately to his notes and a hushed conversation with one of the clerks. I hurried after Clunie, catching up with her slumped on a bench half-way down the hall. I sat on the same bench, close without touching, wondering how to begin a conversation. I didn't need to. Clunie sniffed and dried her eyes again.

"I've made a fool of myself," she said, fixing me with tearful eyes, "I know I have. But Merton said he would look after me. I believed him. And I'm sure that briefcase wasn't empty before the poor man died."

"I think you're right," I agreed gently, "I think the briefcase contained important documents, a more recent will, perhaps,

copies of accounts, maybe other things. But they're gone now, taken."

What I didn't say was that somebody had gone to a lot of trouble to empty the case in such a way that I hadn't noticed. Somebody had de-activated the protective glamours, removed whatever had been inside, and restarted the magic. Somebody who knew exactly what they were doing, and what I was doing, too.

Clunie sat up straighter, moving closer to me so that our knees were touching. She leant forward with the child-like intensity she exhibited when she was being very serious, and presented me with another fifty dollar bill, this time producing it from the expensive-looking handbag.

"Find out what was in that briefcase," she told me, pressing the banknote into my hand and folding my fingers around it, like a child being presented with a special treat for later, "Find out what dear Merton promised for me."

\*

"You should go home right now," I instructed her, "Straight away, before the Vale and Madderfy contingents emerge victorious."

Her eyes widened at the thought of the embarrassment of having to sit through the families passing by and no doubt making snide comments to each other.

"I'll have a word with the Judge when they've gone," I told her, standing up and offering her a hand - still practicing to be a gentleman despite my better judgement, "I'll call to see you this evening."

"Okay," she said, then added as an afterthought, "I'll be at the Club. I've got an evening shift."

She stuffed the sodden tissue into her bag and stood up abruptly. She hurried off down the hall, her stiletto heels clicking furiously on the polished marble tiles. I watched her to the stairs. I dragged the packet of cigarettes from my pocket - already crumpled - and lit one, blowing a smoke-ring before dropping the spent match in the smoking stand that stood nearby. There was an empty matchbook in the ashtray, from the Starfield Club. Probably just a coincidence, I thought.

The Probate Court session broke up soon afterwards. Alva Vale left first, still with her grieving widow act tuned to maximum effect, and flanked by her father and brother. Millearme left alone, in a hurry - no doubt already late for another appointment, or at least he wanted people to think so. The Vale family followed, the

maiden aunts twittering and Merton's parents, clearly still in shock and despair at the loss of their only son, ignoring them completely. Logan brought up the rear, looking pre-occupied.

None of them acknowledged me as they passed. I was a non-person, I had nothing of value for any of them. Merton Vale was dead, his funeral held, his goods and chattels disposed of. All legal and above board, everything to the satisfaction of the staus quo.

Except that a crime had been committed - at least one. Merton Vale had been murdered - although the police chose to ignore it - and his posthumous wishes had been violated. And the only person who seemed to care about the dead Accountant was a floozy, a nightclub hostess who enjoyed the energetic attentions and evident largess of several gentleman callers, all of whom were probably old enough to be her father. And who was still my client.

\*

I waited a few minutes until the slow-moving procession was out of sight and hearing, and very probably out of the building. I put out my cigarette and retraced my steps to Judge Kirkton's chambers. I knocked on the polished wood of the door. The clerk who had been startled by the glamour opened the door a fraction.

"Could I have a word with the Judge, if that's possible?" I asked in my most deferential tone.

Before the clerk could answer, the voice of Judge Kirkton came from within.

"Who is it?"

"Findo Gask, sir."

"Ah. Show him in, would you?"

The clerk opened the door wide. I walked around the huge table to where the Judge still sat.

"Take a seat, Mister Gask," he said, "And tell me what's really going on here."

"I've only my suspicions, sir," I replied.

"I'm sure you do. Any chance of finding out any facts?"

"Possibly, sir. I do have a client, and one with an interest in the matter."

"Indeed. Far be it from me to ask who she is."

I did my best poker face impersonation. I don't think he was fooled.

"I assume you believe there was something important in there," the Judge went on, indicating the open briefcase that still stood on the table nearby, "A more recent will, a codicil not drawn up by his usual firm of lawyers."

I nodded. "Merton Vale was being blackmailed, and I believe he was murdered. There may have been other papers in that case."

"And this supposed later Will might have been stolen my accident," The Judge interrupted, "You know I can't do anything. Without proof, there's nothing I can change."

"I guessed that, sir," I said, smiling slightly, "But you might let me take the briefcase away."

"Looking for a Clue?" The Judge snorted, "Well, good luck to you."

"Thank you, sir," I replied, "But I think I may be able to do better than that."

\*

I pushed the briefcase shut and snapped the clasps closed. The Judge watched me closely as I swung the case off the table.

"Good luck, Mister Gask," he said calmly, "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Well, actually, I don't," I replied glibly, although with more truth than I might normally have communicated. But I had a few ideas, a few tricks up my sleeves, a few surprises I might be able to work. At least, I hoped so.

It was time to drop by the office. By now, Luncardy and her crew would have cleared out, but of course she wouldn't have bothered to let me know that I was free to return to my own place of business. That would have been too much to expect. Homicide cops have better things to do with their time, no doubt.

The office was much as I might have expected. There were a couple of open drawers and a few papers strewn over the desk and carpet. The scotch bottle and glasses had disappeared - retained as evidence, no doubt, and certain never to see the gloom of day again. There was a smell; a smell of dust and sweaty coppers and fingerprint powder, with just a hint of death and decay underlying it all. Welcome back, Gask.

I shook my head, dropped the briefcase by the side of the desk, then tidied away the odd items of paper that littered the place. There didn't seem to be anything missing, apart from a few cigarettes from the box on the desk. The police seemed to be



remarkably honest, or perhaps it was just that I didn't have anything worth stealing.

The presence of the police had not prevented the postman from delivering the daily ration of junk mail and overdue bills. I thumbed through the small pile that had accumulated since I was last here, discarding the obvious advertising materials and deciding it was probably about time to pay at something towards the most long-standing of my debts.

As I sorted through the post, what caught my eye was a nondescript brown envelope addressed to me in a round cursive hand, handwriting that I thought I recognised. I dumped the remaining unsorted mail on the desk and tore it open.

There was no note, nothing written inside. Just a single rather blurred photograph, obviously taken hurriedly and probably from a distant hiding place. The subjects were clear enough, even so. Monzie Hosh, in what looked like an expansive mood, sat at a table at the Starfield Club, toasting a guest whose back was towards the camera. A bulky, well-dressed Goblin, returning the toast with raised glass, one who could so easily be Creagan Madderfy.

\*

I sat in my squeaky swivel chair, still wearing my hat and coat, and smoked another cigarette and stared at the wall and thought for a long *long* while.

Clunie and, before that, Merton Vale had been pressing folding money into my hands like there was no tomorrow. I was definitely ahead financially, although I seemed to be turning up more questions than answers at the moment. Not a satisfactory response. And, it seemed that someone was keeping careful tabs on me, dictating the course of events. I was evidently being watched, at least sometimes and even though I had not been able to detect any sign of my tail.

I concluded that it was time I invested in the case. I had retained a few small magics that I had not yet deployed which might very well be very helpful; certain magical items purchased, as I occasionally do, from the Small Ads columns in the back of the trade press. Items which were expensive, by my standards, and narrow in their scope and application, and which could only be used once.

But it seemed to me there was a way of cracking this case, with just a little application of time and magic.

## Chapter 13 - Return Visit

I stubbed out my cigarette and swung into action, the swivel chair creaking alarmingly as I stood up. Everyone knows that I keep nothing that is important at the office and the cops had no doubt recently verified this knowledge by the professional forensic examination they had given my workplace over the past few days.

I tugged the chair away from the desk, knelt on the floor and pulled out the deep bottom drawer where until recently my office scotch bottle had been. I pulled it all the way out, fumbling it over the little catches which prevent the whole thing from dropping on your foot, then reached to recover a couple of glamours I had stashed behind the rear panel, fixed in place with strips of sticky tape.

There was no magic involved in this concealment, which was why the cops had not found it. They rely too much on anti-concealment glamours, I think, and seem to have almost forgotten that it is perfectly possible to hide things in an entirely mundane way. That, or they hadn't really been trying.

A naive visitor from the surface might have asked: "what does magic look like?" He might as well have asked: "what does air look like?" Obviously you can sometimes see the effects of magic - like the deliberately warning effects of the protective glamour which was until recently engaged around the briefcase - but generally it is quite invisible.

So, *potential* magic - the kind I usually get from specialist advertisements in the back of those low-budget trade magazines - is carefully packaged, usually in little boxes of brightly-coloured folded card. The activation, a unique expression for each one - and *not* a "spell" at all - is printed on the outside, alongside the warnings, limitations and disclaimers that the manufacturers are compelled to include.

It was obvious that I was being watched, followed extremely discreetly by an expert: one who I had not always been able to detect and one I could not be completely sure of shaking. The two glamours that now sat on the worn dragon-hide desk - one box striped in dark green and orange, the other a pale cloudy gray - were intended for just such a situation: one where I was staked out in my own office and where I needed to gain a little advantage over hidden or unknown opponents.

I returned the desk drawer to its place and carefully set the swivel chair exactly where it had been when I had been cogitating earlier. I placed the green-and-orange box on the seat of the chair, opened it with a fingernail and read aloud the incantation. The little box disappeared, replaced smoothly by an image of myself, looking studious - or maybe just bored. The glamour would project an image - for all senses, including magical ones - of the entire room as it had been ten minutes ago. The magic would last a day or so - it was the best I could expect from such a cheap device.

Moving as quickly as I could, I grabbed the second box, opened it and uttered the magic words. The slight dimming of my senses confirmed that the invisibility magic was working. This was a standard product, and probably just like the one Clathy had used when she followed me from the Starfield Club.

There were just a few seconds when it would have seemed that there were two Findo Gasks in the room and it would have taken a very sharp-eyed observer to notice that little blip of inconsistency. Walking as lightly and softly as I could, I opened the office door just enough to allow me through and closed it quietly behind me.

Off I went to the Starfield Club, again.

\*

A sleazy joint like the Starfield Club would always have more than one way in or out. Thus far, I had always entered by the front door and, despite a close shave, always left by the same route too. This time I was planning on using a less public doorway, which is why I was sitting quietly on a noxious dustbin in an alleyway behind the club. The furtive rustling of rats and the near-overpowering stench from the bin itself would disguise any slight noise I might make and my own distinctive body odour. I was relying on the invisibility glamour, which seemed to be holding up at the moment, and my only real risk was some drunk stumbling unpredictably into me.

There was nobody about, no sign of movement or any Goblin presence. The key to successful snooping is endless supplies of patience, in my experience. I had resigned myself to a long wait this evening. I was pretty sure that there was a secret back entrance somewhere hereabouts but it was sufficiently well disguised that I could not easily find it.

The non-secret back entrance - the one used for deliveries and for the ejection of drunks and malcontents - was in an alley on the other side of the building. The stage door, for the musicians and the myriad of waiting staff, was right next to it. I had cased them both out earlier. I was sure that certain of Hosh's more private

affairs would not want to be exposed to the speculations of the hired help, so there would be a more private entrance elsewhere.

The evening wore on and the alley grew darker still. Sounds of musical entertainment and revellers having a riotously good time could be heard, reverberating dully through the walls and getting noticeably louder. Nothing stirred in the alley - nothing big enough for me to worry about, anyway. My backside was beginning to go numb from the chill of the dustbin and the stink of the refuse was threatening to overpower my own limited tolerance of such things. Worse still, I was beginning to wonder if I had guessed wrong.

To my considerable relief, my patience was rewarded when a shadowed figure appeared from the gloom of the alleyway entrance, silhouetted against the glare of the streetlights beyond. Even in the dim light I recognised the blocky figure of Drummond, Hosh's sidekick who had approached me on a previous visit. He looked like a Goblin who had the street smarts and the hard-edged nous to be able to follow me without me being able to give him the slip or even, at least sometimes, for me to realise I was actually being followed. Now, however, his bearing was slouched and despondent, his body language much less cocksure than hitherto, I fancied. He had the shoulder-shrugging appearance of one who feared a severe and unavoidable tongue-lashing - or worse - in the near future.

Drummond approached an apparently blank part of the wall perhaps ten yards away from where I was sitting, carefully attentive and trying to make no noise. The other Goblin drew himself up straight and spoke a spell - inaudible from my location, of course - using the complex hand gestures that some glamour manufacturers insist upon, although exactly why escapes my limited understanding.

The wall appeared to shimmer and writhe, as if a sheet of dimly-illuminated water was suddenly coursing down its surface. Underneath the simulated film of water, a narrow wooden door could be seen, rippling as if it was at the bottom of a clear and shallow stream. It was a cheap glamour, but nonetheless effective; one widely available in the Lower Realms and which had been overlaying the now-visible entrance that had been temporarily deactivated by Drummond's invocation.

Drummond looked around furtively, left and right. He made no attempt to disguise his movements or to masquerade as normal behaviour. Then he knocked on the door with his knuckles, a surprisingly economical movement which drew a series of muffled thuds. After a few seconds, Clathy's slender figure appeared in the doorway. She looked around equally nervously, at first barely acknowledging Drummond's presence. Then, she beckoned him in

and - much to my surprise, but evidently not to his - delivered a fiery and passionate kiss, holding him firmly to her body with her hands pressed on his neck and waist. There was no mistaking the heat, the fire in her embrace and the impression that ripping his clothes off was only seconds away. Her sexual magnetism - powerfully apparent and electric in its effect - was detectable even at my range, a pale shadow of which had been projected in my direction during several earlier encounters. It seemed that, once again, I had been misled by a pair of flashing eyes.

The two lovers - it was obvious that they were so - disengaged with apparent reluctance on the part of both parties. Again they looked around, watching the alley, almost theatrical in their reactions. Then Drummond sidled inside, his bearing now erect and his movements assured. I stayed where I was. There was the sound of urgent conversation from within, although I was not able to make out any words. The door closed and I heard no more.

It went quiet. Even the rats had called it a night. Again I waited, the rippling water effect fading and the door disappeared from view as I watched. Nothing to see. Then the door reappeared with a faint snap, and Drummond's face peered from a crack. The door swung open slowly until it was wide open, even so showing nothing but blackness within. As I watched, Drummond manoeuvred a large, heavy shape through the door, ineffectually assisted by Clathy. It was a shape shrouded in some dark cloth, awkward and difficult to handle. It was a shape that looked uncomfortably like a body in a bag.

\*

It seemed certain that Clathy had been pushed into something by her boss - and by her passion for Hosh's chief enforcer - something illegal, something dangerous, some deadly. I wondered if she realised it or, if she did, whether she really dared complain at all.

Drummond hoisted the body bag over his broad shoulders with barely visible effort and held it in place with one hand. He reached towards Clathy and took a small object she was holding out. He spoke another soundless incantation, this time without the impressive but near-redundant gestures, then simply faded from my view. Another invisibility glamour. Someone must have got a job lot, cheap.

I was forced to make an instant decision. I could attempt to follow Drummond, which might be very difficult given the obvious effectiveness of the glamour and his ability to move quietly. I couldn't guarantee success. Time for plan B.

There is always a slight risk of a collision between two invisible people in these circumstances. I made my best guess of Drummond's trajectory, which would be down the alley and into the sparse foot traffic on the street itself. At this time of night, it would be easy enough to dodge the occasional passer-by, and most would be too drunk to be paying much attention anyway.

Clathy stared in the direction of the departed Drummond for a long moment, then turned on her heel decisively. I waited as long as I dared, then darted for the closing door and slipping inside as quietly as I knew how. Once within, I stepped sideways away from the door and froze, letting Clathy get well out of range before I risked any further movement.

The inner door to the room was already closing behind Clathy's swiftly retreating form. There was a soft thud and a muffled click, then the room was quiet. I looked around, waiting for my night vision to adjust. I was inside a storeroom, dark even to Goblin eyes. Cardboard boxes and packets of assorted shapes and sizes were scattered around, piled high on metal racking and labelled cryptically. Very boring. Still, there was something not quite right. There didn't seem to be very much stuff actually stored in this room, and that which was present was stacked neatly on high shelving where it would be awkward to get at, as opposed to busy stockrooms where the important stuff is dumped on the floor next to the door for immediate access.

The storeroom was bigger than it first appeared, with a second, larger section tucked behind a cluttered expanse of perforated metal shelving that spanned nearly the whole width of the room. I took a look around, indulging my inquisitive streak - the very same one that had got me into this business all those years ago.

Up against the far wall was something that at first I took to be some kind of pallet covered in rags. A closer inspection revealed that it was a rather fine quilted futon on a wooden frame, draped with an equally fine embroidered counterpane. Around the bed, fat scented candles in simple holders had been placed here and there. It seemed I had discovered where my esteemed client had been rutting with certain of her gentleman friends. But it also housed the club's most secret entrance. Hardly a coincidence. I wondered if Clunie was aware of that fact.

The store room did not contain any other obvious insights or surprises, so I risked opening the door. Invisibility glammers do not give anyone the ability to walk through solid objects, of course, so one of the standard ways to detecting that there is an invisible person about is to look for unexplained movements of drapes, doors and miscellaneous furniture.

Aware of this novice error, I pressed my ear to the door. I heard nothing except for the faint sounds of music from the stage, and the clatter and chink of glasses from the bars and tables. There was no sound of footsteps or nearby movement. I eased the door open, peered around cautiously, then slipped though and closed the door silently behind me.

I was at the end of a long dusty corridor flanked with unexciting doors on either side, each marked with a variety of vague signs which contrived to enhance their unattractiveness. There were a couple of intersecting corridors further along, their entrances featureless blackness. The whole warren was dimly-lit, with the bare minimum of the luminescent fungus which is so often cultivated to provide light down here. I almost expected to see a sign on the wall reading "a maze of twisty passages, all alike."

I moved stealthily along the corridor, pausing when I reached the first of the corridor intersections. The music seemed loudest in that direction. This corridor seemed cleaner and more brightly-lit, and I guessed I was approaching the more public parts of the Starfield Club.

I passed a door which was just ajar, and I caught a movement within out of the corner of my eye. I stopped and peeked through the crack. It was evidently Hosh's office. A desk the size of Birmingham in a polished dark wood barred the way to a high-backed swivel chair, the classic position of captain's command. The surface of the desk was a clutter of lamps, telephones and the kind of executive toys that busy executives never actually have time to play with.

Plaques and framed certificates decorated such portions of the walls that I could see, with closed drapes at one side. I doubted these concealed an outside window; it was more likely to provide a view over the interior of the club. Another wall was obscured by bookcases and glass-fronted display cabinets in the same dark wood, although the leather-bound books they contained looked entirely unused. An office to impress the natives, rather than one which actually showed the marks of any hard work.

Clathy was in the office, alone. My first impression was that she was tidying up while the boss was out. There were a couple of glasses with the dregs of drinks and the remains of ice cubes on her waitress tray, which was wedged on the edge of the desk. But there was something strange about her movements. She was being unusually diligent in wiping down all the surfaces, and not just the horizontal ones. She polished and wiped everything that could have been touched by a Goblin's hands. Then I noticed that she was wearing tight-fitting gloves of thin leather, gloves I belatedly realised she had been wearing earlier.

\*

Clathy finished her spit and polish job, then picked up the tray and held it with one hand at shoulder level in the style of professional cocktail waitresses everywhere. She started towards the door and I shrank back instinctively, pressed my invisible back against the wall as tightly as I could before Clathy bumped into me. She emerged projecting a splendid impression of nonchalance and professional competence, marred only by her pausing to wipe the already-spotless door handle with more than essential thoroughness.

Using her teeth and a certain amount of deft juggling, she peeled off the gloves, one after another, put them on her tray and covered them with a heavily wine-stained napkin. She set off jauntily in the direction of the dance music. I followed, curious to see where she went. I passed half-glass doors which looked like more offices - proper ones where actual clerical work was performed. The corridor opened up into what was really the vestibule for a small kitchen. A couple of cooks were hanging around in the open area bantering with several bored-looking waiting staff. The kitchen itself didn't seem very busy. After all, the Starfield Club was not a place to go if you were feeling hungry or if you cared about fine dining. A rat-burger with ketchup and a side of fries was about the most sophisticated dish likely to be found on the menu in this joint.

In the end, Clathy's destination was unsurprising. At the end of this corridor spur was a pair of double-hinged doors with porthole-style round windows in each one and battered metal kick-plates. No doubt the doors had a sign on the other side stating "Staff Only." On the other side was the open public area of the club proper. Through a porthole, I watched Clathy navigate deftly across the packed room in the direction of the main bar, avoiding the wandering hands of patrons with practiced ease.

At the bar, Clathy handed the tray to a very junior-looking member of the bar staff with instructions, judging by the body language, to wash the glasses and dump the stained napkin - and



the gloves, no doubt - straight into the trash. She then spoke to what was evidently the head barkeeper, who waved in the direction of a group of tables on the left of the stage, crowded with punters who seemed to be in urgent need of drinks. She simply resumed her waitressing duties as if nothing had happened.

Being invisible in a crowded room is an especially useless way of remaining undetected. The press of bodies, made worse by the unpredictable effects of the consumption of alcohol, makes it nearly impossible to avoid bumping into someone. I pressed my back against the wall again and waited with as much patience as I could muster until one of the kitchen staff plonked a plate of greasy food on the counter and rang the service bell. A waiter detached himself from the gossiping group and collected the order, finally deigned to deliver the over-salted and highly spiced plate to the unsuspecting - and probably already drunk - patron who had ordered it.

I followed the waiter closely through the swing doors barely delaying their closure at all. The dance music burst upon me, augmented by a thousand conversations going on all at once. Once clear of the door, I slid to one side and made my way to the darker shadows of a clump of potted decorative fungi supposedly to add to the ambience of the place.

I spoke the few words that terminated the invisibility glamour, writing off another fifty bucks I wouldn't see again in a hurry. I adjusted my hat to a more rakish angle and stepped out as if I owned the joint.

## **Chapter 14 - Malice Aforethought**

The Starfield Club was crowded, more so that I had seen it hitherto. Every table was packed, and every bar stool occupied. The house band were playing something loud and up-tempo, and Goblins in formal shirts or skimpy evening gowns were dancing - or at least writhing rhythmically - to its strains. Behind the flimsy balustrade and guarded by potted plants and unsmiling bouncers, the roulette and blackjack tables were all working at capacity under the watchful eyes of croupier and pit boss alike.

A flotilla of pneumatic cocktail waitresses in their skimpy uniforms dashed to-and-fro, trays piled high with refreshments, ready to loosen the inhibitions and pocket-books of guests and gamblers, oiling the wheels of Club business with Scotch and sex-appeal. Sure, a joint like this would take a lot of upkeep, but it must be a golden money-mine especially on an evening like this.

Clathy had disappeared, or at least I had lost track of her in the crush. I had other fish to fry in any case. I moved slowly around the room, keeping to the relatively uncrowded edges and staying away from the bars. No-one is more indistinguishable - and therefore effectively invisible - than a lone male in nondescript clothes moving quietly through a crowd.

I wanted to find Hosh - or at least find out where he was right now. I pressed my way through the crowd, keeping an eye out for his expensively suited body and grey-eyed face. I almost bumped into Clunie on her way past with a tray of empty glasses and discarded cigarette packets held high. She swung around, almost dropping her tray, her eyes opened wide with amazement as she recognised me.

"How did you get in here?" she squeaked, "Mister Hosh has given instructions to all staff to bar you from the place! Everyone's looking for you!"

"Simmer down," I shushed her, then added mysteriously, "I have my ways. Sneaky ways."

I took Clunie by the arm unencumbered by the tray and guided her towards a quieter spot.

"Did you send me a photo? In the post?" I hissed in her ear.

She looked surprised.

"Photo? No!"

I didn't really think she had sent the snap. I was just checking. Somebody wanted me here, wanted to excite my interest in Monzie Hosh and his associates, who may or may not include Madderfy junior. Somebody like Clathy Dupplin.

"Where's Hosh now?" I demanded.

Clunie looked around, bright eyes flicking this way and that.

"I don't know," she said, "He was down here earlier, chatting with some of the regulars, high-rollers, at the tables."

"How long ago was that?"

"Err. Maybe a couple of hours. He's probably gone back to his office."

I grunted something non-committal. I knew that Hosh wasn't in his office a few minutes ago, and I was beginning to worry about exactly whose body it was being removed by Drummond. And exactly who was in charge of the Starfield Club right now.

"Where's Merton's briefcase?" Clunie's voice cut into my thoughts.

"In my office," I replied.

"Who's looking after it?"

"I am."

She looked confused.

"Don't worry about it," I urged her, "I need your help, again. When you've finished here, go to my office - the doors are never locked - and collect the case. I'll let you. Then take it home with you, keep it safe there. Can you do that?"

Clunie nodded her understanding.

"Good girl. Now run along and do your waitress thing until closing time, OK?"

She looked obscurely pleased, out of proportion to the minor appreciation I had shown her. She was a girl who really wanted to please.

\*

Clunie scurried away to take her next round of drinks orders. I watched her shapely form navigating the tables of sharks and bottom-feeders with aplomb. I still wanted to find out whether Hosh was in fact still in the Club. I eased thorough the crowds, trying not to draw attention to myself and avoiding the more brightly lit areas. There were still a few new arrivals at the

entrance, and plenty of punters already clogging the aisles and walkways.

"Hey, you!" came a loud and slightly slurred voice from behind me. I turned around.

I had just been accosted by the overweight drunk to whom I had palmed off the spiked drink I had been presented with, by Clathy, on my first visit to the Club. He had, somehow, recognised me although I had unaccountably failed to spot him in the crowded room. The drunk staggered to his feet, a feat he only managed by putting both hands flat on the table and pressing hard. He turned to face me.

"You're the bum who got me thrown out of here," he bellowed accusingly, with worrying exactitude.

I could sense heads and eyes turning in his direction across half the Club. Voices fell - a bit, anyway - then resumed in a hubbub which threatened to entirely drown out the music from the dance band. So much for the discreet approach, I thought.

The drunk's companion was a frail-looking female with the coldest eyes I had seen in a long time, a female with Professional Services written all over her. She glared at me, clearly worried that my presence was risking her meal ticket for the day.

The Starfield Club is renown for employing the biggest bouncers that can be found in the Lower Realms: not necessarily the tallest but certainly the heaviest. Invariably encased in tuxedos and white dress shirts, the colour scheme and general shape makes them resemble giant black-and-white footballs, with the additional similarity of famously thick and leathery skin.

Three of the aforementioned spherical bouncers converged on me from various directions. At least one of them had recognised me. There was no point in making a fuss, or even a run for it; there were too many of them to be evaded forever, and the crowds would make fast movement effectively impossible. Besides, I still wanted to talk face-to-face with Hosh, and this might just be the quickest way to do so.

I decided to go quietly and not give the enforcers any excuse to put the boot in - at least in front of all the clientele. One planted himself in front of me and gave a terse nod in the direction to the exit. The main exit, I noted, not the staff door in the direction of Hosh's office that I had expected. Two others appeared at my shoulders, not touching but nevertheless standing very close.

I turned in the direction the lead bouncer had indicated, shrugging off with a glare the hand that one of the enforcers had laid on my shoulder. The crowds parted instinctively as our little

quartet moved across the Club floor and up the broad steps that led to the main entrance. Our synchronised movements swept us forward and the chatter behind me got louder as we passed. Two more bouncers opened the main doors wide enough so that the party could step straight through without stopping, and suddenly I was outside.

The two bouncers behind me shoved me on the shoulders simultaneously, hard enough to make me stagger but not enough to actually force me into the gutter.

"And stay out!" the lead enforcer snarled, "Consider yourself warned. You're not welcome here. Next time I see your ugly face it'll end up even more ugly."

And that was it. By the standards of being thrown out of nightclubs, a complete doddle. So why the kid gloves treatment?

\*

There was nothing more for me at the Starfield Club. I rubbed at the lump on my skull reflectively. It was still sore, although noticeably less swollen now. I thought it best if I made an attempt to dig into another part of the mystery, and perhaps even a couple of scores. I decided to find out exactly what Urquhart Garrick's involvement was and what insight he could provide on the reason I was knocked unconscious just outside his lair.

It occurred to me that there was only one obvious - to a Goblin - route to Garrick's residence topside. This was of course the one I had taken on my previous visit. Knowing his reclusive, not to mention paranoid nature, I suspected he had that well covered by all kinds of magical traps and warnings, and quite possibly some technological ones, too - hidden cameras and so on. But, if I were to use a less obvious route - at considerable personal inconvenience, of course - then I might stand a chance of evading Garrick's protections and be able to, well, sneak up on him, catch him unawares.

\*

Which was why, six hours later, I was cold, wet and distinctly muddy, standing in a field in the middle of the night.

I started with a detour to another one of my secret hiding places, this time in the Lower Realms. I had a stash of various useful items underneath one of the ubiquitous urns of decorative or light-emitting fungi, set around the edges of one of the less-frequented public squares in a very up-market residential district. Nobody ever thinks to look for hidden items of dubious lineage or legality in this kind of neighbourhood.

I had arrived on the surface via a different exit from any I had used before, taken a late night bus to a small village less than ten miles from the hamlet of the Strawbury Duck. Then I traipsed across the fields in what humans would think of as darkness and everyone would consider vile weather conditions to arrive on the far side of a hedgerow which was - if my navigation skills were correct - the rear border of Garrick's property.

The hedge was high and unkempt, unbroken by gate or opening as far as I could see. I would have made a near-impassable barrier for any large creature, like a cow or a human, unless equipped with a powerful chainsaw. But this hedge had not been looked after in recent decades. A hedge which is intended to act as a serious barrier should be trimmed and laid regularly. This one had grown tall and leggy, and there was therefore little growth between the ancient roots at the base.

It was the work of a moment to identify and wriggle through a gap, forcing the low branches aside with my powerful arms, adding to the dirt on my clothes and the scratches on my hands in the process. I jammed my hat back on my head; it had been dislodged by low-hanging foliage. Keeping close to the ground, I made my way along the line of the hedge towards the accumulation of low buildings which I was relieved to recognise as Garrick's residence.

A Goblin like Garrick would not want to live anywhere that did not have lots of exits. There were bound to be at least three ways in (or out) other than the entrance I had used on my previous visit. At least one of them would be at the end of a tunnel, a bolt-hole. The exit proper would be very well hidden and a long way from the buildings. Even so, all these exits would be carefully alarmed and booby-trapped, and I would be nuts to attempt a forced entrance through any of them, at least without the assistance of a small army.

Instead I sought another point of ingress from inside the ruined barn that disguised the underground residence. I reasoned that there would be ventilation shafts and chimneys from the living rooms and laboratories below. These outlets would no doubt be cunningly disguised and engineered so as not to show smoke or steam even in the coldest of weathers. Such an installation would undoubtedly require periodic maintenance. I was gambling that there would be access points - carefully hidden, no doubt - which would allow a degree of access to the lower rooms.

Ten minutes of silent and methodical searching in the roofless barn caused me to identify a weather-beaten but still heavily-constructed wooden case, firmly bolted to both floor and wall, and

whose lid was secured by a couple of suspiciously new and strong padlocks.

One of the items I had collected from my stash was a general-purpose un-locker, another of those trade glammers for which I had paid through the nose, one which was strictly speaking illegal and so described in the most elliptical of terms in the advertisements. It was a magic which would open the padlocks and any other mechanically closed devices within a radius of ten feet, unless protected in some way.

I pulled out the little box and quietly read the activation. There was a muffled scraping noise, followed immediately by a couple of clicks as the padlocks released. I eased apart the hasps and lifted the lid to reveal a cavernous space within, dropping well below floor level. Bingo!

The box contained an assortment of pipes and machinery - all a mystery to me - but there was space enough between the fittings to allow me to slip inside, pulling closed the lid above me. As my eyes adjusted to the extreme darkness within, I could make out a dim light around the edges of what my questing fingers soon told me was an inner hatch, although secured on the other side. Trusting to the efficacy of my black-market glamour, I tapped lightly on the hatch with the heel of one hand, and grasped the suddenly open door with the other.

I swung myself through the hatch and landed on the ground as silently as I could. I appeared to be in a laboratory. It was very dark, but I could just make out various glass retorts and complicated apparatus all around. The pipes I had seen in the box earlier appeared to be positioned to suck away fumes from chemical - or perhaps alchemical - processes and to render them, if not harmless, at least not easily detectable from the outside.

What light there was came from an open archway at the far end of the long room, an opening which probably led to Garrick's library. I approached stealthily. Quiet voices could just be heard emanating from the other room.

\*

Some of the voices from the other room seemed familiar. Unsurprisingly, one was quite definitely Garrick's clipped tones, although I could not make out what he was saying. There was another voice which, after a few moments, I also recognised: Creagan Madderfy's laconic drawl. The third voice was a real surprise, although perhaps it shouldn't have been: it was the "potato stuck in the throat" tones of a human speaking the ancient Goblin tongue, although tolerably comprehensibly for all that.

Humans rarely speak the Goblin language well; their larynxes are not well shaped for it. Even those humans who know a great deal about the underworld are more often than not barely able to make themselves understood. Our language is complex, multi-faceted and extremely formal in structure, and it has not changed in millennia. Human languages are much cruder by comparison, not to mention likely to be changed to be incomprehensibly different after as little as a hundred years. I speak something of half a dozen human languages - enough to get by - although my accent and vocabulary would probably be thought of as old-fashioned and rather posh.

I crept forward towards the archway, using every bit of my training in stealthy movements - some of which I had received from Garrick himself. Pressing my back against the wall at the side of the arch, I cocked an ear - a literal movement, for a Goblin - to overhear the conversation in Garrick's study.

"So, Mister Madderfy," croaked the human voice, "I have done everything you and the Professor asked."

"Give Rigg his money, Madderfy," came Garrick's voice, "And let him get out of here."

There were a series of soft noises that suggested that a wallet was withdrawn from a pocket and opened. I risked a movement to bend to floor level and poked one eye around the door frame. I could see a large blocky human who was standing with his back to me with a distinctly military bearing, his head barely missing the stout wooden beams which supported the ceiling. He could manage that only because this space was cavernous by Goblin standards, presumably having been originally intended for human occupation.

Despite his upright stance, the human Garrick had called Rigg sported shoulder-length blond hair and wore a tee-shirt that showed off his broad shoulders and bulging biceps. As I watched, he reached out and took something from someone - the younger Madderfy, I assumed, although I could not see. A rustle of paper made me imagine a small bale of notes had just been handed over.

It should be no surprise that there are published exchange rates between most major currencies in the upper world and the dollars universally in use in the Lower Realms. After all, banks have to make money somehow. Below, there are official exchange kiosks in the vicinity of each of the surface entrances. There are also a few more discreet establishments in certain backstreets which will offer a much better rate, although one is advised to check each note carefully for forgeries, and to count the bills yourself in case they have been *accidentally* miscounted by the clerk.



The man named Rigg stuffed something into the back pocket of his jeans, then touched his head in a manner that looked like a casual salute. Without another word - the Goblin tongue is hard on human throats - he turned on his heel and strode towards the door - the entrance I had used the last time I was here. I heard the door swing open softly on oiled hinges, then a thump as it closed again, followed by footsteps on the steps outside. He had gone.

I knew I had to act fast, while Garrick and Madderfy were together. I withdrew from my coat pocket a small revolver, a snub-nose, another item I had retrieved from the hiding-place under the urn. I do not normally go about armed, although this was a weapon for which I do have a licence in the Lower Realms. Here in England, of course, possessing a gun was strictly illegal - not even the cops in this part of the upper world regularly carried firearms - although I doubted I would be observed, or even heard, if I were to fire a shot.

I pulled back and stood up slowly, silently. I advanced around the edge of the arch, holding the gun in the approved fashion: my old instructors would have been proud of me. The click as I cocked the revolver must have been clearly audible over the occasional crackling of the fire.

Garrick and Madderfy froze, each with a hand outstretched holding pieces of paper. I guessed that the Professor was in the process of handing over a stack of documents which had been in Vale's briefcase, judging by the legal-looking folders he was holding. It looked like he was receiving a great deal of money in return. Madderfy's hand held a fat manila envelope that looked hastily sealed, the paper distorted by the size of the contents.

"I think I'll take those now," I drawled.

## **Chapter 15 - Situation Reports**

"Gask, dear boy," Garrick said, deploying his characteristic and patently false bonhomie, "What an unexpected delight to see you again so soon."

I chuckled under my breath, mirthlessly. The gun in my hand didn't waver.

"I'll have none of the soft soap, thank you very much" I replied, "Put your hands up where I can see them, and keep them there."

"There's no need for all this," Garrick replied mildly, making no attempt to move his arms.

Madderfy's eyes followed the firearm in my hand with mechanical precision, unable to look away from the barrel. He seemed zonked, under the influence of some borderline-legal pharmaceuticals, perhaps, or maybe it was just the effect of a couple of stiff whiskies that Garrick had no doubt poured into him earlier.

"I'm sure there must be some silly misunderstanding," the Professor went on. You had to admire the old boy's coolness under the circumstances.

"Okay," I said, clearly and slowly, "Now, here's how it's going to happen. I'm outnumbered here, and I don't trust either of you. I'm jumpy and likely to be trigger happy. And you wouldn't like that."

I paused. Neither Garrick nor Madderfy said anything. The Professor looked at me with curious detachment while Madderfy's attention was elsewhere.

"Carrick, drop the paperwork on the floor and back away," I instructed.

"You wouldn't shoot your old tutor, now would you?" the Professor twittered on, making no move to follow my instructions or even indicate that he had heard them. Sometimes my patience is sorely tried.

The gun went off in my hand. The noise was sudden and immense in this quiet and enclosed space. A thunderclap like the inauguration of the end of the world. The bullet clipped the edge of the manila folder that Garrick was still holding, then embedded

itself in the back of one of the heavily padded armchairs that were placed around the fire. Both Goblins jumped. The Professor dropped the folder as if his fingers were suddenly burning, which was very nearly the case.

I'm a good shot. It's a skill I have put a good deal of effort into honing. But not to the knowledge of Professor Garrick, I knew. It was a skill I had learned at a more rugged school, a more primitive academy. It was a school with a different kind of instructor: equally unforgiving, perhaps, a master of a very different set of abilities and, perhaps surprisingly, human.

To every magic, a magical countermeasure. It was an expression that Garrick used frequently, although I have not been able to track down the original source. Maybe it really was coined by him. My glamour which disabled firearms in my vicinity was still active - it was the single most expensive piece of magic I owned - but this particular weapon had also been expensively treated with a magical antidote to that glamour.

As the pall of gunpowder smoke cleared, I could see Madderfy lying on the floor, his hands over the back of his head, the envelope of money forgotten nearby. He was making a continuous high-pitched sound - not very loud, but penetrating for all that - a piteous wail which I had heard described as "keening".

The Professor was taking me seriously, finally. He backed away from the folder on the floor finally raising his hands. He moved more quickly as I advanced on him with, I suspect, a face like thunder, and of course taking care to stay out of the reach of his long arms.

"Sit down," I instructed as Garrick's calves reached the now bullet-marked chair.

He subsided into the seat, starting visibly as he felt the puckered rent in the leather caused by my shot against his back. I stooped to retrieve the clipped folder, not taking my eyes off Garrick. I wasn't interested in the envelope with the money. It wasn't mine, and accepting it would certainly put me in a difficult position if and when anyone happened to mention this incident to the cops. Better just to let it lie. I kicked it under another of the overstuffed armchairs.

"I'll be taking my leave now," I said grimly.

\*

I wasn't going to try to arrest or detain either Garrick or Madderfy. Not here, not now. Too many risks. There was absolutely no prospect of any reinforcements in this remote place. Besides, I couldn't trust the cops even if they were nearby.

Madderfy's father seemed to have his hooks into the police organisation, and Junior might have his own connections. And I could not attempt to escort them as prisoners through the night. They were bound to try to escape or attempt to jump me, and I didn't want to be forced to shoot either of them, despite my bravado earlier.

Instead, I elected simply to tie them up and leave them here, using what you might think of as magical hand-cuffs. Maybe self-knotting rope would be a better description, although the processes involved are rather more complex than either description would suggest.

I took what a human would regard as a length of stout rope about two or three feet long from one of my deep coat pockets. I spoke a few words - words I had long ago memorised and were in any case unintelligible to anybody far or near. There was a sudden faint glow as the glamour activated.

I approached the Professor with extreme caution. He was looking at me coolly, his eyes cold and distant.

"Put your hands out in front of you, with your wrists together," I instructed, carefully keeping the gun out of reach of the other Goblin's long arms.

Garrick was apparently familiar with the restraints, at least from a theoretical point of view. He looked entirely resigned as he held out his hands as I had instructed. He obviously knew that trying to jerk away while I applied the cuffs might cause them to over-tighten on his wrist, or tighten around another part of his anatomy - like his neck.

I flicked one end of the rope, which immediately wound itself around one of his wrists. I released my grip timed precisely as the rope's bond sealed itself - this is another skill I have practiced - and the loose end fastened itself around his other wrist, leaving him tightly bound. Garrick just sat there, inhumanly patiently, like a toad under a rock waiting for an interloper to depart.

I pulled a second length of enchanted rope from my pocket and activated it. I stepped towards Madderfy, who was still cowering on the floor, squeaking. As I took the third step, Madderfy tried to jump me. I was half-expecting it. The strength of madness was in him. I side-stepped deftly, then coshed him with the butt of my revolver leaving him sprawled semi-conscious. I waved the rope over his left wrist and the leg of the desk, which effectively tethered him outside of my range.

"Thanks for everything," I said sardonically, stooping to collect the folder from the floor, "No hard feelings, guys."

Fat chance. The look that Madderfy gave me would have stunned rats at fifty paces, despite his own dazed state. The Professor's expression was more opaque, inscrutable, but I guessed he would not be welcoming me with open arms and his finest whiskey any time in the near future.

I backed away up the short stairs that led to the front door, not taking my eyes or my aim from either of them. They would be able to get free in four or five hours, probably, as the glamour wore off: not a long time, but enough for me to get below and make a report to my client, as well as put in train a few measures which might deflect any retaliation.

I opened the door quietly, flicking my eyes to either side briefly to check that all was clear. Rigg, or even another human might have heard the gunshot - after all, we were not so very far from the gentrified residences closer to the station. Any of them might have taken it into their head to investigate, despite the lateness of the hour, or perhaps call the cops of the upper world. I wanted to avoid any such entanglements, of course - night-time encounters between human and Goblin inevitably result in bad news for all concerned.

I had no option but to return on foot - there would be no trains from the station for several hours - but I decided to take the quick route and follow the railway lines back to the entrance I had used on my first visit. This sounds dangerous, although moving trains are easy enough to spot and avoid, and dark tunnels hold no particular fear for a Goblin. Besides, there are usually fewer humans around on the tracks than on the roads.

As it happened, I walked for a couple of hours in the darkness until I reached the point where the minor branch line joined the tracks of more mainstream rail services. I hid myself just at the end of the platform until a train with the correct destination came into view, then scuttled onto the platform and into the last carriage secure in the view that any humans about early enough to catch the first train would be too sleepy to pay any attention to a short figure with a turned-up collar and an oversized hat.

The rest of the trip was a breeze, slipping out of the nearly unoccupied carriage as soon as it arrived at the terminus and casually avoiding the ticket inspectors. The portal in the damp archway whisked me below in an instant, a couple of minutes to show by credentials to the border guards and then the transit tube to my office cavern.

\*

The outer door to my office was ajar when I arrived and a dim light showed within. Mindful of what I had discovered last time

there was someone waiting for me, I pushed the door open gingerly, my revolver once again in my hand. It was Busby Logan, Merton Vale's partner, sitting in one of my more comfortable armchairs, calmly smoking a cigarette and looking very much alive.

"Good morning," he said calmly.

He looked like he had slept well, arisen thoroughly rested without the aid of a clamorous alarm, then enjoyed a stimulating cup of fresh coffee before bathing and dressing. I felt grubby, tired and care-worn by comparison. I put the revolver back in the pocket of my coat, threw my hat on my desk and slumped in the squeaky swivel chair behind it.

The reason I had taken up residence in my swivel chair was to check that my desk drawers had not been tampered with - at least, not obviously - and that the briefcase had been removed. The glamour that would have given the impression to an observer that I was still in my office had evidently evaporated hours ago - it was all I could expect from such a cheap magic - and it might even have collapsed before Clunie had got here to collect the bag.

"You look like you've been up all night," Logan added with sincere and deeply irritating cheeriness.

"I have, but that's none of your business," I growled, "So what exactly is your business here?"

"Ah, well," Logan said conversationally, stubbing out his cigarette in the battered glass ashtray I had slung on the occasional table, "Actually, I'm here to help you, I think. There's something I've discovered which might have a bearing on the death of Vale."

He looked at me placidly, as if the matter was of supreme unimportance.

"I can just go away, if you'd prefer," he added without rancour.

"No, no," I replied, trying to reign in my bad attitude, currently fuelled by a combination of distrust and tiredness, "What is it that you want to tell me?"

"It's like this," he said, settling back in his chair as if he owned the place, "I'm the junior partner at Vale, Madderfy and Logan, and it falls to me to produce the monthly accounts for our own practice - our own business accounts, if you will. It's something I've been doing for two or three years now."

"Uh-huh." My reaction was rigidly controlled and non-committal in the extreme. "So what of it?"

"It was boring work. And I didn't pay much attention. I rushed it."

I find it difficult to imagine what accountants would find exciting, although inspecting columns of numbers all day certainly hits my personal definition of extreme boredom.

"I thought I was only asked to undertake this work since I was the junior partner," Logan went on, "And I was certainly kept busy enough with client work that I could give only the most cursory of attention to our own accounts. Then I started wondering about some of the transactions I was being asked to record and cross-reference. They looked odd."

"Odd?" I echoed, "How so?"

Logan frowned suddenly, the lines on his forehead and around his eyes standing out.

"Sums of money being paid out, for what appear to be entirely unspecified services," he said carefully, "And, a few days later, the same sums appearing as income for another service, equally vaguely defined."

It was my turn to frown.

"So what?"

"So we're not making any money."

"Huh?"

"In short, the partnership of Vale, Madderfy and Logan is not doing very much business," Logan explained patiently, "And the only real clients that we had, it turns out that I was running their books. There were just enough transactions to give the appearance that money was coming in and bills were being paid, but it was just the same funds going around and around."

"So the partnership is broke?" I demanded.

Logan laughed aloud, an uninhibited reaction at odds with his controlled manner.

"Accountancy practices don't go broke," he said patronisingly, "Demand for accountants is so high that there's always work to do, fees to earn, even if it sort-of slides into a different business arrangement. Besides, the partnership costs really aren't that high."

While the fees for professional services, I added silently, are inevitably astronomical.

"There's always some way of making a few dollars," Logan went on, "But neither Merton nor Creagan had been bothering to earn any fees in recent years."

"So what have they been doing?" I wondered aloud.

"I don't know," Logan answered, "Or at least I didn't, until yesterday. It looks like Vale had been distracting himself with that floozy, whatever her name is."

"Maybe," I grunted. Attractive though Clunie's assets most certainly were, I doubted Vale would have found them so alluring that he would have had no time for money-making activities.

"And Madderfy?" I added.

"No idea."

Logan stood up suddenly. I stood too, the swivel chair leaping backwards with a noisier example of its characteristic squeak.

"Anyway, that's it," Logan pronounced, "Now I have to get to my office. Somebody's got to do some work around there."

"Well, thank you, Mister Logan," I said, stepping around the desk with my hand outstretched.

"I hope you can make something of it," he replied, shaking my hand and moving to the door, "It sure beats me."

No doubt it would indeed beat him. I wondered whether it was Vale or Madderfy - it could be either of them - who had taken on Logan. The perfect partner: dim, unimaginative and plodding. Perfect if you wanted to do something else, something secret and perhaps illegal, without anyone noticing.

\*

After Busby Logan had bumbled off, I sat back at my desk and pulled out the folder of documents I had shot out of the hand of Professor Garrick. I had glanced through them a couple of times while I had been travelling, but I couldn't concentrate on them and in any case I had to keep the paperwork hidden from the prying eyes of any nearby humans. The spiky runes of the Old Language would have raised eyebrows and attracted interest from even the most dopey.

I spread the papers over the worn green dragon-hide of my desk and pulled the desk lamp closer to shine a little more light on the fine print. I picked up and carefully read every sheet of paper, front and back, sorting them into piles on the desk when I had completed each one. I built up three piles, three topics - which was at least one more than I had expected. Mister Merton Vale was a Goblin of many parts, it seemed.

When I had finished, I sat with my face in my hands for a long moment, knuckling my eye sockets in an attempt to massage my brain into something resembling order. I wasn't going to let these documents out of my sight any time soon. They were dynamite. Eating or sleeping or showering or changing my clothes - all these



could all wait for a while longer. I gathered together the piles of documents and shuffled them into the folder, which I returned to the capacious inner pocket where I had concealed it earlier. It was time to make a report to my client.

\*

Twenty minutes later I was at Clunie's increasingly familiar door. I knocked rapidly, then stood back slightly, still trying to shake off the degree of lassitude that stress and sleeplessness had induced. Despite the relative earliness of the hour, there was audible movement from within as soon as I knocked. Clunie opened the door a crack, then threw it wide. She rushed out as if she intended to sweep me into her arms like a child or a lover, then stopped herself at the last moment. Her breasts heaved in some apparently strong emotion I could not positively identify, or perhaps it was just the effort of running to the door.

"Findo!" she exclaimed, "Are you all right?"

"I'm OK," I muttered, barely able to raise my voice above a whisper.

Clunie took me by the elbow and guided me inside. She made me sit at a table as if I was in kindergarten with my hat on my lap. I declined whiskey - it would have knocked me flat in my current state - but I accepted a mug of a hot herbal infusion widely sold as a pick-me-up in the Lower Realms.

"I thought you would come sooner, last night," she said, sounding worried.

"I've been kinda busy," I said, the restorative potion beginning to do me some good, "But I've got some news for you."

Clunie sat opposite me and I looked at her across the small table. Between sips of the hot brew, I told her what had happened since I saw her at the Starfield Club. Sure, I glossed over some of the more violent details but, all-in-all, it was a very fair description of events. Clunie lapped it up, never taking her eyes from my face as I spoke and gasping several times during my narration.

"So who was the human?" she asked breathlessly, "And what was he doing there?"

"Rigg," I responded shortly, "Looks like an ex-military type to me. Garrick needed his help to get the papers out of my supposedly secure hidey-hole."

"So Garrick took the papers?"

"I'm sure of it. No doubt my old Professor used his specialist knowledge of magic to open the store while bypassing the glamours I had installed. It would have been child's play for him.

But he couldn't have been sure that I wouldn't have notice that the locker and briefcase had been opened. So he needed Rigg."

Clunie's face was a picture of incomprehension.

"A small explosion," I explained, "Which Rigg would have been responsible for. It had the two-fold effect of concealing any evidence of tampering and ensuring that I would be hurrying to avoid detection by the upper world cops."

She thought for a moment, then asked shyly, "Can I see what was in the briefcase?"

I pulled the folder of papers from inside my coat. I rifled through them for a moment and pulled one out.

"You might be interested in this document," I said, laying it on the table in front of her.

It was Merton Vale's will, featuring a more recent date than the one which had been read in the Judge's chamber. She gasped prettily and leaned forward over the table for a closer look, running her finger over the lines of dense runes like a child.

"I have to take these documents to Judge Kirkton," I said, removing the document from under her hand.

"Why?" Clunie pouted.

"Because they're not mine, and they're not yours either," I explained gently, "Vale clearly expected them to be presented to the Court of Probate in the event of his death."

She looked sulky for a moment, then her face cleared with a look like the moon rising.

"You must be out of pocket by now," she said, moving closer to me again, "and I still want you to find out what really happened to poor Merton."

She pulled another fifty dollar bill from between her breasts and presented it to me. Perhaps she was manufacturing them down there. Or, more likely, she was getting them to breed.

## **Chapter 16 - Way Back When**

I put the money in one pocket and the folder of documents in another, and stood up, jamming my hat back on my head. The infusion had restored some sense of energy to my body and intelligence to my brain, but I was sure it couldn't last long. I felt light-headed, almost entirely detached from reality. I needed a proper rest, and very soon.

"What are you going to do now?" Clunie asked, her soft voice husky and concerned.

"I'm going to Judge Kirkton, of course," I explained, "He'll be interested in this lot" - I patted the thick wad of paper inside my coat - "and I'll let you know what his reaction to them is. As soon as I get there."

Clunie sighed, a lost and forlorn sound in the tiny apartment.

"I guess you gotta do that," she said sadly, "And I suppose there's nothing I can do to stop you."

"No choice, doll," I replied, just a shade too jauntily and adjusting my hat to a more rakish angle, "Just leave it to good old Findo Gask."

I turned to leave.

"Be seeing you," I said around the closing door.

\*

It was mid-morning by the time I staggered through the door of my own apartment. I was barely awake and entirely sub-sentient, the stimulating effect of the infusion having worn off before I left the last of the transit tubes. It took all of my remaining concentration to set my alarm clock - a classic timepiece with two shiny brass bells on the top - for two hours hence.

I knew nothing more. Somehow my sleep was filled with images of blast-blackened steel and glamour-riddled leather, of duplicitous Goblins in evening suits and mysterious humans in jeans. Faces seemed to blur one into another, suit coats turned to short skirts, name-tags and jewellery swirling and changing before my unshaded eyes.

I awoke with a ringing in my head. I turned over, my body suddenly aching from the exertions of the previous evening, and

indeed those of the rest of the night. The ringing in my head turned out to be the ringing of my clock, the brass bells clamouring furiously until I managed to find the toggle to shut off the alarm. For the second time in two days I had awoken, face-down and fully-dressed on my own bed. I was making a habit of it. At least this time my head didn't ache so much.

I was ravenously hungry - a condition even more disabling for a Goblin than it is for most humans - but I felt I had to make some token gesture towards personal hygiene before I ventured out in search of sustenance. Twenty minutes later, showered and changed, I was hurrying down the street towards my favourite diner. David the avuncular patron was, as always, on hand to greet me and to guide me to a seat. I ordered food; to this day I have no idea exactly what I ordered, although it arrived with the minimum of delay.

I lost no time in shovelling a portion of the heaped plate of comestibles into my face. Unusually, David hung around nearby, looking perplexed or perhaps just concerned. He waited until I had managed to get a dozen mouthfuls inside me, then he approached.

"Gask, old boy, what's up?" he asked earnestly, "You look terrible. I haven't seen you looking this worn out in ages."

I drew a breath, tempted to reply along the lines of "Can't talk, eating." Instead, I decided to confide - at least partially - in the patron. I paused between mouthfuls and sketched something of my current case - names and personal details all carefully suppressed, of course - and some fairly disjointed thoughts on the motivations of the main protagonists.

"What about the ladies?" David asked suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged his shoulders - always an expressive gesture on a Goblin.

"Well, in my experience, the female of the species is at least as devious and ambitious as the male," he said slowly, "And you didn't comment at all on what *they* wanted."

I shook my head slowly. David wandered off, leaving me to finish the rest of my breakfast at a slightly more leisurely pace. But he had definitely set me thinking.

\*

After I had finished my breakfast - or whatever meal that convention declared it to be - I sat motionless for a solid twenty minutes in a catatonic haze. It was not really sleep, more some kind of waking-dream state where my mind wandered and drew

random illogical connections between events in the recent past, a topsy-turvy nonsense which went around and around in my head seemingly without end.

Eventually, David stirred me from my funk by the simple act of placing a large cup of poisonously strong black coffee on the table in front of me. The aroma jerked me back to what passes for reality, an effect enhanced by actually drinking the stuff. Revitalised and ready for action, I stood up and nodded my thanks to the Patron, who returned my salute with a gravely polite bow.

The trip to visit Judge Kirkton was swift and uneventful, at least until I got to the court building itself. Nobody seemed to be trying to follow me. It was almost as if I was suddenly irrelevant, unimportant in the grand scheme of things. Or maybe I had just shaken them off. I couldn't tell.

The tussle with the receptionist at the Court of Probate was something that I should have anticipated. After a certain amount of discussion - pleading, really - I finally managed to convince her that I had something important to communicate to the Judge. This involved a generous measure of pursed lips and disapproving glances on her part, and a good deal of fast talking on mine.

This lengthy debate was followed by another tedious twenty minute delay while the receptionist attempted to phone through. She operated the telephone as if the use of such a brute mechanical device was a function below her pay grade. Finally she got through to someone - presumably one of the clerks in the Judge's offices - and started a whispered conversation.

Throughout this process, I hung around with as much patience as I could manage, pacing the floor of the grand foyer trailing clouds of smoke from innumerable cigarettes. Eventually, I was waved over and pointed in the direction of the staircase, so that I could once again traverse the long stone-floored corridor which led to Kirkton's chambers.

I arrived outside the finely-polish wooden door. Before I could knock, the door was opened by one of the aforementioned clerks, one I recognised from my previous visit. From the other side of the table, Kirkton himself looked up and beckoned me inside, bade me be seated. I explained why I was there to the Judge, who listened carefully throughout interrupting only to ask a couple of extremely pertinent questions. When I had finished, he sat thoughtfully for a long moment, then nodded to his clerk.

As directed, I handed over everything I had taken from Garrick, accompanied by a further brief commentary on my part, opinions I had inevitably formed at high speed and using a great deal of

impressionistic licence from my review of the mass of material. I checked off the items on my fingers as I spoke.

There was the last will and testament itself, supported by typewritten drafting notes which looked as if they had been professionally transcribed, then carefully annotated in a neat hand which I took to be Merton Vale's. My previous reading had made it clear that Clunie would be due a modest bequest: not a fortune, but a decent sum which would make her life a good more comfortable - or maybe allow her to explore the world as a tourist for a while. But it was not the bulk of Vale's legacy. Most of his money would go to his wife, as would be demanded by the laws of the Lower Realm in any case. She would be a rich widow, only slightly less so because of the bequest to Clunie. Maybe she would regard it as a pay-off.

The second bundle represented the affairs of the accountancy partnership itself. As that idiot Logan had finally begun to realise, the partnership as a business was on the verge of failure. It had only been kept solvent by sums of money circulating around, money which had little or nothing to do with the operations of the firm. This was not a legal problem in itself, but it wasn't something that lined up with any business model I had heard of. Was Vale behind the scam? Or was the presence of these papers in his briefcase because he too was concerned?

Finally there were a set of accounts, a thick ream of paper with careful columns of numbers, which I took to be Monzie Hosh's records, his - mostly legitimate - accounts for the Starfield Club. They were the items the blackmailer - whoever he was - had been trying to chisel out of Vale. Presumably they would make their way back to the remaining partners for safe-keeping.

The one thing I did not hand over was a scribbled note on a torn scrap of paper. It was one that did not fit well with the neatly typed correspondence and the professionally drawn up legal documents. It was the kind of note that looked like a memo to self: created in a hurry, and written in an untidy version of Vale's own hand.

It read: "Who's in control? C and D together? M under threat!"

I passed over the last of the papers and sat quietly while Kirkton digested. Finally, the Judge turned to me, his expression as stern as ever over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

"I don't suppose I want to ask how you came by these documents," he said, handing one of the piles to the clerk on his left.

I shook my head slowly.

"No, I didn't think so. Still, I think justice will best be done if I ignore any such queries," Kirkton went on, "I'll arrange a little interview with young Mister Millearme from Pane and Pickles, and get him to confirm the authenticity of these documents."

He tapped a second pile of paper still on the polished wooden table in front of him.

"Then, I suspect, there will be an opportunity to re-convene that little group of relatives and business associates, and read Mister Vale's will," adding with some satisfaction, "This time, properly."

He didn't add, and with a nastier bunch of self-serving money-grabbers it would be hard to find in the same room. I just thought that.

\*

The documents I had handed over had made it very clear - to me, at least - why Merton Vale had so very recently left instructions that his will was not to be read without his briefcase being opened in the presence of the lawyers. Given the explosive material concealed in the case, and with the benefit of twenty-twenty hindsight, it was a very wise precaution.

But it had been unsuccessful, at the last. Vale had been outsmarted, or at least outmanoeuvred, by those who had poisoned him, stolen his briefcase from safekeeping - my very own safekeeping, natch - and lifted the contents from what was supposed to be an absolute protection.

It was less clear why the briefcase had been pilfered. Creagan Madderfy I had caught red-handed, receiving the goods from Professor Urquhart Garrick and his human henchman. Was the younger Madderfy acting on his own, following his own agenda? Or was he an agent for his father? Perhaps he was representing the remainder of the accounting partnership, trying to recover their perilous business position? Although right now he was probably nursing a thick head, engendered by the combination of a wicked hangover and the cranial percussion I had inflicted on him. He was probably nursing an unruly temper, too.

Which of the family members and business associates would benefit most from Vale's untimely demise? Too many, it seemed to me, for an analysis of motives to be a reliable guide to the guilty party. Garrick was almost certainly a paid accomplice. He probably didn't know the whole story; indeed I had probably told him more than I should when I visited him the first time.

I needed more information. There was some history here which I had not grasped, some situation or event in the past which had a

direct and material bearing on recent affairs, but about which I knew nothing. The Madderfy's weren't likely to tell me. Logan probably didn't know the whole story, or even any significant part of it. The relationship with Monzie Hosh, not to mention Clathy Dupplin and her grandmother, was obscure in the extreme, or perhaps just non-existent: a coincidence, not a conspiracy.

There was only one possibility: I needed to talk to Alva Vale, alone.

\*

After a further round of close questioning from the Judge, and the taking of copious notes on the part of his clerks, I was finally released. I stood up and nodded politely to the Judge, who glanced up and returned the salute with a half-nod of his own; the acknowledgement of one professional to another of a job well done.

I closed the heavy wooden door behind me and walked quickly down the echoing stone-flagged corridor to the equally noisy staircase. Half way down the first flight of stairs, I stopped abruptly, one foot poised over the next step. Apart from the sound of my own feet on the polished stonework, the building was quiet: just the earnest susurrations of legal judgements being determined. Or perhaps they were snores. But behind the soft noises of the building, as I walked, there had been the faint sounds of movement, sounds that might have been muffled footsteps.

Somebody was following me; an invisible somebody; somebody who knew how to move quietly and keep the sounds of the body movement almost - but not quite - below the level of detection; a somebody who had been waiting outside Judge Kirkton's chambers for me to emerge.

There are recognised techniques for dealing with such a situation, straight out of Private Detective school, Class 101. Right now, the simplest approach was just ducking into a crowd, such as the crowds that are almost always found in the transit tubes. In these enclosed spaces, somebody sporting an invisibility glamour will inevitably be jostled - even trampled - by travellers who fail to detect their presence, a situation both unpleasant for the follower and obvious to the individual being trailed.

A few quick hops through the tubes to a random destination is usually enough to deter even the most enthusiastic tail, followed by a walk, preferably through a quiet neighbourhood, to be reassured that you really have shaken off your unwanted appendage. After that, back to the transit tubes to continue to your intended destination. Total time lost: an hour and ten minutes. I really



don't understand why anybody even tries to follow me about. Don't they know about the training?

\*

I found myself once more standing on the front door step of the gracious Vale residence, ringing the doorbell. There had been no sign of anybody following me for at least twenty minutes. I had hightailed it to the home of the late Merton Vale as soon as I had felt confident that I was not being shadowed.

I had half-expected a lengthy wait outside, but in the event the heavy wooden door was opened almost immediately by the aged female retainer who had ushered me inside on my previous visit. I had also expected that I would be required to undertake a little fast talking in order to be admitted. Again, wrong: as soon as the housekeeper recognised me, she beckoned me inside and directed me towards a reception room on the ground floor, a different room that had been used to host Merton's wake. It was almost as if I was expected.

Alva Vale received me in a - well, the only word was *boudoir*. The aged retainer showed me inside, bowed formally with a carefully neutral expression on her old face, then backed out firmly closing the heavy wooden doors behind her. Both room and widow were a vision in pale tones, a visual harmony only an expensive interior designer can achieve. A swathe of deep-pile cream carpet lapped against the walls which were themselves painted a colour a carefully-chosen two shades lighter. An airy high ceiling allowed for drapes with elaborate swags and tails that framed the high windows, yet still let in a surprising amount of light.

For all its size and grandeur, the room was surprisingly intimate. The curtains which edged the vast four-poster bed concealed a substantial fraction of the room, a separation that hinted at even more intimate surroundings within. A couple of comfortable-looking chairs finished in pale leather - yet another shade of cream - were set around a grand fireplace presently not lit. The opening itself was graced by an arrangement of dried fungi in shades of fawn and beige and mushroom. The walls were decorated with large works of art - I hesitated to categorise them as paintings - executed sparsely in charcoal or ink on pale backgrounds.

The centrepiece of the entire room was Alva Vale herself. She lay artfully arranged on a chaise-longue, swathed in a dressing gown in cream satin somehow a different but again complementary shade to the curtains and walls and carpets. Her garments were carefully placed to leave much of her arms - and even more of her legs - entirely uncovered. Another region was also exposed,

displaying a great deal of what my grandmother would no doubt have insisted on called her *décolletage*.

Placed on a low table in convenient arms-reach was a cut-glass tumbler containing a transparent liquid which displayed just a very few bubbles rising leisurely to the surface, rising slowly enough for me to infer the presence of much alcohol in the colourless fluid. Standing by the glass was a bell in some silvery metal, ready to summon the housekeeper - or some other servant - to refill her glass.

"So you're the mysterious Private Detective?" she purred, in a voice unslurred but already somewhat loosened by the contents of the tumbler.

"The name's Gask, Findo Gask, Ma'am. We've met before," I said levelly, "At your late husband's wake."

She drew a hand to her mouth prettily, to hide a smile or giggle, or perhaps just a hiccup.

"That's true, isn't it," she said, "But there were too many people about. I wasn't paying much attention, I'm afraid."

She picked up her glass and sipped coyly, taking the opportunity to look at me over the rim and under her eyelashes.

"Surely you can understand that," she continued, swirling the liquid around the half-full glass, "But now that you're here, maybe you can tell me what you know about poor Merton's death."

She fixed me with a smile that left no room for misinterpretation. Long experience had taught me that it's hard for some females - even some very good-looking females - to realise that their bodies are not irresistible. Mrs Merton Vale was coming on to me as if I was just any other guy with his brains in his pants. Mistake - big mistake - huge. I was certainly no patsy, but if Alva wanted to play pat-a-cake then I was willing to play along, at least for a while.

"I'm not sure what I do know," I said carefully, "Although I think I'll learn more from a closer study of the stash of documents I've recovered - at great personal risk, I might add."

As I spoke, her eyes lit up, a brightness that might have been mistaken for a hunger, a need.

"Are those what were in poor Merton's briefcase? You got them back?"

I nodded wordlessly.

"Oh so very brave of you - tell me *all* about it," she gushed.

I gave her a heavily précis'd and slightly over-dramatised version of my adventure. I made no mention of the names of those involved, or even indicated that I had recognised any of them.

"So brave!" she breathed, when I had finished, "To face down those horrid Goblins, and that human too."

She put down her drink on the little table, next to the silver bell, then looked up at me under her eyelashes again.

"So can I see Merton's papers?"

Again, I nodded without speaking. Suddenly, Alva stood up, somehow slipping out of the dressing gown as she rose from the chaise-longue, leaving her wearing only a short and revealing negligee fabricated from a material so diaphanous that she might as well have been entirely naked. She moved to me, pressing herself close so that I could feel the warmth of her body and the swell of her breasts, and sense her hot breath on my face. She ran a hand over my chest, inside my coat, just where I have my deep pockets.

"There's only one little snag," I whispered in her ear, catching her hand, "I don't actually have them any more."

She drew back, her eyes narrowing.

"Where are they?" she snarled.

"They're in safe-keeping," I said, a wry grin slowly forming on my face, "With Judge Kirkton."

## **Chapter 17 - Arm of the Law**

The heavy front door closed behind me. I was once again out on the street in front of the imposing Vale mansion. I confess to have been unsurprised by this development. Why is it that so many females believe that wanton and vampish behaviour is a guaranteed route to trust and favours from anybody male?

After my revelation that I had - astonishingly - turned over the papers to the proper authorities, Alva Vale's interest in me waned rapidly, like someone switching off a light, her appetite for sex disappearing as if it had never been. She was quite an actress. Maybe it had been a talent she had perfected at the exclusive little private school where she had no doubt been educated. Or perhaps it was a skill she had acquired in later life, evidenced by her ability to ensnare a rich husband like Vale. I wondered what she really thought about anything: her leisured lifestyle, her close friend Mister Monzie Hosh, her dear-departed husband. Who could tell?

Alva Vale had turned away from me, then swept up the little silver bell that stood next to her drink and rang it impatiently. The housekeeper had appeared almost immediately in the doorway. She stopped and looked from Alva to me and back again, her face professionally expressionless - although I thought I could detect a hint of surprise. Perhaps I wasn't exactly where I was expected to be when she re-entered the room.

"Mister Gask will be leaving now," Alva said imperiously, her face a carefully bland mask.

I nodded politely to the widow Vale, then followed the housekeeper out of the room and back to the front door.

\*

I turned on my heel and once again made my way down the terraced hillside to the less stylish and more heavily-populated regions of this cavern. I felt at home almost immediately. I dodged my way through the crowds on the streets, checking instinctively for anyone following me - I can't help being this paranoid, it just comes naturally to me - and then took the transit tubes back to more familiar caves.

Once in my home cavern, I approached my office building via a roundabout route. This was one of several I had very carefully scouted out before I selected this particular location for my

business address. My path allowed me to get close to the building entrance with little chance of being observed. I stopped in the deep shadow of an alleyway entrance so narrow that few people would even realise it was there, the mere slit in the walls almost completely hidden behind a more than usually noisome trash bin.

I stood quietly for a long moment, watching and listening for anything in the stillness of the street. Finally, I caught a movement in the corner of my eye. On the opposite side of the road, not quite directly across from the main entrance to the apartment block, a dark figure leaned casually against a wall. He was positioned so that he was not visible to a casual observer and, to a less-casual observer, he might have been mistaken as someone who was just having a crafty smoke in a secluded place.

As I watched, I identified a second dark-clothed figure, and perhaps a third - it was hard to be sure at this range - concealing themselves in different doorways in other directions, all carefully ignoring each other. It seemed that Madderfy's goons were staking out my office. It was not a particularly imaginative ploy, more something straight out of PI School Class 201: "When you lose somebody you are tailing, go and wait for them somewhere they are likely to return to."

There wasn't anything vital for me in my office, no need to go there at all. I quietly backed away from the alleyway entrance, then turned on my heel and strode off in the direction of the transit tubes, leaving the goons to enjoy a long and fruitless wait.

\*

The vicinity of my apartment seemed to be free from any signs of leech-like appurtenances or, still worse, unwanted observers, at least as far as I could tell after a very long and close period of observation. I used another one of my stealthy approach routes as a caution, and made it my business that anyone who was hanging around was minding their own business.

Satisfied at last, I made my inside and up the stairs. The building was quiet in the early evening, as it usually was: no music played, no sounds of arguing couples or howling infants, no groans or cries of pain or pleasure. Just a restful silence. It was another reason why I had chosen this place.

I opened my own front door with my own key and pushed it wide, then stopped dead. There was something out of place. I am an unrepentantly tidy housekeeper, with a place for everything and everything in its place. I like to be able to move around my own apartment with my eyes closed without bumping into things, and still be able to find the coffee jar in the cupboard by touch alone.

There was a dark lump in the middle of the floor, next to the easy chair and the side table with the chess set, visible even in the gloom of the unlit apartment. I hadn't left anything there. I wasn't expecting any deliveries. I reached over and switched on the electric light - a low-powered version of the technology used by humans, adjusted to the lower light levels preferred by Goblins - to take a closer look at the object on the floor. It was a bundle of dark material that looked as if it contained a body, a bundle that I thought I recognised. It was the bundle I had last seen being carried over the broad shoulders of Drummond, Monzie Hosh's right-hand man, assisted by the bright-eyed Clathy Dupplin.

Time to call the cops, again. This was getting to be a habit.

\*

"This is getting to be a habit," Inspector Luncardy said, pointing at the body on the floor with what must be quite literally the Long Thin Arm of the Law.

I nodded. I had to agree. It was another bad habit I seemed to have acquired in recent days, having dead bodies dumped at my residences. It seemed that somebody was trying to send me some subtle and understated message, and I wished I could work out exactly who - and what - it was.

I had called Luncardy direct, rather than the generic police emergency number, on the principle of "better the devil you know". To my great good fortune - although I didn't necessarily appreciate it at the time - she had been on duty and took my call immediately. She had responded to the description of my circumstances with a few terse grunts and a similar number of sharply-pointed questions, then barked: "Stay where you are" before slamming the phone down.

She had arrived in about ten minutes, bringing no less than four assorted uniformed types with her. I guess coppers like Luncardy don't feel in control without a few underlings to boss around. After all, she wouldn't want to get her hands dirty doing things herself; rather, she would content herself with directing others from her appointed spot in the centre of attention.

I had been standing outside my own apartment door when Luncardy's team arrived, smoking the second of two cigarettes in quick succession and trying to get the sickness in my stomach to settle. As always, she was all business and no time for anything resembling casual small talk. She strode forward, brushing past me in her haste to get to the scene of the crime, and bent to inspect closely the bundle in the middle of my living-room floor.

The Inspector lifted the edge of the cloth that covered what I expected to be the face and flicked it aside. She had been so

closely followed by her team that, for a moment, I could not see whose deceased form had been so kindly delivered to my door. Then the minions parted and I could just make out somebody I knew.

"Mister Monzie Hosh," I breathed, "Departed, I guess, for a better place."

I was not really surprised, not after what I had witnessed at the Starfield Club. But I was beginning to get distinctly cross. Somebody was trying to take me for a sucker.

\*

"Hah," Luncardy said, typically mirthlessly, "You recognise him then?"

I had to agree he was hard to recognise, even from my close proximity. The self-satisfied smirk had been permanently wiped from his face by what looked like repeated blows from a heavy blunt object. Brutal, vicious blows. Blows delivered by somebody very strong or somebody very angry.

"He's been really messed up," I replied, "I take it he's dead?"

The Inspector pressed a long thin finger against the side of Hosh's throat, held it there for a long moment. Then she nodded.

"He's dead," she agreed, "Been stiff for a little while now."

I nodded. That would be consistent with Drummond's removal of Hosh's corpse from the Starfield Club.

"So he was dead long before he got here," I clarified, "Someone's dumped him on me."

As with so much police work, the next hour or so involved a distressing amount of hanging around while other people did their bit. In short order, the Inspector called in a forensics squad from Headquarters, and a team from the coroner's office. She also dispatched two of her own force on door-to-door enquiries in the apartment block. This was pointless, in my view, a hiding to nothing, as my neighbours were uniformly of the "didn't hear nuffin, didn't see nuffin" disposition. But at least it kept the uniforms out of the way, doing something that their Sergeant would regard as useful.

Luncardy herself stood aside, leaning her long thin body against the doorframe. I slouched nearby, watching the coroner's team photographing and measuring the body, and taking samples of the bundle it arrived in. I had been careful not to touch the unexpected package that had been delivered, even though the rough cloth was unlikely to retain fingerprint impressions. I guess

my reactions were themselves the subject of a close degree of scrutiny from the Inspector herself.

"All right, Gask," she said at length, "I guess you're a victim here. Although exactly why I'm prepared to believe you, I can't imagine."

"That'll be my trustworthy face, then," I replied, grinning insouciantly at her just to break the tension.

"Huh," she snapped back, "Private dicks. Can't book 'em, can't shoot 'em."

I think she was joking. At least, I hope she was.

"You better be telling me everything, mind you," she continued, waving a long thin finger in my face, "If you're holding out on me, it will give the very greatest pleasure throwing the book at you, very hard."

She had a point. I wasn't holding out on her, at least not much. It was all getting a bit deep. Someone was trying to make me panic in the presence of dead bodies, or perhaps to scare me off. I'm made of sterner stuff, let me reassure you, and I'm not so easily fazed by the odd corpse or two.

I had already explained all the background to Luncardy, as well as what I had seen at the Starfield Club. It all sounded good, and was very nearly entirely true, too. Grudgingly, at least, she appeared to be giving me the benefit of the doubt encouraged, I'd like to think, by the fact that I had called her directly.

The Inspector fished in the pockets of her mannish jacket for her packet of cigarettes and her holder. She selected one carefully, then screwed it into the holder in that vaguely threatening way that she had evidently long perfected. She did not offer me a cigarette but I still offered her a light, using the book of matches I had taken from the kitchenette drawer and not the ones I had acquired from the Starfield Club.

While Luncardy smoked at me, a thought flashed through my mind: what had happened to the cheap matchbook from the club, taken when I was waylaid. But why bother? Maybe my assailant had just fancied a smoke while delivering me to the surface world branch of Cowpat Central. Or maybe I really was getting paranoid.

\*

Inspector Harriet Luncardy stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray I habitually keep conveniently close to the apartment door, convenient for stubbing out an early morning smoke on the way out in search of a late breakfast. She straightened her lanky form with sudden air of determination, then strode over to where her



sergeant was directing another of her crew to assist the team from the coroners office.

She stopped the junior officer who was doing the actual lifting - he was looking very green about the face as he shuffled Hosh's feet onto the gurney - and took one long last look at the battered face of Monzie Hosh. She nodded to her officer, an expression of sympathy flitting across her face before being suppressed by the mask of stern professionalism. Then the body bag was rapidly zipped up and wheeled away to the morgue, the youngster looking distinctly pleased to be getting outside into the more open air.

The Inspector crossed the living area of my apartment and conferred quietly with the leader of the forensics team whose members had been padding and dabbing their way around the place for the last hour or so. They were speaking so softly that I could not overhear, even though they were just across the room. She stood ram-rod straight, her chin held held high. If only she could be persuaded to unbend a little, I thought, to let go of her professionally distant persona, she might be an interesting person to know. Maybe I should buy her a stiff off-duty whiskey sometime.

Luncardy returned to me, still at my post in the doorway.

"Somebody really wanted him dead," she said with carefully controlled evenness.

"Any clues as to how, or when?" I asked, with what I hoped was just the right amount of casualness.

She looked grim.

"It will all need to be confirmed by a post-mortem examination," Luncardy answered carefully, "But he must have been surprised by his attacker. There was no damage to his hands or arms; he had made no attempt to defend himself from the blows."

So it was somebody he knew, somebody he was expecting. I nodded.

"We think he was knocked down by a first blow to the back of the head," she continued, "Quite low down, which suggests that the attacker was a short person - and fell unconscious to the floor. Then he was struck repeatedly. Somebody wanted to make sure he never got up again."

Any further questions I might have had were forestalled by the return of the flat-foots who had been undertaking door-to-door enquiries. Luncardy stepped into the corridor to take their report. Again, I could overhear nothing but, from the shaking of the heads, the results were exactly as I had anticipated: they had completely

failed to turn up any report of a disturbance or strangers with large bundles in the corridors, despite having knocked on every door in the joint.

The Inspector walked back into the flat, brushing past me again, then stopped and looked around.

"Okay, then," Luncardy said, raising her voice only slightly, "Pay attention everybody."

Every officer in the room reacted immediately. She had that kind of commanding voice. No need to shout.

"Gentlemen," she said clearly, "It's time to pay a visit to the Starfield Club."

There were mutterings of understanding. Her Sergeant picked up the phone - my phone - and dialled a number from memory. The call was answered almost immediately and the officer issued a long series of exactly the kind of instructions you would expect when planning a raid on a sleazy nightclub.

The Inspector turned to face me.

"You're coming with me," she said sternly, ticking me off in front of everybody, "You'd better show me exactly where this secret entrance is."

## **Chapter 18 - Friends Reunited**

By the time we got there, the reinforcements called for by Luncardy's Sergeant had already arrived and had positioned themselves at a discreet distance from the front door of the Starfield Club. The cops weren't trying to make themselves inconspicuous and the club doormen must have noticed something untoward. As I watched, the two rotund bouncers conferred, looking uneasy and glancing at the massing force, then one went inside, presumably to ask for instructions.

Luncardy herself did not delay. She split her team in two. Half of the group she sent, under the charge of the Sergeant, to stake out the not-at-all secret rear entrances where waiting staff and performers arrived, beer and bottles were delivered, and drunks and malcontents evicted. The remaining section, which she led herself, peeled away down the familiar alleyway on the other side of the building. I tagged along, keeping close to the Inspector's side.

The signal to move in was given by two sharp blasts on an official police whistle - the damp rock walls and buildings make radios useless down here. Thuds and crashes from battering rams being applied to the service entrance doors started even before Luncardy and I had reached the point marked by several overflowing refuse bins where, if my memory was correct, a small doorway was concealed.

The Inspector drew a small box from her pocket. A quick glance showed that it was a reveal-all spell, a glamour which was only legally available to the police - although I was pretty certain I could get my hands on one if I really put my mind to it. She held up the little package and spoke the inaudible words - no showy hand gestures seemed to be required - which activated the magic.

This time, there was none of the gentle transition between states or rippling water effects I had seen earlier. Instead, the concealment simply clicked off like a switch for the kind of electric light popular in the surface world. I guess the official magic must be particularly puissant. Or maybe just no time for cute effects in the service of the state.

The same small wooden door was now clearly visible. Luncardy jerked her head and four officers stepped forward with a heavy battering ram. Frankly I doubted whether the flimsy-looking door

would require much more than a good kicking to get it open. In any case, one decent swing of the ram and the door flew open. Luncardy herself was first inside, closely followed by the members of her squad who were not encumbered with the ram and with me making up a close fourth in the pack.

Inside was all chaos and confusion. There was no attempt at resistance, which would have been futile anyway. The band stopped with a screech as the cops entered the main auditorium, which made the audience swivel their necks to see what was going on. A hush fell for a few seconds, where the only sound was the clearly-audible clatter of a ball in the roulette wheel, before a hubbub of disconcertion and outrage swelled up on all sides.

Luncardy's squad were evidently experienced in undertaking raids on nightclubs, while the bouncers milled about in a confused fashion, leaderless and unused to making their own decisions. In just a few minutes, the cops had rounded up all of the waiting staff and casino croupiers, the enforcers and security staff, and the musicians and performers. Most of the junior staff were subjected to a short interview, then released, while those remaining in positions of responsibility were detained for more formal questioning.

The punters were politely directed to go home, or at least leave quietly. There was no suggestion that the guests were doing anything illegal, Luncardy quietly made it clear, and the current raid was the result of a long-running police investigation. This was not quite true, of course, but it calmed the situation rapidly, so that the clientele soon left in twos and threes, muttering and gossiping to each other. The cops even turned a blind eye on at least two individuals dealing in drugs of some kind, and the working girls were treated exactly the same as any other customer. I guessed that trade at the Starfield Club would be slow for *days* afterwards.

It soon became apparent that nobody knew where Hosh or Drummond could be found - nobody was letting on that the former was by now chilling at the morgue, of course - and none of the other waitresses could tell Luncardy where Clathy was. Several of the girls said that she had been around only a few minutes ago, but exactly how long was usually unclear and always inconsistent.

On a whim, I asked first one and then another of the girls about the whereabouts of Clunie. Nobody seemed to know, which was a little bit worrying, although she might just have gone home early. I checked out the little storeroom where Clunie - and who knew how many others? - had carried out her romantic little trysts. It was empty, the candles and bedding undisturbed and looked as if it had not been used since I had last been in there.

By the time I caught up with Luncardy again, she was holding interviews in Monzie Hosh's office. Hosh's office looked exactly as it was when I glanced in there on my previous visit: preternaturally unsoiled and neat, almost as if it had recently undergone a careful and thorough cleaning.

When I arrived, Luncardy was grilling one of the more senior waiters. From the look of frustration on her face, I got the impression that she was learning nothing useful.

"Can I ask a question?" I said to Luncardy.

She looked at me askance, then nodded brusquely. I smiled at the aged figure, who looked as if her had been lifting trays for at least two hundred years.

"Is there anything missing?"

The old boy looked around carefully, taking his time.

"No, everything seems to be in its accustomed place," he replied eventually.

"OK." I said, "Thanks."

I wasn't sure what I was asking for, anyway. Just a hunch. They don't always work out.

Luncardy jerked her head in the direction of the exit. The waiter moved to go without a word. Just as he was leaving the office, he turned and said: "Good to see the redecorations have finished at last."

Luncardy narrowed her eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Hosh's had the walls and ceiling repainted," he said, looking confused, "The furniture and carpet's been under plastic covers and dustsheets for days."

That would explain the cleanliness of Hosh's office - no bloodstains. The winding-sheets that wrapped his body had been formed from painter's rags.

\*

It was turning into another long night. I was already flagging, my reserves drained by the exigencies of the last few days. I was hungry and I could really do with a coffee, but I had to make do with interminable cigarettes while the cops asked their interminable questions.

As it turned out, Luncardy learned nothing of substance from the remainder of the interviews, although she certainly spent long enough getting to that point.

"Clathy and Drummond have gone, and nobody knows where, at least as far as anyone is saying," she told me despondently, after the last croupier had left, "Somebody must have tipped them off."

I shrugged. It was just possible that they made it out of the secret rear entrance before we arrived, perhaps warned by the bouncers on door duty. But the loving couple would have had to move astonishingly quickly and it was more likely that they had already flown the coop long before we arrived.

"OK," Luncardy eventually instructed her squad, "We're learning nothing new here. Wrap it up."

She turned to face me, pressing her face close to mine. Few females can do that, but she was taller than most. There was a pause as she looked me eye-to-eye.

"Thanks for your help," she said steadily, with apparently genuine intent, "There is a case here, I'm sure of it. I'm not going to drop this one."

"Do you think Captain Wester will see it that way?" I asked.

"Leave Wester to me," she answered with icy determination, "Now, you go home and get some sleep."

\*

I went home. The neighbourhood was free from black-garbed stooges and inexplicable stakeouts, as far as I could see. Besides, I was getting to be past caring. The apartment was free from the taint of the dead and the stench of policemen; even the aroma of fingerprint powder had faded.

I undressed and took a long, long shower, and toyed with the prospect of tracking down the emergency scotch bottle. In the end, I didn't need it: I was so exhausted that I fell asleep on the top of the bed, not even bothering to draw the covers over me.

I should have anticipated that I would be woken in what felt like the middle of the night. The phone rang and rang, and stopped, and rang again, and eventually I surfaced fuzzily, trying to work out the cause of the din. Finally, I reached a level of consciousness that allowed me to coordinate thought and hand, and I managed to pick up the receiver and grunt: "Gask."

It was Luncardy, of course, sounding as bright as a button, as if sleep was something that only happened to other people.

"Morning, Gask," she breezed, "You awake?"

"I will be shortly," I responded, irony being one of my mental functions which kicked in early.

"Great," she replied, ignoring my remark, "I got a call from the coroner's office, the results of his post-mortem examination. I want to go through it with you. Be in my office in half an hour."

"Forty minutes."

There was an exasperated sigh from the other end of the line.

"Okay. Soon as you can."

There was a click and the line went dead.

I was going to need sustenance, not to mention chemical stimulants, before I was ready to face Luncardy in her lair. I dressed quickly and hurried down the street to David's diner on the corner. The patron was at the door when I arrived. Either he always stood there, or he somehow knew when I was approaching. How would I know?

I had been sat in my usual booth at the back for all of ten seconds before a large cup of strong black coffee. I reached for it greedily, swallowed half of it, the hot liquid scalding the back of my throat. I was just pulling the ashtray towards me and fumbling in my pockets for cigarettes and matches when David re-appeared, notepad in hand.

"You'll want the special this morning," he told me, already jotting on his pad.

"I will?" I responded, "What is it, then?"

"Herb sausages, eggs, mushrooms and hash browns."

I wasn't going to argue with that. And I certainly wasn't going to ask what was in the sausages along with the herbs.

"Bring it on," I replied, grinning up at him.

\*

Forty-three minutes after Luncardy's call, and feeling much better, I was in her office in the precinct headquarters. Not an interview room, her actual office: she was not treating me as a suspect in the case. I wondered just what it was I had done to engender this kind of trust from somebody who was, by all accounts, an altogether prickly character.

Harriet Luncardy's office was a model of restrained functional elegance. Unlike Wester's office, which was filled with sporting memorabilia overlaid with a patina of dust and partially concealed by stacks of files, hers was almost clinically neat and tidy. No dust or dirt, no pictures on the desk, no flower vase on the windowsill, no clutter of folders heaped on chairs or floor.

The desk itself was set carefully in the centre of the room, the polished wooden expanse unbroken except by a lamp, two phones, a tidy for pens and pencils, and a desk blotter which looked unsullied by any actual ink. The blotter framed a single manila folder containing a thick wad of papers that Luncardy was poring over.

The copper escorting me knocked once on the open door and entered immediately. I followed. Luncardy looked up, closed the folder on her desk, jerked her head to beckon me inside. The uniformed type that had brought me up quietly closed the door behind me.

"Take a seat, Gask," she said, waving a hand at the two visitors' chairs, "Glad you could make it eventually."

Well, maybe she did have a sense of humour carefully concealed about her person. Very carefully concealed.

Luncardy opened the folder again, took out two bundles of papers.

"So, I've got the coroner's report," she said, indicating one of the bundles, "Which we'll come to later. And a report from forensics."

She picked up the second bundle, turned over a few pages.

"They went through his pockets," she went on, "Found all the usual things you might expect for the well-heeled mobster: a case of large and expensive cigars, accompanied by a chunky metal lighter and a large pocket-knife which was undoubtedly intended for trimming the ends of the cigars, and not by any means a murderous weapon."

She raised her eyes to the ceiling momentarily, as if to indicate distaste with the arguments of overpaid lawyers.

"Also a pocket-book in fine leather, containing cash and a collection of receipts for expensive goods from up-market shops and emporia."

Her eyes focussed on mine across the desk.

"But there was one thing in his pockets that looked out of place, even though it was from his own nightclub."

She held up a sealed plastic bag, of the kind that are used everywhere to contain items that might be evidence. She was watching my reaction like a hawk. The bag contained a part-used match-book from the Starfield Club.

"Your fingerprints were found on this."



My prints are on file with various authorities, of course. It's a pre-requisite to getting a PI's licence in all underground jurisdictions.

"Sure," I said levelly, "I told you I went to the Starfield Club. Took away the freebie matches. Who wouldn't? Taken from my pockets when I was turned over on the way out of Garrick's place. I'd been wondering what happened to them."

She twirled the transparent bag around, then put it down carefully on the desk right in front of me. I leaned forward to get a good look. There was a scribbled note inside, on the cheap cardboard of the cover: "My place, 7pm. Come alone."

"Is this your writing, Gask?"

I looked more closely. I guess some people might have remarked on the resemblance, but it wasn't my hand, just an uninspired attempt to imitate it.

"No," I said firmly, "It's not. Looks a bit like it, though."

"Hmmm," she said, "It's just as well for you that the handwriting department agrees with that statement."

I nearly suppressed a sigh of relief. Luncardy pretended not to notice.

"Look," I began, "It was a clumsy and heavy-handed attempt to frame me. Somebody wants me out of the way. No doubt Hosh's body was supposed to have been found unwrapped and bloody in my living room, with incriminating evidence in his pockets."

"I know," Luncardy acknowledged wearily, "That's why you're still here, rather than being asked a long series of hard questions in one of the rooms downstairs."

I went on to tell her about my stealthy approach to arriving home, and how it must have surprised Drummond. He must have been in my apartment only minutes before I got there myself, and presumably warned off by Clathy.

The one thing I didn't say was: I wasn't supposed to get back home as early as I did. Everyone had been trying to detain me, one way or another. But who was doing it deliberately?

\*

Luncardy took her time running through the coroner's report, although ultimately I learned nothing that I hadn't already gathered from previous conversations. She also said she had put out an all-points alert for Drummond and Clathy. After that, the time began to drag. We rapidly got bogged down in petty details that were probably not going to lead anywhere.

Finally, I had had my fill of this irrelevant stuff. I stood up suddenly, the chair scrapping on the floor. Luncardy looked startled as I retrieved my hat and made to leave.

"What're you doing?" she demanded.

"I'm learning nothing useful here," I said directly, "And I do have a client to report to."

She looked wryly at me, then pressed a button on her telephone. The same uniformed officer appeared at the door almost immediately.

"Mister Gask is just leaving," Luncardy said. It was the second time in less than a day that somebody had said that about me.

\*

It was approaching noon before I once again stood before the slightly irregular front of Clunie's apartment block, the construction of the apartments merging imperceptibly with the uncut rock of the cavern wall. I inspected the building - if that's the right word for these constructions - but I could make out nobody on the stairs or terraces.

Finally, I made my way up the stairs and along the narrow balcony to apartment number 514. I didn't knock; instead, I listened carefully for several minutes, my large ear pressed firmly up against the solid timbers of the door. I wondered if Clunie was at home. If she was entertaining one of her gentleman friends, she might not wish to be disturbed. I could come back later, in the afternoon, perhaps before she set out for her shift at the Club.

There was no sound from within. Despite their solid and old-fashioned construction, apartments like these are not particularly well sound-proofed. I was pretty certain I'd be able to hear Clunie inside, unless she was asleep or otherwise making no noise.

I knocked briskly, then stood back slightly so that somebody peering through a crack in the door could see me clearly. I wasn't trying to sneak up on anybody, after all. The door resolutely refused to move, to open a crack. I knocked again. Still nothing. Nobody at home, then.

These old places are less secure than they look, as well as less soundproofed. The timbers of the doors are so old, so dried up and shrunk, that there is a great deal of movement in the frames and hinges. For a big guy like me, it is the work of a moment to lift the door by the handle, lean against the hinge and pop the bolt out of its restraining hasp.

I pushed the door closed behind me and stepped into the tiny apartment. It was as tidy and over-furnished as it was before.

There was no sign of Clunie, no sign that she had gone away for a lengthy period: all her clothes and shoes and knick-knacks were still in place. Perhaps she had been detained entertaining another of her gentleman friends. A girl's got to eat, after all.

I gave the place a cursory once-over. I checked the bedroom - a vision in pink - and the bathroom - a clutter of bottles and jars and implements of the kind which are a mystery to the male of the species. Nothing doing. Then scribbled a note on the back of one of my business cards: "Call me. Gask." I tossed the piece of cheap card on the coffee table.

I made my way out of the front door, leaning against the frame again to force the lock back into place. There was a clunk as the fittings re-engaged. Then there was a voice in my ear and a sharp jab in the small of my back. A knife, not a gun. I had no magical protection - or any other kind of protection - against blades.

"Stand still and put your hands where I can see them."

## **Chapter 19 - Missing Person**

"Why'd'ya call the cops?" the voice behind me growled, "I thought you were smarter than that."

I recognised the voice, the hulking presence behind me. It was Drummond, of course.

"You dumped a body in my rooms," I explained in a reasonable tone of voice, "A dead mobster. I've got a professional reputation - and a PI licence - to maintain. Besides, why wouldn't I call the cops?"

There was an exasperated sigh in my left ear.

"Jeez, don't you ever pick up your messages?" he muttered, "Half a dozen calls to your answering service. I even left a note on your desk."

I started to turn, a barely perceptible movement to try and get the drop on him. But he was too smart for that. The sharp pricking over my kidneys increased.

"Don't try it, Bud," he warned, a nasty tone creeping into the edges of his voice, "I've killed more Goblins with this pig-sticker than you've had hot dinners."

Given the number of meals I've been missing over the last few days, this was quite possibly true.

"Look, I'm a busy guy. Things to do, places to go," I said, laying on the reasonableness thickly, "Besides, that stakeout at my office certainly put me off going there."

There was a frozen moment of silence. I got the distinct impression that this was news to him.

"Yeah, well," he said eventually, sounding sheepish, "I don't count that as an excuse."

"So what's this message you're so fired up to deliver, then?"

"We've got Clunie," he said bluntly.

I stiffened.

"So listen, and listen good," he went on, the menace in his tone returning full-force, "Things at the Starfield Club don't concern you."

So, if you want to see Miss Clunie Ford alive, butt out. And get the cops off the case, too."

"But ..." I began.

The knife at my waist jerked.

"No buts. No excuses. Get the message to that lady cop friend of yours."

"Luncardy? She's not a friend."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just get the message to her, right? Leave the Starfield Club alone, or you'll end up getting your client back in pieces."

"The cops won't take kindly to that kind of message," I said, more than a tinge of real worry in my voice, "They won't listen to me. No chance."

There was another sharp jab in my back.

"Look, Mister Professional Private Dick, it's your job to persuade 'em. Get them to lay off, soon, or the lady gets it."

\*

The pressure on my back ceased abruptly and the hulking presence disappeared. I turned around very slowly, as Drummond might still be stood nearby, might yet do something stupid. Something more stupid, more like. If you're going to go to the trouble of carrying out a kidnapping then the least you can do is to make sure that the ransom note is delivered in person. I was forced to the conclusion that Drummond was not the brains of the outfit.

The big Goblin was nowhere to be seen, of course. These old places are a warren of tunnels and passages and staircases, and there was no point in even trying to catch up with him. He certainly knew how to move quietly, stealthily, and he might have deployed another of those invisibility glamours he evidently knew how to get his hands on.

So now I had my client in trouble, big trouble. She was a sweet girl, managing to display a charming degree of innocence, especially for one who worked in a nightclub and slept with some of the wealthier patrons. My highly atrophied sense of chivalry woke up and kicked me, metaphorically, in the ass. There was no way I could let Clunie suffer at the hands of whoever was behind all this.

I could not risk delaying talking with Luncardy - I might very well be under discrete surveillance even now. But I could choose where and how I communicated Drummond's message. I made my way back down to what passes for ground level around here,

making no more than a token attempt to spot Drummond lurking in the shadows. I got no sense of his presence, but that didn't mean he wasn't nearby.

There was a public callbox on the corner of the short street that linked the cavern wall apartment complex to the main thoroughfare. It looked worn and well-used, although clearly in working order. Few around this neighbourhood could afford a phone of their own, and the poorer kind would queue here to make their calls. Besides, the local tough guys would tear the ears off any vandal they caught damaging this vital form of communication.

I grabbed the receiver, stuffed coins dredged from the recesses of my pocket into the slot and dialled Luncardy's direct line. I had it committed to memory by now. The phone rang for fifteen seconds before it was answered.

"Yeah?" She worked hard at the tough-guy image.

"Luncardy? It's Gask."

"Well, well. Less bored now, are we?"

"Much less, thank you for asking," I answered in bright and brittle tones. I doubt she noticed.

"So what do you want then?"

"I've got information, important information. News I can't tell you over the phone."

"Ha! You better not be playing games with me," she growled.

"I'm not," I replied with all the sincerity I could muster, "Look, you need to trust me in this one."

There was a derisory snort from the other end of the line.

"Okay, I'll bite. Although I'll probably regret it."

"Thanks. Meet me in my office as soon as you can."

There was a series of muffled noises, as though she was conferring with an underling with her hand over the microphone.

"Forty minutes," her voice returned, "If that's convenient for your busy schedule?"

"Great. Thanks." I rang off.

I could rely on Luncardy bringing a squad with her - she never went anywhere alone - so now would be a good time to find out whether there was still a stakeout on my office and exactly what Madderfy's goons were up to.

\*

The black-garbed squad were still on-duty around the low-rent building where my low-rent offices were located. As far as I could tell, they were the same group who were there last night. They must have endured a long and boring stint overnight. I had no sympathy whatsoever; any decent stakeout needs two or, ideally, three groups to make sure a fresh crew was ready when the mark returned to the lair. This spoke of poor management all around. These lads would be cold and tired, not at all alert and likely to make stupid mistakes when the unexpected happened.

Unlike my stealthy approach on the previous occasion, this time I strolled up the main road from the direction of the transit tubes as if I didn't have a care in the world. I carefully ignored their lurking presence of the watchers and their clumsy attempts to stay out of sight, and tried - with reasonable success, I thought - to give the impression that I had enjoyed a long and restful sleep and a good meal before a late arrival at work.

The lobby was deserted when I arrived, although in truth I don't think I have ever seen anyone in the building lobby. Oh, I know that a reasonable number of the other offices are tenanted - I am a detective, after all - although the exact occupants do seem to change on a weekly basis. This was probably just the expected result of cheap rents and dubious business models.

I collected my mail from the box and made a show of thumbing through them as I trudged up the stairs - an unsurprising collection of bills and advertising materials, at first glance. Nobody tried to intercept me, nobody attempted to follow me. I pushed open the office door and glanced around - nobody lurking under the desk - then slumped in the squeaky swivel chair and tossed my hat on the scarred leather surface.

I didn't have long to wait. I quickly scanned Drummond's note, which contained nothing he had not already communicated, then stuffed it in my coat pocket. I had slit open, and immediately binned, about half of the junk mail before the two henchmen shouldered their way through the office door. They glanced around, looking bleary-eyed and jumpy, starting at the shadows in the recesses of the office. I had carefully avoided turning on any lights to engender just such a reaction.

"Good day, gentlemen," I spouted cheerily, looking up at the familiar figures, "How can I help you this fine morning?"

One of the goons looked too tired to speak coherently. He glanced at the other, a pleading look in his eyes. His companion was clearly made of sterner stuff.

"Madderfy wants to talk to you," the second Goblin said, enunciating his words with special care.

"Sure," I replied brightly, leaning forward to pick up the phone, "What's his number?"

The first goon lumbered forward, pressed his thumb down over the phone cradle so hard that I thought the creaking plastic would shatter under his weight.

"In person," he grunted, some remaining part of his instruction still firing up the neurons in his brain. Not that I imagined he was a world-class thinker under normal circumstances.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" I continued in the same cheery tone, glancing from one to the other and back again, "Let me just have a look at my appointments for today."

"Wise guy," the second Goblin snorted, "Now shut up."

He picked up my phone, which was still working despite the ministrations of his colleague a few moments before, and dialed a number. It was answered almost immediately.

"Gask is back," the goon muttered into the handset, then listened to a stream of instructions from the other end, "Right. Okay. Keep him here. Five minutes."

He slammed the phone down and glared at me. I sat back in my chair, smiling pleasantly and giving the pair of them my best impersonation of bright-eyed helpfulness. I had been pretty certain that they would not attempt to take me to Madderfy. Trying to escort a slippery customer like me through busy streets without giving me an opportunity to get away would have been next to impossible.

The first black-garbed Goblin moved to stand by the door, presumably ready to intercept me should I try and make a run for it. Not that I was planning on going anywhere just at the moment; they were exactly where I wanted them to be. The second henchman, trying very hard not to yawn, backed away from the desk, keeping his distance in case I tried to grab him. Neither of them had bothered to pull the bulky automatics that were clearly visible under their jackets. Either they thought they didn't need them, or maybe they had heard about my anti-gun magic. Didn't matter either way to me.

\*

The two goons stood in silence in the half-light, trying to remain alert. After a minute or two, I leaned further back in my chair, stretched luxuriously and affected an enormous yawn. This was just as successful as I had hoped, since both of them were yawning hugely when Old Man Madderfy arrived. He looked distinctly displeased: me looking as bright and chirpy as a theme-park attendant while his henchmen were practically asleep on their feet.



I could see him practically biting his tongue trying not to bellow at the two of them.

"Okay, you two," Madderfy said in a carefully controlled voice, the tinges of menace almost completely concealed, "We'll take it from here. Go outside and keep watch."

They stumbled out, almost falling over themselves to absent themselves from their boss's presence. I wouldn't want to be in their shoes when the Old Man got them alone.

Madderfy was accompanied by a third and larger black-garbed Goblin, one I didn't recognise. This one looked well-rested and alert, and infinitely more dangerous than the clowns that had just left. Treat with extreme caution. This newcomer took up a station by the door. I still wasn't planning on making a run for it, but there was a serious chance that I wouldn't be able to make it with this boy in the way.

Madderfy looked around my office disdainfully, then settled himself comfortably in the better of my visitor's chairs, presumably unaware that it was the one which Vale had occupied when he died. He picked up a couple of the envelopes that littered the desk, inspected them briefly, then tossed them aside. He appeared as unenamoured with the quality of the junk mail as I felt.

"So, Mister Gask," he began, looked at me down the length of his nose - a particularly effective tactic for a Goblin, "I asked you to come and see me when you had recovered from your, shall we say, temporary incapacitation."

"Well, I've not found out anything more about Vale's death," I said reasonably, and with a degree of truthfulness, "Which is what you said you wanted to know. Although you may not be aware that it was in that chair that he died."

To his credit, he did not leap out of the seat, although it did take a certain amount of the smugness out of his expression.

"And besides," I went on, "You didn't seem to be very keen to see me when I turned up at the wake at the Widow Vale's place."

He grimaced slightly.

"I admit I was a little hasty and unwelcoming on that occasion," he acknowledged with a degree of grudging graciousness, "After all, you did make yourself useful at the Court of Probate. Although it was strange that Merton went to all that trouble for an empty briefcase."

"Thank you," I said with feigned modesty, "All in a day's work. I'll send you my bill. Although you needn't worry about the contents of the briefcase. They had been stolen. But I managed

to get them back, delivered them straight to Judge Kirkton in person yesterday morning. There was another will in there, a more recent one, and loads of other documents that kinda looked important. But they're all sorted out now. No need to worry at all."

I might have expected a reaction from Old Man Madderfy. He might have looked angry, or confused, or even relieved that I had done the right thing. Not a flicker. He must make quite a poker player.

"So why is it that you haven't been investigating what really happened to Merton?" he said, smoothly changing the subject.

"I have been investigating, actually," I responded, my cheerily helpful voice once again coming to the fore, "It's just that I'm no closer to finding out who killed him. If anybody did. The police are officially saying that it's a suicide, as I'm sure you will have heard from your friend Captain Wester. And I have had my hands full with certain other matters which keep getting in the way."

"And what other matters are these?" he purred.

"Well, another dead body turned up on my doorstep. On my lounge carpet, actually. Terribly inconvenient, not to mention distracting. The police ask so many questions."

His poker face definitely cracked on this one. He sat up straight and glared at me, a distinctly worried expression playing about his eyes.

"What? Who?" he spluttered.

"It was Monzie Hosh," I continued in a most reasonable voice, "You may not have heard of him, although both your son and your daughter certainly have. Indeed, they seem to have known him quite well. You might care to ask them. Some people would say he's a mobster, although I'm sure that can't be true. Just an ordinary honest businessman, used to run the Starfield Club. You may have heard of that place. But you can see why the police were so very interested when somebody ices him, then dumps his corpse in my apartment."

Old Man Madderfy took a few moments to pull himself together.

"Look, Gask," he began in a man-to-man kind of voice, "I don't want you talking to the police any more."

"And exactly why," came a voice from the doorway, "Don't you want Mister Gask to be talking to us?"

## **Chapter 20 - Protection Racket**

You could hardly fault Old Man Madderfy's reaction to the arrival of the cops. Without missing a beat, he put on his most urbane expression and his most winning smile, and turned in his seat to face the police squad.

"Why, Miss Luncardy," he said smoothly, "What a pleasure it is to see you here."

The Inspector stood framed in the doorway, even her lanky form dwarfed by the big Goblin in black. Behind her stood the taciturn Sergeant and a phalanx of at least four other cops - about average for her, I would say - and, following up the rear, Madderfy's other two goons. These last had probably been half-asleep, or more so, when Luncardy's crew arrived. No time to give a warning at all. I really wouldn't want to be in their shoes when Madderfy found exactly what happened.

"It's Inspector Luncardy to you," she said tartly, adding after a barely perceptible pause, "Sir."

She moved into the room, ignoring the goon who was looking to Madderfy for instruction. She stopped in front of the desk, her sharp eyes flitting from Madderfy to me and back again. Finally, they focussed on the Old Man.

"To repeat my question, sir" she said levelly, "What was it you were telling Mister Gask here not to talk about?"

"Oh, I was just advising Gask not to repeat his unfounded suggestions about my business," he lied smoothly, "Wouldn't you agree that libellous remarks are to be avoided?"

He turned away from Luncardy and glared at me, daring me to contradict him.

"I have no intention of making any libellous remarks about your business to the police," I said, robot-like. I think Luncardy got the message.

It would only be a little later that I would remember that I hadn't actually mentioned Madderfy's private business, let alone utter baseless speculations about its nature. So why was this the first lie that sprang to the Old Man's mind when caught out?

"Mister Madderfy," Luncardy said formally, "I am here on police business to interview Mister Gask. I am afraid I must ask you to leave."

"Of course, of course," Madderfy replied urbanely, then added, "Does your Captain know you're here?"

"I will of course be filing a report in the usual way," Luncardy replied primly, "And I am engaged in a murder enquiry."

"Indeed."

Old Man Madderfy stood up slowly, the smile seemingly nailed to his face. He barely gave me a glance, although his manner made it clear he was not happy with me, and with the situation. He moved towards the door sedately, without rushing, without acknowledging that he was being thrown out. He was just about to step over the threshold when Luncardy called out.

"Mister Madderfy. I will need to interview you. Please could you confirm your expected whereabouts for today and tomorrow?"

Madderfy's face was like thunder when he turned around. I could have applauded Luncardy for that look alone. Mind you, the control in his voice when he replied was also a masterpiece.

"Why do you feel the need to interview me?"

"I'm investigating a murder," she reminded him, "Your son, daughter and son-in-law - deceased - all of them knew the victim. The company you used to run had dealings with him. So perhaps there is something you know which will help with our enquiries."

It was eminently clear that Madderfy did not like this level of official interest in his affairs. He was used to being in control where the police were concerned. Although I wondered what kind of explosions would punctuate the next interview between Luncardy and Wester. She wasn't like his tame police captain. She had morals, or at least pride. She wasn't going to be distracted from this course easily.

"I'll be at home," he replied, speaking slowly and carefully, "You can reach me there anytime."

That should keep him out of my metaphorical hair for a little while.

\*

Madderfy left the office, trying unsuccessfully to conceal his frustration. He was followed by his head henchman, who seemed confused by the turn of events, and trailed by the two other goons whose tiredness had been suddenly swept away by shock and fear.

Luncardy took charge immediately. She directed the Sergeant and a couple of her squad to make sure that Madderfy actually left the building, then asked the remaining cops to wait outside in the corridor. Her eyes narrowing, she pressed both her hands on the desk in front of me and leaned forward over it.

"What kind of games are you playing, Gask?"

I looked directly into her eyes, looking grim.

"This is not a game," I said earnestly, "I've got somebody into trouble. And I think I need your help to get her out of trouble again."

Luncardy looked back at me warily, although I thought I could detect an expression of concern creasing the corners of her eyes.

"By 'her', I take it you mean your mysterious client?" she asked.

This was no time for beating about the bush.

"Clunie Ford," I confirmed, "She's been kidnapped."

Her eyes opened wider in surprise, perhaps even shock, then narrowed as her default state of suspicion reasserted itself.

"How to you know that?" she asked pointedly.

I recounted my interview with Drummond at the door of Clunie's apartment. I gave her the note that Drummond had left on my desk, now slightly crumpled from being in my pocket. I even showed her the slight tear in my favourite coat - in fact, my only coat - made by the point of Drummond's knife over my kidneys.

While I was telling her all this, Luncardy stood up straight and screwed one of her cigarettes into her holder, then lit it herself. She still didn't offer me one. She wandered up and down the office carpet looking distracted, obviously deep in thought. By now, she must have known pretty much everything I knew about this case. If she knew more than me, she wasn't letting on.

"Do you think Old Man Madderfy's involved with this somehow?" she said suddenly.

"Hmm. I don't think so, not directly," I said after a moment's thought, "I think he suspects that his son is deep in it - which he is - and maybe he wants to protect him, or cover up any scandal, at least. But he doesn't know what's really going on. Not a clue. He's really desperate to find out, but he's going about it in a really heavy-handed way. Calling in a favour with your boss, leaning on me - leaning on you, even."

"Wester's getting jumpy," Luncardy confirmed, waving her smoking stick around expressively, "His balls really are on the block. But there's no way he can instruct me to ignore the second murder, especially with such a botched attempt at a frame-up."

I found I could bear the thought of Captain Fowlis Wester's discomfiture without undue upset to my mental equilibrium. Serves the old bastard right.

"So where is Drummond now? And Clathy. I imagine they're still working together on this," she went on, "Where are they holding Clunie?"

"I have no idea," I said bluntly, "But I think there's a way. Argaty Dupplin, Clathy's grandmother. She's devoted to her. Grandma might have a clue, even if she doesn't know it herself."

"Good idea, Gask," Luncardy said approvingly, "Let's get round there right away."

"No," I said firmly, "Drummond wanted to keep the police out of this. He might be outside watching even now. If you leave me here, it'll look like I've persuaded you to leave alone. Then I'll go and talk to Argaty."

Luncardy glared at me over the desk, suspicion at full throttle. Then she looked away, took a last drag on her cigarette and stubbed it out with unnecessary force in the desk ashtray in front of me.

"Okay, Gask," she said, shaking her head, "We'll go with your plan. But I want to know everything she says. Everything, understand?"

I grinned up at her.

"You'll have to trust me," I said wryly.

"Huh. I'm not going to make a habit of that, believe me."

\*

After Luncardy had gone, I spent a few minutes tidying the office, emptying the ashtray and opening the rest of the mail. I might even consider paying some of these bills sometime soon. The domestic bliss was just a distraction, something to do with my hands; I was sunk in my own thoughts as I pottered about.

There was no point in rushing anywhere. Anybody who was watching me, keeping track of me in some way, would be alert - jumpy, even - after the departure of the police. I needed to give an hour or so to relax, become complacent, get bored. I decided to take a late lunch at the usual diner, then lingered over a cup of coffee and a second cigarette.

Finally, it was time to go. I had no idea whether I was still being followed, but I had to assume that I was; Drummond was too good with those invisibility glamours for me to be sure. Fortunately, at this hour, the transit tubes would be crowded enough to make it extremely difficult for an invisible person to move undetected, without being so crowded to prevent me from moving quickly if I wanted to.

I took a very roundabout route, hopping in and out of the tubes seemingly at random. I'm sure my destination was not at all obvious, at least at the outset. There was no sign that I was being tailed and, after seven or eight changes, I was confident enough to make for Clathy's apartment by a direct route.

The lobby of Clathy's fashionably smart apartment block was empty when I arrived. The decorative fungi in the vases were fresh and expensive-looking, and the marble tiles on the floor had been recently polished. I really must find myself a place like this one of these years. I'd have to come in to some money first, though. Which made me wonder: how could a cocktail waitress in a sleazy club and her crippled grandmother afford to live in surroundings like these?

I took the lift tube to the fourteenth floor and marched around to 1412. Once again, I took off my hat and composed my face into an expression of profound respect for one's elders and betters. Every little helps. Then I knocked loudly. Argaty gave no sign of being deaf, but you can never be sure with the elderly. Or she might have been taking an afternoon nap.

As it turned out, I did not have to knock again. Sounds of slow and careful movement came from within almost as soon as I knocked. I waited patiently as the peephole was opened and closed, and the locks and bolts were drawn back, and finally the broken-toothed smile of Argaty Dupplin appeared at the crack of the opened door.

"Mister Gask," she chirped, "How nice. I hadn't expected to see you again. Come in, shut the door behind you."

Leaving me to deal with the complexities of opening and closing the door, she hobbled across the room back to her favourite armchair with the aid of her stick, then carefully lowered herself into the seat. Today the fire burned more brightly, and the room was still shrouded in gloom from the closed curtains. It was stiflingly hot, but the ancient creature still carefully arranged her old blanket over her even older knees.

Unbidden, I sat where I had sat before, on the worn davenport. Argaty turned her alert grey eyes on me. For a moment, it looked

like her eyes were embedded in an ancient tree root, the only things alive in the gnarled and fissured skin of her face.

"So what brings you here, Mister Gask?" she asked.

"I'm looking for Clathy."

"I suppose I should have guessed that. She's not here, you know."

"Have you seen her recently?" I asked, trying to get a touch of concern into my voice.

Argaty shrugged.

"She said she would be going away for a few days, staying with some friends. She packed a bag."

"What was in the bag?" I demanded.

"All the usual things," Argaty replied, looking puzzled, "Clothes and shoes and toiletry. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"And then she left?"

"Well, yes," the grandmother said, still confused, "Then she came back. She had forgotten her sunglasses. And to say goodbye properly."

"I see," I replied, adding solicitously, "I though Clunie looked after you. Are you able to cope by yourself?"

"Oh, I'm not as frail as you seem to think, sonny," Argaty bridled, "I can manage well enough, thank you all the same."

"I'm glad to hear it. So now I'll leave you to your book."

I stood up as if to leave, pushed my hat back on my head and started across the carpet.

"Close the door behind you, if you please," her voice came from behind me.

I stopped and turned to face her again.

"There's just one other question," I said, "If you wouldn't mind. Where's Clunie?"

"Who?"

"Clunie Ford. You must have heard the name."

"Oh, that silly floozy of a waitress that took up with Merton Vale," Argaty said airily, "I've no idea. Why should I?"

I nodded in thanks. She probably really didn't know where Clunie was. But her reaction to my questions was patently false. Of course she knew who Clunie was. And, although she tried to



hide it, she was not really surprised by the questions. But I decided not to press the point any further. I wasn't going to beat up a grandma, was I?

\*

I thanked Argaty Dupplin again, asked her to mention that I called when Clathy returned, even encouraged her to think that I had some important news to impart. As I had been bid, I closed the door behind me carefully, listening to the clicks as some of the locks snapped into place. Then I listened carefully for a while, my ear pressed up against the closed door. There was no sound of a telephone receiver being lifted, just the silence of an old Goblin sitting in front of a fire.

From the Dupplin apartment block, I went straight to the 14th precinct headquarters to see Luncardy. There were too many eyes on my office and my own apartment just at the moment, or at least I felt that there might be. I had been at Clathy's place for so short a time that I could count on any tail not yet having caught up with me.

I enquired at the front desk for the Inspector. After a short muttered telephone conversation, I was asked to wait in an interview room. Not her office this time. I wasn't sure whether this represented a demotion of trust or just expediency. Even so, the door was left open and I was given every impression that I was free to leave at any time.

I paced up and down impatiently, smoking a cigarette as if my life depended on it. A uniformed type put his head in a couple of times to make sure I was okay; once to ask if I wanted a cup of coffee - I declined; police coffee is like Creosote with added sugar - and once to re-assure me that Luncardy would be with me very shortly. Finally, I slumped in one of the uncomfortable chairs that encircled the single table.

"Ah, Gask, there you are," Luncardy said unannounced as she swanned into the interview room trailed by a couple of juniors, "I had our handwriting expert take a look at that ransom note you found. He's compared it with the note on the matchbook."

"And?" I said, once again marvelling at Luncardy's incredibly focussed attitude.

"And it's a match - ha!" she snorted at her own pun, "Taking into account the writer was probably trying to disguise his hand and, on the matches, imitate your writing, my expert says there's an 95% probability that the two notes were written by the same person."

"That's good news," I said, "So Clunie's kidnapping is almost certainly related to the killing of Hosh."

"That's right," she said, looking pleased with herself.

"To be honest, I had assumed that was the case anyway," I said, "But it's always good to be sure."

"Quite so. And what brings you in here?" she asked, reaching into her pocket for cigarettes, "Anything important?"

"Well, not particularly," I said, inspecting my nails with ironic modesty, "It's just that I think I know where Drummond and Clathy are holding Clunie."

## **Chapter 21 - Accidents Happen**

Inspector Harriett Luncardy narrowed her eyes and glared at me, distracted only momentarily from the important task of fixing her cigarette into her holder.

"You're playing games again, Gask," she snorted, fumbling with her lighter.

"I'm doing no such thing," I protested, "I came straight here to tell you what I learned. Just like you asked."

"Hmm, Okay," she acceded grudgingly, "Maybe you did. So Argaty knows where her granddaughter is, does she?"

"Uh, no. I truly believe she doesn't have a clue. But she told me that Clathy had been there, at the apartment, very briefly. Said she was going away for a few days. Staying with friends" - I made quotation marks in the air with my fingers - "she said. She was in a tearing hurry, barely had time to say goodbye to her favourite grandmother."

"So?"

"So, Clathy left, then came back a moment later to collect something. Something important to her. Her sunglasses."

"And so? Get on with it, Gask." Luncardy was getting impatient.

"So, Clathy's gone to the surface," I explained as if to a child, "No Goblin would ever willingly visit the surface without something to protect their eyes."

"Well? The surface's a big place," she objected, "They could be anywhere up there, or down here for that matter."

"Maybe. But, few Goblins feel comfortable on the surface: the open skies, the constant presence of humans and the risk of an embarrassing discovery."

"Huh. Humans. What do they know?"

"True enough," I continued placatingly, "But we know of one place on the surface linked to this case. I know what its like. I've been there, twice. A place carefully constructed to make a Goblin feel comfortable."

"Garrick's place," Luncardy exclaimed, finally getting it, "A real Goblin hideaway. All the comforts of home."

"Right," I agreed, "I could be wrong, of course, and it's quite a gamble. But it sure sounds like a good bet to me."

The Inspector stood quietly for a few moments, lost in thought, her tall angular figure motionless, like a heron in a pond, while the smoke from her ignored cigarette trailed lazily to the ceiling.

"Okay, let's do this," she said eventually, striding over to the table I was sat at and reaching for the telephone.

"Are you going to check with Wester first," I asked, putting my hand on the receiver before she could reach for it.

"No, I am not," she replied, a trace of irritation in her voice, "This is my investigation, not Wester's - and not yours, either."

She took a deep drag on her cigarette and breathed smoke at me through her nose.

"Although I do appreciate your cooperation," she continued more calmly, a touch of warmth in her eyes. Perhaps she could show some graciousness sometimes after all.

I sat back in my chair, reaching into my pockets for my own cigarettes. While I fiddled with the packet and the matches, the Inspector picked up the phone and dialled a short sequence of numbers from memory.

"It's Luncardy," she said into the microphone, "My office, five minutes. Bring the rest of the squad with you."

She returned the receiver to its rest with a clatter and looked directly at me.

"Time to go and organise another raid," she said simply.

\*

"Follow me," Inspector Luncardy instructed, turning on her heel and striding briskly towards the door.

The two coppers who had watched silently while she and I had sparred now followed her unhesitatingly. I shrugged, pushed back the stackable chair with much squeaking of the tiled floor, picked up my hat and followed her out of the interview room. The female officer had such drive, such focus, and so little time for the niceties of civilised life. It seemed I was just another one of her minions, now. Mind you, she did seem to engender that kind of unquestioning obedience that was impressive, even for one as insouciantly insubordinate as I.

As I emerged from the door, I caught sight of Luncardy stood at the corner of the corridor, looking back at me with an expression of faint surprise on her face.

"Are you coming?" she asked. As if she really had to.

I hurried after her, darting between the police officers typing their reports, barking into telephones or just goofing off with their feet on the desks. I reached her office only a few moments after the last of her squad had squeezed in. It was just as well Luncardy kept her office uncluttered; with this many Goblins packed into the room, any extraneous junk would have resulted in papers all over the floor.

I have to admit I was impressed by Luncardy's organisational abilities. She issued a long series of instructions in a firm clean voice, instructions which were so clear and obvious that there were few questions and fewer complaints from the force assembled in front of her.

One of the few questions was one of my own.

"What do you want me to do, Inspector?"

"Stick close to me," she said off-handedly, "You're just an observer, a civilian. I may need your advice during the operation. But you're not, under any circumstances, to take action yourself. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Ma'am." The words came to me automatically.

As the squad filed out of the room, Luncardy took me on one side.

"I think we should give ourselves a bargaining chip," she said, "Take Argaty Dupplin with us."

"But she's an old Goblin," I protested, "Ancient. Very frail. She's in no condition to get involved in anything like this."

Luncardy rolled her eyes.

"Oh, she won't come to any harm," she replied dismissively, "Don't be such an old woman. I just want her there in case I need her to talk to her granddaughter. I'll send a couple of my Goblins to pick her up."

"Well, okay then," I agreed grudgingly, "But you're going to need a wheelchair. And blankets. And another pair of sunglasses. No, two pairs of sunglasses."

"Two pairs?"

"Yes," I countered, "One pair for her, and one for me."

\*

As it happened, the sunglasses weren't actually necessary, at least initially. By the time we emerged from the Lower realms exit set in the arches under the railway station, it was already dark, at least by the standards of humans.

A mismatched fleet of vehicles was waiting for us, drawn up in a row along the kerb: a white van with rust spots showing through its paintwork, a new-looking Mercedes estate with blacked-out windows, and a couple of anonymous-looking hatchbacks which could have been manufactured at any time in the last ten years.

Rather than the lengthy and, quite frankly, slightly risky train journey I had used on my first visit, this time we would travel in style, or at least with speed. Not comfort, though; my stomach was already protesting at the prospect of being driven at full tilt by a lunatic Goblin driver.

Following Luncardy, I was directed towards a yellow Mini traveller at the head of the convoy which, belatedly, I realised I recognised.

"Gask!" a familiar yet unwelcome voice sounded, "I should have known."

\*

"You know Mister Gask, Tarsapple?" Luncardy snapped as she folded herself into the back seat of the Mini. Not that she had to bend much, even for such a tall female; this was a human-designed vehicle after all.

"Yes, Ma'am," Tarsapple replied, a smirk flitting across his face on the side that Luncardy could not see.

I followed the Inspector into the little car, sliding across the cool leather of the seat. Suddenly I wasn't looking forward to this little jaunt at all.

Tarsapple was in the front passenger seat, grinning malevolently when Luncardy looked away and smiling like an angel when the Inspector's attention was upon him. The driver's position was occupied by Glenshee, the large youngster who was displaying his characteristic confusion at the turn of events.

"Everyone set?" the Inspector called through the open window.

There was a muffled chorus on the theme of "yes" from the assorted vehicles.

"Okay. Sunglasses on, everybody," Luncardy instructed, her commanding tone coming to the fore once again, "Drive on."

What any skulking human would have made of her words was anybody's guess. Mind you, such a hypothetical bystander would

have been even more bemused by this group of short individuals, all dressed in long coats and brimmed hats, and all wearing sunglasses in the middle of the night.

Glenshee set the Mini in motion with a jerk. The little convoy shot out from under the arches and joined the city centre traffic.

I had to suffer forty minutes of Glenshee's maniacal driving before we entered the tiny hamlet which had Garrick's residence on the outskirts. We seemed forever on the verge of crashing into the oncoming headlights, whose glare was nearly unbearable even with the protection of sunglasses, and my knuckles were by now white from gripping the seat. My stomach had been protesting for at least half of the journey, and even Luncardy was looking distinctly green about the gills.

Luncardy's instructions had been to disembark the transport in the car park alongside the tiny railway station. The car park was empty when we arrived, since our handful of vehicles filled it almost to capacity. Across the road, the public house was lit up brightly, and the sounds of humans enjoying a frightfully jolly night out could be heard clearly. Otherwise, the hamlet was quiet, with only an itinerant cat to mark our presence.

Employing the stealthy movements - at least by human standards - that comes naturally to most Goblins, the police squad abandoned the vehicles and regrouped around Luncardy in the darkness of the road a hundred yards or so from the lights of the hamlet. The walk and the cool darkness had worked wonders for the state of my stomach, and I now felt ready for action.

Luncardy divided her force into two groups. One, led by her trusty Sergeant, was to cut across the fields away from the road and approach the rear of the buildings. The second and larger group, led by herself, would approach from the front and spread out to cover the sides. The movements were timed to converge simultaneously, to prevent any possibility of escape. I was to remain at the rear of Luncardy's group, since I was - as the Inspector pointedly reminded me - here only as an observer.

We split up, the Sergeant's team disappearing into the fields as if they have never existed. The other group continued along the road, hugging the shadows and hedges for cover. Most of the cops moved quietly enough, although one or two of them were just a little clumsy. Maybe it was time for a refresher course in stealthy movement.

In the end, all that planning and surreptitious movement was wasted. Maybe they had been warned that we were coming. More likely, some hidden alarm - whether magical or mechanical, I could not tell - was triggered before Luncardy's team had even reached

the broken gate that marked the gap in the hedgerow at the front of the property.

From all side of the building, lights shone out - powerful electric lights, human manufactured - which lit up the surrounding trees and hedges like daylight, and caused most of the coppers to scramble for their sunglasses. Whoever was inside also knew that the intruding force were from the Lower Realms, as the voice that rang out across the night spoke in the ancient Goblin tongue.

"Stay back! I'm armed and not afraid to shoot," it boomed, obviously amplified in some way, "And I have a hostage. Stay back and nobody'll get hurt."

\*

Police training cut in, and the cops immediately took cover behind the low bank formed by the roots of the overgrown hedgerows. Using hand signals alone, Luncardy directed parts of her squad to encircle the property to left and right. The she waved me forward.

"Was that Drummond's voice?" she whispered.

"Yes, I think so," I replied, speaking directly into her ear, "It's a bit difficult to tell."

Human-made electronic amplification is usually not very effective for Goblin voices, and the words sounded strangled and tinny to my ears. I was pretty certain it was Drummond, though.

"They seem to be expecting us," she said wryly, "You wouldn't have anything to do with this, would you?"

I shook my head.

"Garrick's a wily old codger," I said placatingly, "And pretty paranoid to boot. He'd have set alarms all over the place. You'll need to be careful."

Luncardy led out a long sigh, then squinted at the farmhouse, protecting her eyes against the glare of the spotlights with her own elegantly stylish sunglasses and a carefully manicured hand.

"Yeah," she said laconically, "Maybe you're right. I should've expected something like that. Better talk to those inside, then."

I guessed that she would want to avoid any kind of full-scale assault. Very wise. Such a thing could get very messy, especially if Garrick's paranoid tendencies extended to defences as well as alarms.

Luncardy took a small package from her pocket, an austere grey box of the kind that characterised police-issue glammers. She read the text on the packaging carefully, spoke the words of



activation then casually held the cardboard box to her face for a moment.

"Attention Drummond," she said calmly, her voice amplified hugely by the glamour from the box.

It was what a human would probably think of as a loudhailer operated by magic, and was altogether much more sympathetic to the guttural complexities of the Goblin tongue than loudspeakers.

"This is Inspector Harriet Luncardy of the Lower Realms police," Luncardy continued in that clear and strident tone always adopted by policemen under these circumstances, "You are surrounded. Throw out your weapons and come out with your hands up."

There was no immediate response. I began to think that this would turn into a waiting game, a long siege - worryingly, a position which might just favour those inside the house, rather than those who would in a few short hours be exposed to the sunlit human world.

Luncardy waved at several of her squad who by now were behind the hedge on the left, at the far end of the ruined house. One of the cops started to force his way under the low branches, no doubt trying to approach the buildings undetected. He was only half way through when a shot rang out. He wasn't hit, but it must have been close, judging by the way he ducked back under the cover of the bank.

Clathy's voice rang out, sounding panicky and desperate. Never a good combination, in my experience.

"Stay back! Stay back! I don't want to shoot."

Suddenly there was a crashing noise in the bushes on my right, as if somebody was rather slowly and clumsily trying to force their way through the hedge at the other end of the buildings.

"We've warned you, Luncardy," roared Drummond.

Another gunshot blasted out, accompanied by a flash of flame clearly visible in the gloom and followed by a cry of pain. There were more crashes in the hedgerow, then a body fell forward and lay motionless on the grass.

## **Chapter 22 - Cover Story**

Luncardy reacted before anybody else could move. Even me - a fact which I have to admit impressed me somewhat. She scurried down the line of the hedgerow at that bent-double position adopted when moving rapidly under fire. I followed her, wondering which ill-advised member of the squad had been foolish enough to break through with neither instruction nor backup.

As I got closer, I could not for a moment recognise the motionless figure, although I had the feeling that I really ought to. It was the walking stick that gave it away: lying in the grass was the stout cane I had last seen in the possession of Clathy's aged grandmother.

"It's Argaty!" Luncardy exclaimed, evidently shocked by the sight and forgetting momentarily that the glamour that amplified her voice was still active.

Her exclamation must have carried to the house and been plainly audible inside. The Inspector swore fluently, a most unladylike explosion that I would not have expected, about half of which would have been clearly audible to every Goblin in the vicinity. It cut off abruptly when Luncardy remembered the control which temporarily disabled the magical amplification. The members of her squad I could see looked variously amused or shocked. I was impressed, although I resisted the temptation to wildly applaud her stream of fluent profanity.

But we had a serious problem to content with - another more serious problem. It was no laughing matter. An innocent - at least, I assumed so - was lying injured, perhaps even dead in the field of fire. There was no cover, none at all, and anybody attempting assistance would be exposed to further shots from the house.

I heard irregular footsteps behind me. I swung around and saw another of Luncardy's squad, one of those who had been sent to collect Clathy's grandmother.

"What happened?" Luncardy hissed as the young officer limped up.

"She hit me," he said, wheezing, "Nearly broke my ankle. Made a dash for it."

"Wimp!" the Inspector snarled, "Letting a grandma get away from you!"

The youngster's face immediately turned the deep puce of a Goblin blush. It seemed that he had carried out his instructions to the letter: persuaded Argaty that Clathy was in trouble and that the police needed her help in sorting things out. He had escorted Argaty in her wheelchair through the lower realms and to the surface by the same route we had used earlier, then been driven from the exit in another of the eclectic collection of vehicles used by the official forces when in this part of the surface world.

Realising that a siege was in progress - the bright lights and the amplified threats would have made that just a bit obvious - the copper had held back, very sensibly keeping Argaty out of the danger zone. But she was not to be so easily dissuaded. The young officer had been whacked in the legs by the stout cane that she habitually used to support her aged body. Then she had levered herself from the wheelchair and somehow managed a burst of speed that had taken her the last stretch of the roadway and through the hedge, spurred on, no doubt, by the sound of her granddaughter's voice. Amazing what fear and familial concern can do.

As the young cop spluttered out his explanation, there was a cry from the house, one which was not electronically amplified. Every head swung around as the surrounding police force came to high alert. The scream was followed by a crash as the cellar door opened and Clathy emerged, her emotional state so heightened that she managed to ignore the score of armed cops that encircled the place and rushed straight over to where her grandmother lay.

Drummond's voice sounded out from the house, also without artificial aid. He sounded panicked, uncertain and vulnerable.

"Come back," he bellowed, "Leave her! You can't help her!"

Clathy ignored the instruction and knelt over the prone body, first attempting to rouse Argaty and then, with no response to her most urgent attentions, collapsed in hysterics over the body, weeping with her face in her hands.

Sensing a moment of opportunity, the Inspector reacted with characteristic speed and decisiveness, and grasped it with both hands.

"Move in," she commanded, making frantic hand gestures to her squad, "Everybody, move in!"

She turned to me, raising an admonishing finger like an irate schoolteacher.

"You," she instructed, "Stay here. And keep your head down, dammit."

\*

The squad followed Luncardy's commands unhesitatingly and to the letter, leaping into action with impressive coordination and skill, like a machine of many well-oiled and finely polished parts in intricate motion. It was a master-class in the precision and predictability of police training, with all eyes and attention fixed on the old farmhouse.

Not another shot was fired during the incursion, for which I was entirely grateful, although nobody could have been sure that Drummond, or anyone else still inside, would not have gone loco under pressure and resolved to go out fighting in a suicidal blaze of gunfire.

Two brave souls rushed over to where Argaty lay, scooped her up by the armpits - one either side - and dragged her to the dubious safety of the bank under the hedge. Sadly, their heroism was in vain, as it turned out; I would later learn that Argaty was already dead, killed mercifully quickly by Drummond's bullet.

Following close behind, two more cops apprehended Clathy, dragging her off in the same direction as her grandmother. Admittedly, she made no attempt to evade the clutches of the law, but slumped passively, now almost catatonic in grief. Meanwhile, inside the house, I would later be told, the remainder of the squad soon found and overwhelmed Drummond, who was confused and undirected, shaken by the sudden desertion of Clathy rather than the shooting of an ancient, a person irrelevant and probably completely unknown to himself.

I had agreed with the Inspector that I was not to involve myself, so I watched from behind the hedge as events unfolded. As I crouched there, feeling about as useful as a chocolate teapot, I heard the faintest of noises from the field behind me. I pricked up my ears - a literal action for a Goblin - and swivelled around. There seemed to be sounds of stealthy movement, mostly - but not entirely - masked by the noises from the coppers in the basement. If I hadn't been left behind, if I had been part of the team now assaulting the farmhouse, I would never have noticed a thing.

I scuttled across the road as quickly and quietly as I could, determined to investigate. Sure, it could have been a fox or a badger, but these creatures are naturally wary when Goblins are about, and there had been silence from the undergrowth hitherto. I wormed my way through the hedge, adding to the scratches on my hands, and the dirt and damage to my clothes. By the time I got through, whatever it was had already gone. I stood

motionless, silent, every sense alert, but there was nothing to be seen or heard, nothing to suggest that I had not imagined the whole episode. The brightness of the floodlights had ruined my night vision in any case, so I was relying more on hearing than sight.

I gave up and went back to the road, where the house lights were finally extinguished, just too late. Several coppers were now emerging from the house with a prisoner in tow. Clathy was led away, now screaming hysterically and trying to get to Drummond, the cops desperately trying to silence her so as not to disturb the human residents of the well-maintained properties closer to the station. Drummond himself was surly and unresponsive, handcuffed to one of the larger of the officers. He was guided back to the cars we had abandoned with shoves and whispered imprecations.

I watched them go. I doubted I would have anything more to do with either of them. It was all in the hands of the police now. Both of them had gone well beyond anything I could influence. Killers, both of them - or at least accessories after the fact - kidnapping and conspiracy. Worse still, Clathy had fooled me, taken me in completely with her little-girl-lost impersonation. I really should know better.

I shook my head and turned back to look at the house just as a surprisingly large number of cops guided out Clunie. She looked remarkably well for someone who had been abducted and locked away. She rushed up to me and clasped me to her very expansive bosom like an old friend or a worried child. Finally I managed to extricate myself.

"Findo!" Clunie squeaked, "I thought you would never find me."

"All part of the service," I replied, stepping back, "And of course I had lots of help."

I caught sight of Luncardy looking faintly amused at my discomfort, pausing for a second at her favourite role of directing in some detail the actions of her squad. Finally, she took pity on me, came over and addressed Clunie directly.

"Miss Ford," she said formally, "I'm afraid I must ask you to accompany my officers to the precinct station, as a witness, of course."

Clunie glanced at me, as if to reassure herself that it was okay for her to go.

"You go with the police," I said, trying not to let my relief show in my face, "It's standard practice. They'll want to get a formal statement from you. I'm sure it won't take long, and I'll catch up

with you at home later on. Make sure you tell them everything you can remember."

She looked dubious for a moment, then brightened.

"Sure. Okay then, if you think so."

Once again escorted by more than the necessary minimum number of coppers, Clunie was taken back to the Lower Realms.

\*

With most of the coppers now out of the way, I took the opportunity to take a good look around Garrick's underground lair. The accommodation was even more spacious than I had imagined. The main rooms ran the entire length of the tumbledown farmhouse above as well as the ruined barns on either side. It was clear that much of this space had originally been constructed by human hands, presumably as cellars for storage, as the ceilings were unnecessarily high for even the largest Goblin stature.

Garrick had linked the cellars together with arched tunnels and closely-fitted doors, although the doors themselves looked as if they were rarely closed. As I had seen on my previous visits, he had used the space under the farmhouse itself for his study-cum-library, as well as a surprisingly well-equipped kitchen, a well-stocked larder, a bathroom and other essential domestic facilities. Evidently he was a Goblin who liked his creature comforts.

The archways at either end led to two separate, spacious laboratories that I now had the leisure to investigate more thoroughly. The benches of one lab were cluttered with complicated glassware in twisted shapes and bubbling retorts that a human would probably think was used for chemical experiments, although alchemical might be more appropriate. There were shelves of carefully-labelled chemicals in stoppered bottles, earthenware storage containers, and sealed jars of liquid preservatives containing rare and mercifully unrecognisable portions of unusual animals.

The second laboratory seemed to contain both less and more than the other one. A human would think the room mostly empty, with just a few shelves and cupboards, and a single bench, lining the walls. What the room contained a lot of was magic. The walls and floor were infused with puissant spells which seemed to writhe and twist in unlikely dimensions, the arcane movement somehow always just out of sight. It was a room for the creation of, and experiments with, magic and glamours of all kinds. Garrick clearly liked to keep his interests separated.

The main space had been enlarged by the addition of several side-rooms which had been hollowed out by Goblin hands, judging

by the low vaulted ceilings and masonry walls. These included one which Garrick used as a bedroom: for all his apparent comfort in residing this close to the surface, he was still enough of a Goblin to feel more comfortable surrounded by solid stone in all directions.

Another thing that must have made Garrick feel a great deal more secure was the presence of two long tunnels with hidden doors, providing secret entrances or, more likely, emergency bolt-holes that emerged in distant parts of the fields and woodlands beyond. It was just the kind of contingency that the Professor would incorporate as a matter of course.

As I poked my way around the rambling facilities, it slowly dawned on me that Professor Urquhart Garrick has gone, left in haste at some time before the police had arrived – perhaps very shortly before. At first glance, it seemed that nothing had changed in the underground quarters. The bookcases were filled with ancient books and rare volumes bound in embossed leather. But as I looked closer, I could see that the truly irreplaceable stuff was missing. There were spaces in the bookshelves, some packaged glammers missing from the shelves in the laboratory, and a few items of clothing taken from the bedroom cupboards.

I could imagine that Garrick was not best pleased when Clathy and Drummond dumped themselves on him, especially with the restrained form of Clunie in tow. I guessed that the brooding bulk of Drummond would have persuaded the Professor – who had always been a bit of a coward – to comply. No doubt he played along, pottering around his demesne while Drummond and Clathy sat in the best chairs by the fire and fretted. Then he ducked out unseen, using one of the secret tunnels I had discovered earlier.

No doubt Garrick was hedging his bets. If nobody tracked down the fugitives, then they would eventually leave and he could quietly return and nobody would be the wiser. Alternatively, he make sure he was absent in case of any unpleasantness. Still, there was half a lifetime's investment in this place, and I doubted that Professor Garrick would relish the prospect of abandoning everything he had accumulated in a century or more.

I went to track down Luncardy, who was still directing the last of the forensics crew in the living area.

"How are you doing?" I asked her.

"Almost done. Not sure if there's anything of great significance here anyway."

"Probably. I do think that the Professor cleared out just before we arrived," I said, "Perhaps while we were right outside. Can you spare a couple of coppers to keep a watch on this place?"

Luncardy looked at me shrewdly.

"You think Garrick will come back?"

"Don't know. Maybe. It's worth a try."

Luncardy nodded slowly.

"I've got just the boys for that job," she said.

\*

Luncardy was understandably anxious to return to the Lower Realms as soon as possible, before the harsh light of day - a light that could not be turned off at the flick of a switch - made conditions increasingly unpleasant, and before we were all at risk of interruptions from daytime human activities.

The two of us set off for the station car park, having left behind a couple of her squad that she had singled out for this particularly dubious honour. One was a senior with a pock-marked face and an irregular series of jagged notches in both ears that I hoped were the results of close shaves in a long career of policing, as opposed to some bizarre form of self-mutilation. But he looked like an experienced old boy, although I couldn't help but think that his experience was mostly engaged with taking it easy and getting away with the minimum amount of effort.

The other designated guard was a fresh-faced cadet with a crisply-pressed uniform and an eager-to-please attitude straight out of Police College. He had stood ramrod-straight as the Inspector had delivered her briefing, as if he had a steel bar down the back of his shirt. I strongly suspected that Luncardy had deliberately selected these two for this watch because they would annoy each other sufficiently to stay awake and alert while up here.

We were chauffeured back to the hidden entrance under the station by Tarsapple and Glenshee with another virtuoso display of high-speed driving that once again caused me to feel green and pasty-faced from motion sickness, and even the iron-clad Luncardy suffered a few white-knuckled moments. Can't they just drive slowly for a change?

Once below, we separated, Luncardy shaking my hand and formally thanking me for assisting the police with their enquiries. Her mind was someplace else. She turned to follow her squad back to the precinct, while I returned home to shower and get some sleep. I tamed my queasy stomach and swirling head with a shot of whiskey, and was dreamlessly asleep before my head hit the pillow.



The next thing I knew was the ringing of the phone. It was Luncardy, of course.

"Come downtown," she said brightly, the usual steel in her voice tempered by what seemed to be genuine puzzlement, "I'll buy you breakfast."

I threw on some fresh clothes and made it to the police house in twenty-five minutes. Luncardy was looking as fresh as an overnight mushroom. She had clearly had managed to find time to get home, shower and change her clothes - another sharply-cut business suit - although how much sleep she had managed to catch was open to speculation.

I was shown to Luncardy's office without delay by one junior officer. The Inspector was talking animatedly on the phone, making a report of last night's activities in a manner that suggested this was the thirty-seventh time she had communicated all these details. She waved me to a seat and held up two fingers; privately, I doubted it would take her only two minutes to finish the call.

The young copper returned a few minutes later and stuck in front of me a greasy and steaming paper bag containing, I would shortly discover, a genuine copper's breakfast. My stomach rumbled and I lost no time in investigating the contents.

Finally, Luncardy slammed down the phone with a disgusted snort and threw herself into the chair behind the desk. I looked at her expectantly, mouth full.

"We've been interviewing Clathy and Drummond all night," she said, "They've admitted killing Hosh and attempting to cover it up. Clathy's saying it was an act of self-protection; she just snapped having been assaulted by her boss once too often. Then persuaded Drummond to help her afterwards. A cool customer, that one."

She was right. Her grandmother dead by her boyfriend's hand not ten hours before and she was already positioning herself for an insanity plea.

"What do you need from me?" I asked around a mouthful of crisply-fried meat slices. Never ask what kind of meat.

"They're protecting somebody," Luncardy said bluntly, "I'm sure of it. I need a lever, an angle."

"Follow the money," I said.

"What?"

I swallowed the last of my breakfast and leaned forward over her desk.

"Who stands to gain financially from this situation?" I asked her, "And who would have the money to pay for expensive lawyers to help a poor waitress to cop an insanity plea?"

Luncardy's eyes narrowed to a feral stare at the thought.

## **Chapter 23 - Follow the Money**

I'm sure it must have been a complete coincidence. Just at that moment, a uniformed junior knocked on the open office door. Luncardy looked up.

"Message from Captain Wester, Ma'am," the youngster said, saluting, "He'd like to see you, in his office, in five minutes."

"Okay," she acknowledged, standing up. The uniformed copper disappeared.

"You'd better come too," she said to me, standing up and brushing non-existent lint off her skirt.

I trailed after her through the precinct house and into the open-plan area where junior police officers wrote their reports.

"You wait here," Luncardy advised me, "I doubt Wester will want to talk to you, but best be to hand just in case. He doesn't like to be kept waiting."

I shrugged and leaned myself against the wall by the door, fumbling for my cigarettes and matches. Privately, I doubted that Captain Fowlis Wester knew I was in the building at all, although I shortly learned that I was quite wrong. Just as Luncardy reached the inner door, a grinning Tarsapple emerged from Wester's office followed by a bemused-looking Glenshee. I sighed heavily. Wester was sure to have received the most negative possible report of my involvement from this pair.

Luncardy frowned at the surface agents as they passed, then went inside shutting the door behind her. The buzz of conversation in the outer office made it impossible for me to hear anything of the conversation within, especially across the full length of the floor. But I did not have long to wait. It could not have been more than five minutes before the office door was yanked opened again and a very red-faced Luncardy stormed out.

"You haven't heard the last of this, Wester," she growled, slamming the door behind her and stalking across the open office trailed by the glances of every cop in the place.

She reached the outer door where I still leaned on the wall, blowing smoke.

"My office, if you please, Mister Gask," she said with a note of barely contained fury in her voice.

I stubbed out my cigarette and followed her with alacrity. Once inside her office, she threw herself into her chair behind the preternaturally tidy desk and waved me to one of the other chairs. I sat and fumbled with my hat while she fumed.

"What's up?" I asked, genuinely confused.

"I have just been given a direct order," she said, "By Captain Fowlis Wester. I am instructed that under no circumstances am I to interview Old Man Madderfy, or his son. Nor am I to talk to Alva Vale."

So Wester was still in the elder Madderfy's pocket, it seemed. Or at least had a place in his pocket-book.

"And," she went on, "I am to thank you politely for your assistance" - she grimaced to indicate something of the true form of words used by Wester - "and send you on your way. No doubt you will get a formal note of appreciation in due course."

"I see," I responded carefully, "So what are you going to do?"

She looked conflicted, uncertain what to do. After a long minute, she frowned and looked suddenly determined. She had made up her mind.

"Dammit, Gask," she said, a steely chilliness entering her voice, "I'm going to ignore a direct order from a superior officer."

\*

I have to say that my respect for Inspector Harriet Luncardy increased immeasurably at that point, and was only slightly dented when she added: "Or, at least, work around a direct order from a superior officer."

I grinned at her wryly. I got the strong impression that she had never, ever, done anything other than following the rule book before. More worryingly, I also got the impression that she rather enjoyed the experience.

"Okay," she said, rising from her chair with an air of determination, "Let's go."

"What are we going to do?" I asked, also standing up.

"I'm not going to do anything," she replied, "You're going to talk to Old Man Madderfy. And, purely by coincidence, I'm going to be in the same room at the same time, and accidentally overhear what he says."

"Do you really think Madderfy with answer my questions?" I asked her.

"Maybe," she answered, "It depends on the way you ask him."

My grin widened so much my face ached. She was a smart cookie, that one.

\*

The Madderfy mansion was an elegant palace of polished white stone and soaring columns, set in its own walled grounds on a terraced ridge in the most desirable of caverns. It made the late Merton Vale's residence look like a hovel fit only for a domesticated animal.

The grounds themselves spoke volumes about great wealth. Living space is at such a premium down here that using land simply to provide a degree of privacy from one's neighbours was almost unthinkable. Even Vale's place abutted its neighbours to left and right. Here, the outer walls surrounded manicured gardens on every side: raked gravel beds bordering white stone carvings in the classical Goblin style, and urns and planters overflowing with decorative fungi of every kind.

The front gate was open when I arrived, and I marched through it with Luncardy at my side. It was only ten yards or so to the front door - even the very wealthy can't afford very much space down here - which gave me quite enough time to inspect the portico and the stone pillars which held it up.

The front door was framed by more pillars, and was high and wide enough to admit even the biggest human without stooping. The bell-pull was an enormous chunk of ornately wrought iron, which I pulled just for something to do; the distant chimes of the doorbell rang out somewhere on the other side.

"Mister Findo Gask to see Mister Madderfy," I announced formally to the uniformed flunky who opened the door.

"Come in, sir, madam," he replied smoothly, glancing from me to Luncardy and back again, "And I'll see if Mister Madderfy is at home."

The butler was a middle-aged Goblin with smooth dark skin and calm lilac eyes who moved as if he was entirely constructed from carefully-polishing and well-oiled machine parts. He took my hat, directed us to a cluster of chairs in the entrance hall, then silently padded off to find out if Old Man Madderfy would deign to see poor old PI Gask.

I sat in one of the chairs. Luncardy seemed too fidgety to sit and instead paced up and down like a caged animal waiting for

lunch. I offered her a cigarette, but she declined. Too tense to be pacified by tobacco. I took one myself and lit it, and smoked it down to the filter in no time at all. Just as well I was the calm one.

The butler returned after ten minutes or so. Luncardy stopped her pacing and turned to face him.

"Mister Madderfy will see you now, sir," he intoned, "If you would so good as to follow me."

I stood up and followed him. Luncardy followed me.

The butler opened the double doors which led to a room set up as a library. The number and variety of books would challenge even Professor Garrick's private library. The difference was that Garrick used his books - read them, or referred to them frequently - so that the bindings were bent and damaged. These books here were just for show. They had probably been bought by the yard just to give this room the right ambience of old leather and fusty learning.

Old Man Madderfy was seated behind a large desk whose polished surface was inlaid with rare woods, rare minerals and the harder portions of rare animals. It was probably supposed to be impressive, or at least impressively expensive, but the overall effect was one of garish tastelessness.

"Mister Findo Gask, sir."

Madderfy looked up as I was announced, smiling. The big black-garbed Goblin who had accompanied him to my office had been standing quietly in one corner of the room. He stepped forward when I entered, then stopped dead when he saw who was behind me. The smile - sneer, really - on Madderfy's face froze as Luncardy followed me in. The butler ignored the reactions in the manner of professional staff everywhere, bowed politely and backed out, closing the door behind him.

"Mister Gask. How nice, what a pleasure," Madderfy rallied, "And Inspector Luncardy. I hadn't expected to see you here."

Luncardy showed no sign of having heard the Old Man speak. It was up to me to do all the talking.

I strode over to the desk and plonked myself in one of the chairs on the side opposite Madderfy, without waiting to be invited. Luncardy remained standing, her hands clasped behind her back and her legs very slightly apart. The very image of the patient copper at ease.

"Mister Madderfy, so good of you to see me," I bumbled, "You once said that we could help each other, and that I should feel free to come and see you any time."

"I did say those things, yes," Madderfy replied smoothly, steepling his fingers and cranking the urbane suavity dial up to eleven, "So how can I help you today?"

I mimed a frown of simple-minded puzzlement.

"Oh, I think I'm here to help you," I replied, "Although I might have one question for you, too, afterwards."

"Well, then. What is it you have to tell me?"

I held up a hand with three fingers extended, and touched the first with my thumb.

"Did you know that both Creagan and Alva have been visiting the Starfield Club?"

"Ye-es," Madderfy said with a waver that was not quite undetectable, and glancing at the motionless copper beside the door, "I do. It's a place of public entertainment. Why shouldn't they go there?"

"No reason, no reason at all," I agreed amicably, "Although both of them seem to be quite friendly with one Monzie Hosh, the proprietor. I'm told the police seem to think he's something of a shady character."

Madderfy snorted without much humour.

"The police have no proof," he retorted, "Otherwise he would be in jail."

It was a good act. If I didn't know better, I'd have sworn that Madderfy didn't know that Hosh was dead, murdered, and his body found in my apartment. Either that, or the brown-envelope payments he was making to certain members of the police force were not good value for money.

I shrugged - another expression particularly effective for a Goblin. Then I touched my second finger.

"Did you know that your son Mister Creagan Madderfy has been associating with a certain old scholar, one with a dubious reputation, one who was excluded from a very fine university many years ago, one Professor Urquhart Garrick?"

"Garrick," he dissembled, "I don't know anyone by that name."

Again, I shrugged.

"Okay," I said cheerily, "Although I know Garrick quite well - he was a tutor of mine once. And still an unrepentant old rogue."

The third and final finger. Old Man Madderfy seemed to have developed a twitch in the eye.

"Are you aware that Creagan Madderfy and Professor Garrick were interrupted handling certain papers," I said gravely, "Certain confidential papers which were the property of your late son-in-law Mister Merton Vale?"

Rather than answer, Madderfy blew his stack, in spite of the silent presence of Inspector Luncardy. Or perhaps he had no choice. Otherwise I would have made an accusation of wrongdoing about his son, in front of a police officer.

"Out! Get out!" he bellowed, "Out of my house, now. Both of you."

He must have pressed a hidden button to summon the butler. In less than a minute we were both on the outside of the front door which closed behind us with a slam. Impressively, I had got my hat back, too.

I glanced at Luncardy. Her grin was threatening to take off the top of her head.

\*

I grinned back at Luncardy, both of us at severe risk of bursting into giggles like a pair of naughty schoolgirls.

"That was fun!" she exclaimed, her eyes bright.

"You might not want to make a habit of speaking like that," I said wryly, "After all, that's *my* job."

She nodded enthusiastically, still unable to wipe the smirk off her face.

"Come on," I said, taking her by the hand, "Time to talk to the Judge."

She looked confused for a moment, then realised I meant Kirkton. I wondered for a moment what else she could be thinking of.

\*

Obtaining an interview with Judge Kirkton was a lot simpler this time. Perhaps it was just the brooding presence of a police Inspector - Luncardy had recovered her usual stern demeanour by the time we got to the Court of Probate - or maybe because some word of warning had filtered down to the reception desk. In any case, less than ten minutes elapsed between our arrival and me knocking on the stout wooden door of the Judge's chambers.

"Come."

I pushed open the door and entered, taking off my hat and followed closely by the Inspector. Judge Kirkton sat, as it seemed



he always did, at the head of the vast table which served both as desk and meeting-place. There was just a single clerk visible, pottering around behind the Judge's back with a pile of heavy reference volumes in his arms. A further collection of dusty tomes was spread out in front of Kirkton, and it looked as if he had been interrupted in the middle of some intense legal study.

As the Judge recognised who it was, a ghost of a smile flitted momentarily across his face. Then he composed his features into the image of legal rectitude that he no doubt imagined was an essential part of his position. He set aside the heavy book, linked his fingers and rested his hands on the table in front of him.

"Mister Gask," he acknowledged, looking at me carefully.

He then glanced meaningfully in the direction of Luncardy. I took the hint.

"Judge, may I introduce Inspector Harriet Luncardy of the fourteenth precinct," I said formally.

"Inspector," he nodded, looking slightly surprised. Perhaps he was expecting her to be a floozy or, still worse, another PI.

Kirkton waved us both to chairs at the side of the table.

"I suspect," the Judge said levelly, "That you have something of interest to communicate. And, perhaps, there is something you would ask of me, yes?"

"There have been some developments," I replied, "In the case I'm working on. I've been able to assist the Inspector here in the safe release of a kidnap victim, and the apprehension of two Goblins who are, I understand, likely to be charged with conspiracy and murder."

Judge Kirkton said nothing, although his expression communicated his interest clearly enough. I gave him the short version, a précis of the events that led up to the arrest of Clathy and Drummond, and the release of Clunie. I left out the bit about Argaty.

"You have been busy," Kirkton said ironically, after I finished, "But what has all this got to do with me?"

I glanced at Luncardy, who once again seemed content to sit in silence and let me do the talking.

"I suspect there is yet more to be discovered," I replied, "Other parties involved, conspiring, perhaps, or at least profit from the events."

"Ah," Kirkton said, "The partnership of Vale, Madderfy and Logan, Accountants, perhaps?"

I nodded slowly. You don't get to be a Judge by being stupid.

"Besides," I added, "We still have the little mystery of who killed Mister Merton Vale."

The Judge sat in silence for a minute. Even the clerk ceased his soft padding about the office and stood quietly by the bookcase. A Goblin could certainly have heard a pin drop.

"Perhaps I should suggest a way forward," Kirkton said eventually.

I sat up and looked attentive.

"I dare say your case might be progressed by further sight of the materials in Vale's briefcase," he said, "And perhaps we should get somebody to review the partnership's accounts in some detail. This may be of some assistance to your investigations."

I sat stony-faced. This wasn't quite what I had hoped for. Kirkton ignored my reaction.

"In any case," he went on, "You do realise I will have to re-read the Last Will and Testament," he added, almost as an afterthought.

"Yes, I do, sir," I responded carefully.

"And that the Vale and Madderfy families will have to be present in this office once again?"

I grinned broadly, and even Luncardy cracked a smile. Kirkton ignored that reaction, too.

\*

There was a business-like knock on the door. The Judge looked up sharply, then nodded to his clerk, who put down the pile of books he was about to re-shelve, padded silently around the table and opened the door. A uniformed copper stood outside, looking more than slightly nervous.

"Ex-excuse me, your Lordship," he stuttered, "I have a message for Inspector Luncardy. I'm afraid it's urgent."

The Judge looked quizzical for a moment, then laughed shortly, mirthlessly.

"Ha," he said, "A policeman's work is never done, I suppose. Well, I imagine we are just about done here, for the time being."

The Inspector and I stood up and made to leave.

"However," the Judge continued, looking sharply at me, "I will require your presence at the true reading of the will. You must be there."

"I understand," I replied, tugging my hat down over my eyes.

I followed Luncardy and her messenger out of the office. As the door closed, the Inspector spun around and glared at the junior office.

"So what's so important that warrants dragging me out of a discussion with a Judge?" she snarled.

She looked as if she was about to bite the messenger, if not shoot him. The youngster took a step backwards, collided with the stone wall of the corridor, then glanced nervously left and right as if trying to figure out an escape route.

"It's, it's, it's..." he mumbled. Fear had amplified his stutter to the point of paralysis. He took a deep breath and tried again.

"P-P-Professor Garrick's place," he managed, "It's been ransacked."

Luncardy and I looked at each other, both mouths open in surprise.

"I'd better get there right away," she gasped, sprinting down the corridor towards the stairwell.

"I'm still in," I shouted after her, "I'm coming along for the ride."

Coat flapping, I followed her along the echoing corridor.

\*

By the time that Luncardy and I arrived back at the farmhouse, a large team of cops were already crawling all over the place. Garrick's establishment had been entirely cleaned out, stripped of everything useful or valuable, with just a few broken retorts and torn pieces of paper to show where the laboratories and library had been.

The Goblin police who had assigned to guard the place had been knocked out, although both swore on oath that they had seen nothing and that nothing had touched them. Of course there are plenty of magical means of rendering somebody unconscious and I didn't doubt that Garrick had plenty of tricks up his sleeve. It was probably easier for him than knocking them out with the classic blunt instrument, or getting his human henchman Rigg to do it for him.

The Professor must have returned almost as soon as we had left. He had used a third secret entrance, one I had not found, one concealed using Goblin magic in the stone walls of Garrick's bedchamber. I poked about in a desultory way for a few minutes, but there was nothing else to be seen that appeared in the least bit helpful. I mentally kicked myself for not spotting the hidden entrance, or at least deploying one of those charms that indicate

the presence of concealment glamours. The other entrances had been easy to find - too easy. Garrick must have been relying on our lack of thoroughness.

"We're wasting time here," Luncardy said sullenly.

I shared her view that an important lead had got away from us. Garrick had almost certainly gone to ground somewhere or, more likely, was actually above ground, having used his human friends to transport his goods and chattels in some anonymous white panel van. We probably weren't going to be able to track him down very quickly; he was too clever for that.

But I doubted I had heard the last of Professor Urquhart Garrick.

## **Chapter 24 - Fat Lady Sings**

Luncardy and I had thoroughly wasted our time travelling to Garrick's place. It was already late in the afternoon by the time we had returned to the Lower Realms. The Inspector had been morose on the trip back, immediately getting tetchy when I tried to engage her in small talk and positively snarled when I suggested that she should have something to eat. It was time to separate, I thought.

In any case, it was high time to report to my client. I guessed - correctly, as it turned out, my hunches are often pretty good - that Clunie would by now have been taken home from the police station, and the formal and convoluted process of making a statement and getting it officially signed and witnessed would have been completed. Hopefully, the cops would have had the courtesy of escorting her home and I expected I would be able to catch up with her there.

Once again I climbed the flights of steep steps and made my way along the unguarded landing which provided access to the front doors - indeed, the only doors - to the traditional Goblin residences which were only just a little more than caves hollowed from the rock face. I knocked vigorously on the door of number 514, risking skinning my knuckles on the ancient time-hardened wood. There was no answer, although I thought I could detect faint sounds coming from inside: sounds which might have been running water.

I decided to wait; hanging around in patient fashion is a skill I have honed with long practice over a great many years. I stood outside the closed door, half-heartedly watching the passers-by in the street below, and smoked two cigarettes one after the other. Eventually, the faint noises of bathing ceased. I waited a full third cigarette's worth of minutes, then I tried knocking again.

A change to the sounds from within suggested Clunie had heard my signal this time. A few moments later she opened the door a fraction and peaked through the door jam. There was a gasp as she recognised who it was, then she threw back the door. She was wrapped in a towel tucked perilously insecurely under her armpits with droplets of water beading her smooth brown skin of her head and shoulders. As I suspected, she must have been taking a shower.

"Findo!" she said in a girlish and breathless voice, "There you are! Come in, come in. I was beginning to worry about you."

"Oh, I'm well enough," I replied laconically, following her inside the apartment, "I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

She nodded.

"I'm fine," she replied, smiling wanly, "The police were very kind to me."

I was sure they were. Luncardy was completely distracted by Garrick's shenanigans, and I could imagine that even the most hard-bitten of her squad would not have been particularly hard on a pretty young Goblin with the little-girl demeanour.

Clunie threw herself into one of the too-large chairs that over-filled the main room of the tiny apartment. The bath-towel unravelled itself further. It would only take a sudden movement for me to get a full view - another full view, I should say, after Merton's photographs - of her breasts.

I sat more carefully across the table from her, placing my hat on the arm of the chair.

"I know you've been through it all with the police," I said gently, "But I need you to tell me too. Tell me what happened, in your own words, in your own time."

She put her hands in her lap and sat up straight, as if she was about to recite a lesson at school. In a clear controlled voice, she went through the sequence of events from her abduction from the Starfield Club by Drummond to her release from her prison in Garrick's lair. I asked a few questions, nothing very significant; I did it more to keep her talking. It was all in all, a lesson well learned, a study in projecting the literal truth. I would have awarded her a gold star immediately.

Finally, I asked one last question, a question which was a rote part of the "victim interview" suite that I had learned at the Academy a good many decades before.

"Is there anything else? Even something you're not completely sure about," I asked in my warmest voice, "Or thought too trivial, or embarrassing, or maybe you just forgot about."

She was quiet for a moment.

"There was one thing," she said, so softly I could barely hear her.

"What's that?" I asked, leaning forward in my chair.

"I wasn't sure at the time," she announced, more loudly, almost angrily, "It was almost too faint to hear properly and I was locked

in that horrid little room, practically suffocating. I was asleep, I think, or fainted. When I woke up, I heard voices."

"What was it?"

"I didn't hear it all," she replied apologetically, "First Clathy's voice, something about 'powerful friends' who 'just needed to get her hands on her husband's money'. Then Drummond said: 'she's promised us legal help' and 'get us out of here'. Then it all went quiet, then there was shooting."

"She?" I queried, leaning yet further forward, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it."

"Did you hear a name?" I pressed her, urgently, my face next to hers across the table, "I need a name."

\*

There was a crash from behind me, the door flew open and a female Goblin stormed into the room.

"Alva!" Clunie screamed, clapping her hands to her face.

That was the name I had expected, although the sudden arrival of the female herself was as much a surprise to me as it apparently was to Clunie.

Alva waved a gun around, not wildly but steadily, with complete control, as if she knew exactly what she was doing. It was a delicate little thing, all smooth curves and chromium plate; the sort of thing that a lady could easily conceal in a handbag for self-protection, but deadly enough for all that.

She was dressed in the dark and nondescript outer clothing that she had donned when I followed her to the Starfield Club, on that recent occasion which now seemed like several hundred million years ago. She kicked the door behind her closed, at some risk to the elegant and expensive high-heeled shoes she wore. She didn't take her eyes off us for a second.

"Hands up, both of you," she instructed in a calm clear voice, as if she was merely demanding a second cocktail from a servant.

I raised my hands slowly. There was no point in antagonising the desperate in situations like this. Clunie sat frozen, wide-eyed, her hands still pressed to her cheeks.

"And you too, slut," she added, with more than a touch of venom in her voice.

I nodded at Clunie, who lifted her hands cautiously. Miraculously, the towel stayed in place.

"Gask," she sneered, pointing the muzzle unequivocally in my direction, "I'm sure a gumshoe like will carry a gun. Pull it out - slowly - and toss it over here."

I dropped my weapon, heavy and slightly oily, on the floor. Alva looked at it disdainfully. The gun oil had already left a stain on Clunie's carpet. Without taking her eyes off me for a second, she kicked my gun into corner of the room behind her.

"What do you want?" Clunie asked with a tremor in her voice.

"Huh," Alva said, "You really are as dumb as you look. You couldn't just content yourself with playing with my husband, could you? You had to get involved, get him to sign away what's rightfully mine."

"What do you mean?" Clunie squeaked indignantly.

"Who do you think arranged to have photos of you and him taken?" Alva sneered.

Clunie's eyes rounded even more. She looked completely shocked, outraged at the suggestion. I guessed Alva needed to get her hands on the accounts, and the easiest way was to get one of her friends at the Starfield Club to accidentally capture a few images from the back storeroom with which to blackmail her husband.

"And then you had to keep this snoop involved," she added, waving the shiny pistol at me, "It was bad enough when Merton blabbed. I didn't think you'd keep him on. You should've taken your pretty baubles and left well alone. So now you both know far too much."

It was time to make a move, before Alva did something rash. I stood up suddenly and rounded on her, trying to make it obvious that I was heroically placing myself between her and Clunie, and, more importantly and less obviously, between her and my own gun, the one I had carefully made immune to my own glamour.

\*

"Stay back, Gask!" Alva shouted, her cool reserve finally cracking, "I've told you!"

The tiny room seemed full: full of bulky furniture and emotions, and the desperation found in the last-chance saloon. There barely seemed room to breathe, let alone dodge around an armed lunatic. And beneath it all, there was the faintest tingle of active magic, filling the spaces around us with an eldritch haze.

Holding Alva's gaze, I advanced on her steadily, forced her to take a step back, and then another - steps away from the only really deadly weapon in the room. The little chromium-plated



automatic was inches from my nose, but still held steady by a hand only slightly pale around the knuckles.

"Say your prayers, Gask," she said, waving the gun in my face again, "Your time's up."

Click, click, went the little automatic. No shots. Alva staggered backwards again, somehow failing to register that the weapon had not fired when she pulled the trigger.

"Give me the gun, Alva," I said softly, urgently, holding out my hand, "This has gone far enough. Just give it to me, now."

"You bastard!" Alva yelled, any pretence at calmness or gentility now entirely abandoned.

She looked at the useless weapon in her hand, then threw it viciously at me. I dodged it easily. I heard it thud against the rock wall behind me.

I made a grab for her and managed to pin her arms to her side. She kicked and struggled, and tried to bite, so I threw her in the direction of the armchair in which I had been sitting. She landed awkwardly, her shoes scraping over the surface of the coffee table. Clunie shrieked again, then jumped up, clasping the towel to her bosom and backed towards the door which led, I guessed, to the bedroom.

Alva struggled to her feet. With the strength of desperation behind her, she pushed past me, almost knocking me to the floor and rushed towards the door. I staggered after her, grabbed her by the shoulder as she reached for the door-handle and spun her around. I am normally hesitant to strike a lady, but I'm prepared to make an exception when the lady in question tries to stick a gun up my nose. So I hit her, once; a solid blow to the jaw, hard enough for her to sit down on the floor all of a sudden and not pay very much attention to what was going on for a while, although it did not quite knock her completely unconscious.

I picked up the semi-conscious Alva like a sack of potatoes and forced her back into the armchair recently vacated by Clunie. I pulled a set of those magical restraints from another of my pockets and hand-cuffed her. She didn't struggle or even move; she was still dazed by the un-gentlemanly punch I had landed on her. Her face really was going to ache for the next few days.

"Call the cops, right now," I instructed Clunie, who was clutching the door jam for support and looking pale.

She nodded and hurried into the bedroom. I hoped she had a phone in there. I bent to recover my own weapon - I didn't particularly want the police getting a really close look at that - and tucked it back into my coat pocket. I left Alva's gun where it lay,

half-hidden under one of the armchairs; I didn't want to disturb the thing, especially as a forensic analysis would undoubtedly show that Alva had tried to blow my face off.

\*

Having tidied up that which needed tidying up, I sat and watched Alva for a few moments, making sure she was breathing and, with more immediate concern, that she was securely shackled. She didn't move, and just lay slumped in the armchair, a livid bruise already beginning to appear on the side of her face.

Clunie re-appeared in the doorway to her bedroom a few moments later, the towel now completely unravelled and held in place with one end at her throat. I wasn't in the mood to appreciate her curvaceous assets just at the moment.

"I spoke to Inspector Luncardy," she reported in a matter-of-fact way. Of course she kept the phone by her bed. All the better for those intimate late-night chats with her gentleman callers.

"What did she say?" I asked gruffly.

"She sounded like she was trying not to swear," Clunie replied, looking like a demure schoolgirl despite the trailing towel, "Or maybe laugh. I wasn't sure."

"But what did she actually say?" I reiterated.

"She said she'll be here in ten minutes. And that you weren't to do anything stupid."

"Huh," I muttered, "I'm not planning on doing *anything* right now."

I sat heavily in the other armchair, the adrenalin rush wearing off rapidly. Clunie too seemed to be a mild state of shock, or at least distracted, and sat on the arm of my chair. I ignored her.

True to her word, Luncardy arrived - mob-handed, as always - on the doorstep. She strode in, head held high, in the arrogant manner that so irritated Clunie. But I thought I knew Luncardy better than that: it was the acquired mannerism of one who was basically insecure, but too proud and ambitious to admit it. Clunie sprang up, clutching the towel more tightly. She looked faintly guilty; I couldn't imagine why. I stood up more slowly.

Several members of Luncardy's squad followed her inside and fanned out, at least as far as they could in the tiny room. Two of them hustled over to where Alva sat. She seemed to have more-or-less recovered from the blow, although I doubted she would be smiling any time soon. The cops dragged her to her feet and turned to face the Inspector.

"Alva Vale," Luncardy said formally, "I am arresting you on suspicion of conspiracy to defraud, and conspiracy to murder your husband. You have the right to remain silent."

The rest of the statement of rights for the accused - a long and involved one in the Lower Realms - was drowned out by Alva complaining about my behaviour, that I had assaulted her without provocation. She went on and on.

"Take her outside," Luncardy said in a manner which brooked no disagreement, entirely ignoring her diatribe.

She then approached Clunie, apparently trying but ultimately failing to repress a sneer at her appearance.

"Miss Ford," she said formally, "I will need you to make a statement. Another one, I'm afraid. Down at the station house. When you're dressed, of course."

Clunie blushed and scurried into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Luncardy bent and picked something off the floor, handed it to me, pushing it into the pit of my stomach. It was my hat.

"And I'll need a statement from you, Gask," she said briskly, bending slightly forward and adding so softly that nobody else could have heard it, "Good work, though."

Luncardy straightened up, then turned to the taciturn Sergeant. She spoke equally softly to him, so that it was impossible for me to hear.

"Yes, Ma'am," he acknowledged with a salute, turned and walked briskly away, taking two of the juniors with him.

\*

This little set piece worked as perfectly as Luncardy could have expected. I was just a bystander, part of the audience. I could have applauded.

Luncardy and Alva and I trailed downtown to the precinct house accompanied by most of her squad, leaving just one youngster to escort Clunie when she had dressed. As we arrived, Clathy was being escorted in handcuffs from an interview room at the far end of the building, a copper on either side. Her view down the corridor was limited by the blocky bulk of the Sergeant in front of her. At the same moment, the double doors from the front desk swung open and Alva was brought through, still handcuffed, also partially obscured by the bodies of the police squad. Luncardy walked alongside Alva and I trailed the group, not paying much attention, at least initially.

The two parties met mid-way along the corridor and were forced, naturally enough, to break ranks in order to get past. In the melee, the three ladies suddenly came into close proximity. Luncardy held up a hand and stopped Clathy and her escort.

"Thank you, Miss Dupplin," the Inspector said, apparently oblivious to Alva's presence, "We can discuss a plea-bargain later."

Alva spun around to face Clathy, eyes narrowed, fury etched on every feature.

"You stupid bitch!" she screamed, "You should've kept your mouth shut! Why couldn't you just keep to our deal?"

The coppers either side of Alva grabbed her before she could inflict any physical harm on Clathy and hustled her away, shouting a most unladylike collection of epithets.

Clathy didn't know what had hit her. All she could see was her ticket out of here disappearing. Tears welled in her eyes, and she collapsed to the floor wailing. She tore at her face, clawed at her own eyes and ripped an earring from her ear, which fell to the floor nearby with a bloody flap of skin still wetly attached. It was a damn fine act. Or maybe she left genuine remorse. Who could be sure?

It was, I thought, all over.

## **Chapter 25 - Police Showdown**

All over, bar the shouting, as it turned out. Although there was quite a lot of shouting. Lots and lots of shouting, in fact.

The showdown between Luncardy and Wester was a particularly spectacular example of the shouting, and one which I was able to overhear in person. Not that I was sure I really wanted to. Nevertheless, it was impossible not to overhear their full and frank exchange of views; every copper in the 14th precinct must have been able to follow every word.

Luncardy was understandably furious with Wester's attempted interference in the course of her murder investigation. I had no doubt that the Inspector took these things extremely personally, having little separation between her personal life and her professional commitments. Put frankly, she lived for her job and had no life outside it. This probably made her a very good copper; whether she could ever be anything else was open to debate.

Wester, for his part, took exception to Luncardy's perceived insubordination. No, not perceived: she really was behaving in an insubordinate manner. Or at least, allowing her sense of ethics - her personal perception of right and wrong - to override her sense of duty and discipline.

The whole thing was brought to a head by Tarsapple's report to Wester, as far as I could tell at the time. After the return from the surface, after the shoot-out at Garrick's place, Tarsapple took it upon himself to explain to Wester how close I was to the investigation, and to certain wealthy members of the public who might be threatened. No doubt Tarsapple imagined this would somehow reflect badly on me, personally; it was all to do with that previous disagreement with me.

Wester clearly took a more flexible and pragmatic approach to police work, and to the time-honoured problem of balancing the personal needs of underpaid public servants with the existence of powerful individuals with deep pockets. He had a delicate position to protect, and no doubt considerable motivation to do so.

Wester clearly felt threatened, insecure. He attempted to pull rank, to shout Luncardy down, to threaten her with suspension. The trouble was, he was entirely guilty: of taking bribes, of concealing evidence, and of being a complete ass, too. Half the

coppers on the force knew it, and the other half had heard about it in the coffee shops and locker rooms. Inspector Luncardy's chilly demeanour might not make her the most popular officer in the precinct but nobody would have suggested that she was anything less than hardworking and painfully honest.

Luncardy was having none of Wester's bullshit. She stood her ground and shouted back. Two Goblins with their careers on the line. The blatant insubordination - and the fact that this argument was in no way secret - forced Wester to threaten her with an internal investigation. Perhaps he expected this to be the clincher, that all coppers have something to hide that would not withstand such an intense scrutiny. He was wrong. He didn't know Luncardy well enough.

The internal investigation arm of any police force is the resting-place for a certain kind of intense weirdo found nowhere else in the known universe. I recognised the kind immediately when I was interviewed by an investigator who visited my office a couple of weeks later. I never really understood his brief, his name I never did catch and, in the entire time he sat in the visitor's chair, he never looked directly at me, never caught my eye.

The investigator asked me questions in a dull monotone, wrote down the answers in tediously slow longhand and thanked me mechanically, absent-mindedly, on the termination of the interview. I never received any direct feedback, any indication of whether my remarks had helped or hindered Luncardy or, for that matter, Wester in retaining their position. Public servants at their best, I suppose.

\*

Clathy never did get to a proper trial, with judge and jury and all that. She was just declared officially bonkers. Yes, I'm sure there is a more scientifically precise and politically correct term, but she was in reality criminally insane, a danger to the public and to herself. So she was simply locked away in a lunatic asylum for the rest of her life.

She must have been pretty unbalanced to begin with, just to fall in with Alva's crazy scheme in the first place. I suppose Clathy had been driven by a need for revenge for the treatment she had received at Monzie Hosh's hand, a deep and festering resentment later amplified when she was discarded by Merton Vale in favour of Clunie. Somehow, it had been enough for her to cool-headedly plot Hosh's murder and the subsequent removal of his body.

Then, there was the stress of the siege at Garrick's place and the death - at least partially her own fault - of her grandmother, even though it was Drummond who actually pulled the trigger.

The final straw, the blow that tipped Clathy over the edge, was the underhand trick that made Alva believe that she had ratted on her, and the sudden realisation that there was no way out. I don't suppose Luncardy really wanted, or even expected, that to be the outcome; she was just looking for a way to get the ladies to talk. But I'd bet the Inspector had sleepless nights over the result.

By the way, Drummond did stand trial and admitted his guilt: accessory after the fact to Hosh's murder, and the manslaughter of Argaty Dupplin. I didn't attend the proceedings - which were very short - but I was later told that he seemed surprised to find that he was going to jail. Perhaps he too had got it into his head that some powerful friends were going to set him free, and he had never quite understood the changes in his circumstances.

The last time I saw Clathy was through the viewing hatch in the steel-reinforced door of a padded cell in a forbidding building in one of the remoter caverns which certainly looked like a prison, even though it was officially designated a hospital. Her slender frame was encased in a clinically-white straight-jacket. She displayed no recognition when I spoke, when I called her name. She just sat on the mat, staring blankly at the wall. There was nothing I could do.

\*

Creagan Madderfy was also declared insane, or at least suffering from a condition where he was easily distracted by the unexpected and likely to lapse into catatonia by the slightest change in his routine. It was a condition where he was best committed to an institution. Unlike Clathy's establishment, this was an expensive private institute in one of the classier caverns where the rooms are large and comfortable, the food is beautifully cooked and elegantly presented, the staff quietly spoken and efficient, and the locks so discreet that you might never notice them. I was advised against visiting him. My presence would be so disruptive, so unsettling, that it might undo weeks of careful and expensive therapy. Not that I really felt the need to do so.

With hindsight, I suppose I should have expected a change in the operations of the partnership of Vale, Madderfy and Logan, Accountants. With Merton Vale dead, and Madderfy junior likely to be out of circulation for a while, Busby Logan was now in effective control of the accountancy partnership. His plodding approach seemed to allow him to carry out some actual accountancy - rather than ignoring the business, as it had been by the other partners - and the company actually started making a decent profit.

Logan also seemed to have come out his shell socially. He had suddenly joined the ranks of the rich and famous, at least in a minor way, an overnight promotion that he barely merited and could not have expected. So, rather than the introverted bore I

had encountered at Merton Vale's wake, a modicum of fame - or at least newspaper exposure, which counts for pretty much the same thing - had turned him into a minor celebrity.

A month or two after Alva's arrest, I made a call on Busby Logan in his office. Business was slow, and I was really just touting for business. My mission was simple: press the flesh, remind him who I was and leave a card in case he ever needed a private dick.

I had expected a tussle with some dragon of a receptionist before I could even get to the partner himself, and I was mentally preparing myself. But it turned out I was entirely wrong. As soon as the charming young Goblin at the desk realized who I was, I was buzzed through with only a moment's delay. I was shown into a spacious and - by Goblin standards - airy office, all polished beech-wood and pale carpets, and with a striking view from the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Logan greeted me with a lively bonhomie and shook my hand warmly. We chatted for a few minutes as if we were old friends, during which time he took my card and read it carefully, then placed it square on the blotter on his desk. He gave me every impression that, when his busy schedule allowed, he would give my proposition the attention it so justly deserved. Then, with profuse apologies, he ushered me out, declaring himself already late for another meeting.

Needless to say, I never heard from him again.

\*

Madderfy senior soon regrouped and engaged a full-scale ass-covering operation to protect his own position. His tactical objective, I would hear soon enough on the grapevine, was to keep Creagan out of prison and his name out of the newspapers, and he pulled strings in high places - and less exalted ones, too - in order to prevent Madderfy junior from being charged with any offence. One of the strings he pulled had me attached to the other end.

Madderfy called in person at my office, just him: no goons. I looked pointedly at the door, as if I expected a black-garbed Goblin to appear at any moment. After a few moments, I waved him to one of the guest chairs on the far side of my desk, then looked at him expectantly.

Old Man Madderfy started with an apology. It was a good one, really good: very sincere, very heartfelt. It went on for quite a long time, and hardly sounded rehearsed at all. He had clearly heard of that well-known adage: "Always sound sincere, whether or not you really mean it."



I brushed aside his apology with my characteristic understated modesty - I'm not yet perfect, you understand - and asked whether there was something I could help him with at this time.

His gambit was to ask me whether it was right that his son be prosecuted, whether it was just for him to face the full might of the law, or whether that course of action might be considered unreasonable, especially to one such as me, so intimately connected with the case. Finally, he offered me a cigar from his own case, which contained an array of very fine hand-rolled Havanas of a kind very difficult to get down here.

I accepted his gift with alacrity and a faint knowing smile. The expression that lit up the Old Man's face was a joy to behold. He knew only too well that, in accepting the gift, I had also accepted his proposition. He further understood that my vestigial senses of pride and ethics would prevent me from accepting any substantive payment for this favour, that offering any kind of serious bribe would be counter-productive at this time.

I used my own pocket-knife to trim and prime the fine cigar, then accepted a light from Old Man Madderfy's own hand, which held an expensive-looking chunk of chromed metal which flamed instantly at the touch of a concealed button. While I smoked, I explained that, of course, what happened to Creagan was not up to me and the authorities would undoubtedly make their own decisions on the matter. Nevertheless, I promised that I would speak in confidence with the police and, if the opportunity arose, with the District Attorney himself, and express the view that Creagan's actions were surely entirely justified in the light of subsequent events.

All in all, good value for the price of a single Cuban cigar.

To be honest, I did not really want to see Creagan prosecuted. Neither he nor his father were really trying to do anything other than protect their family. Madderfy Junior's sole crime was to attempt to buy stolen property from that unmitigated scoundrel Garrick. The Professor had undoubtedly sold out to the highest bidder, and Old Man Madderfy's pockets were undoubtedly much deeper than either Clunie's or Clathy's, or even Alva's.

Creagan was just the agent, making the nerve-wracking journey to Garrick's surface hideout at the prompting of his father. It was clear that he had become partially unhinged by the experience, which was why he had become practically catatonic when I burst in, waving my gun around.

Admittedly, Merton Vale's will and the other papers might not have ended up in the hands of Judge Kirkton if the Madderfys had been successful. Even so, it was me who stole these legal

documents at gun-point, after breaking and entering a private property. If Creagan could be prosecuted for wrong-doing, well then so could I.

## **Chapter 26 - The Lady Gets It**

For a long time, the District Attorney was still to make a call on whether to prosecute Creagan and Alva. The word in the corridors in the precinct police house was that the family was too well-connected, too affluent, and would be able to hire sufficiently expensive lawyers that it was not worth the DA's effort.

But I thought differently. There was evidence enough to convince even the most recalcitrant jury of Alva's guilt and, short of some flagrant bribes in the courtroom - a route sufficiently unreliable and expensive that nobody seriously considers it these days - she would be convicted and locked away for a very long time.

The matter came to a head while I was actually in the police house, on one of several tedious visits to make yet more statements, and to assist Inspector Harriet Luncardy and her colleagues with the paperwork and the loose ends. Alva was still being held in the cells downstairs, but it seemed that her lawyer had persuaded the authorities to allow a visit from her father. She had been brought up to one of the interview rooms on this occasion; nobody really expected a grandee like Old Man Madderfy to visit some squalid basement cell.

It seemed that Alva and her father were alone in the room, except for her lawyer, of course, and some luckless junior in a uniform was on guard just outside the door. I was just passing by, in conversation with Luncardy on some minor and long-forgotten aspect of the case. Without warning, the door was flung open, startling the young copper so much that he practically flew across the corridor and very nearly collided with the two of us.

It was Madderfy senior leaving, his face beetroot with anger and indignation. With his hand on the door-handle, he turned back to face his daughter, who sat behind the table, pale and tearful, with her lawyer looking shocked sitting to one side.

"You are no daughter of mine," he bellowed, "And you'll get not a cent from me. Not a cent, do you hear!"

He slammed the door and stormed off, brushing past Luncardy and myself without even a flicker of recognition. Alva was on her own.

Creagan was a different case, of course. Old Man Madderfy's influence would see the charges against him quietly dropped, and almost nobody would notice that it had been. The younger Madderfy would languish for a while in the expensive private retreat his family's money provided for him. Then, when the fuss had died down a little, and the attentions of the newspaper reporters were elsewhere, he would quietly check out and return to his father's house.

My influence on the matter was miniscule, of course - possibly non-existent - and the Old Man had probably wasted the cigar on me. I still have it, by the way, only a little smoked, and now of course rather dried up and very stale, languishing in the back of my desk drawer. It is my sole memento of the whole sorry affair.

\*

Alva never said what happened to her husband in my office, or indeed any of her involvement in anything. She remained tight-lipped through the entire affair, no doubt on the advice of her council. She refused to answer questions from the police and, later on in court, from lawyers, citing the Goblin equivalent of what some humans would call the Fifth Amendment. It didn't make any difference in the end.

I was called as a witness, for the prosecution, one day a very long time after almost everybody had forgotten about the events at the Starfield Club. Perhaps that was the idea of the delay: the detail of the events had sunk into the background of everyone's minds, and so clarity and precision now took a back seat. I'd like to think my recollections were better than most: I am a trained detective after all, and I made copious notes in the days immediately afterwards, as always, sat comfortably in my office with a strong cup of coffee - or a stronger glass of whiskey - in my hand.

The trial was held in Number Seven Court in the Central Court Buildings, part of a large collection of imposing masonry erections separated by several spacious plazas close to the centre of Number One cavern. This is the cave which holds the core of our society - at least according to the pundits in the newspapers - the seat of government, commerce, education and law; the cave which - by old-fashioned word-of-mouth reputation, rather than documented history - was the first to be populated by our forefathers many millennia ago.

The Court Building itself was a soaring edifice of elegant stone arches, cool stone-flagged corridors and enclosed courtyards, which echoed to the sound of expensive shoe leather mixed with the soft susurrations of confidential conversations. It was altogether a rather more impressive setting than Judge Kirkton's

chambers, which felt modest and homely by comparison; indeed, very little expense had been spared to give the impression that no expense had been spared.

The Judge was a wizened old gnome, small and wiry - even by Goblin standards - whose name I missed the general racket of "be upstanding for...". He seemed to spend his entire existence sneering at lawyers and witnesses with equal disdain. He made no attempt to disguise his disgust at the shenanigans that Alva - not to mention the rest of the cast - had got up to, allegedly, and was equally disparaging at the antics performed by the legal representatives for both prosecution and defence. I would have supported his viewpoint if it were not for the strong suggestion that there was nothing in the caverns - and certainly not the surface world - that would actually meet with his approval.

As for the jury, well, I guess the best way to describe them was to ask you to imagine a dozen of the most nondescript, average-looking Goblins you might see on a cavern street. None of them had any clear distinguishing features and even my trained observational skills found it difficult to separate old from young, male from female, prosperous citizen from street bum. I guess this is a side-effect of the process used to select jurors. Anybody displaying even the most cursory hint of having a genuine personality or an opinion of their own is regarded as a threat and therefore rejected out of hand by either prosecution or defence. It is in the nature of juries when the lawyers have a chance to influence those who are selected, that those so selected are on average fairly dumb, characterless and unlikely to read any newspaper beyond page three and the sports headlines.

After the usual amount of hanging around, I was ushered into the witness box and swore the usual oath to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. My hand was placed, not on a Bible, but on a contained glamour which made it much harder to tell an undetectable conscious untruth. Of course, there are ways of circumventing such magics - beyond the obvious one of being oblivious to the truth - but I would not have to attempt any such deviousness today.

I had previously referred to my notes - notes which eventually became the basis for these memoirs, by the way - and I was able to answer the prosecution's questions with a clarity and directness which earned a degree of grudging approval from the beak. I suffered the minimum amount of offensive cross-examination, the defence legal team quickly realizing that it would further irritate the already irascible judge, who seemed quite capable of directing the jury to whatever verdict he saw fit.

I guess the jury eventually managed to work out exactly what happened, despite the wilful obfuscation by lawyers for the defence - and the prosecution, for that matter. In a secret deal with Hosh, long before, Merton Vale bought the Starfield Club; having dealt with the accounts, he must have had a good idea of what the Club was earning - not very much, mainly because of poor financial management - and what it could earn if managed properly.

Until Merton Vale could extricate himself from the remains of his accountancy partnership and devote his entire attention to the money-making machine that the Club could become, he retained Hosh as the day-to-day manager. I doubted Hosh was entirely happy about being told where he had been going wrong by an over-privileged toff.

Alva must have got wind of this - how, I will never know - and struck on the imaginative ploy of blackmailing her own husband in an attempt to discover more about the asset Merton had acquired. This must have been about this time that she took up with Monzie Hosh. This was almost certainly a calculated move; her sophistication and up-town manners would have appealed to a low-life brute - a true categorisation, despite the expensive suits and ties - like Hosh.

In some hothouse amalgam of passion and ambition, Alva and Hosh must have plotted to kill Merton, having understood that - as is the convention for wills in Goblin society - all of his goods and chattels would revert to her in the event of his death, as hers would to him in the event of her own untimely demise. Hosh must have been persuaded by Alva, by one means or another - I'm sure I don't need to spell it out for you - that the Club would be better under her control, giving the two of them free rein, a move which Hosh not doubt regarded as the return of his rightful property.

When they discovered that Merton had engaged my services, the lovebirds' schemeing threw up another doozie to obscure their plans. Hosh approached Merton and made it clear he knew about the blackmail, and that wasn't particularly worried about it. Rather, he stressed it was Merton's problem - he was the owner, after all - but pointed out that there were aspects of the Starfield Club's operations which could not withstand an investigation by a half-way competent private detective.

Merton must have been convinced. The two Goblins traveled together to my office, to buy me off, at a time Alva knew I would not be there. Cool as a cucumber, Hosh suggested that they help themselves to my scotch - my own very fine bottle, or at least as fine as I could usually afford. Unbeknownst to Merton, Alva had previously visited my offices - never locked and barely noticed and

added poison to my bottle of whiskey and left poor Merton a stiff in my own office for me to discover.

Throughout the trial, according to my own observations and the newspaper reports, Alva sat silent, stony-faced, refusing to acknowledge anyone or anything beyond those which would have earned her a spell in the joint for contempt of court. It didn't work, in the end: the jury found her guilty on all counts, unanimously.

\*

There was another court-room I had to attend. This one was a little more familiar and certainly much less daunting. It was the re-reading of the Last Will and Testament of Merton Vale which, by Goblin law, could not be completed until the fate of Alva was determined. She was, plausibly, a benefactor in her late husband's will and so, if she had been acquitted of his murder, she would have been eligible to receive a bequest. Now that her guilt was established, the same law directed that she must be excluded for any benefit.

This reading was a much more subdued affair than the previous occasion, even though many of the same individuals were present as the first time. Judge Kirkton presided in his own chambers, with much the same odd assortment of individuals seated around the same vast and highly-polished table.

One one side of the table, occupying the same seat as before, sat Old Man Madderfy, poker-faced as always but with lines of tiredness and worry clearly visible on his face - lines that I would have sworn were not there before. The elder Madderfy was flanked by Creagan, who appeared to be concentrating very hard on keeping his fragile grip on reality intact and, in place of Alva, Busby Logan who looked suave and prosperous, a far cry from the nervous and confused wretch who was present the first time around.

The same clutch of maiden aunts and dissolute uncles that had cluttered the place sat opposite; the same clerks and the same junior from Pane and Pickles, Attorneys-at-Law, flanked Kirkton at the head of the table. Clunie Ford sat demurely at the foot, close to one corner and facing the Judge, while further along the same edge, positioned like bookends, I sat with my hat in my lap.

After the brief opening formalities - Kirkton was never a great one for even the most cursory of social pleasantries - the floor was turned over to Millearme. He received the will from one of the clerks, opened the seal - being careful to show what he was doing to the witnesses here present - unfolded the papers and read the document aloud in a stuttering monotone, barely audible even in the dusty hush of the Judge's chambers.

The will contained no surprises as far as I was concerned and, rather than listening to Millearme droning on, I found my mind wandering in a sort of speculative semi-conscious daze. It seemed to me that Alva could not have been aware - at the time - that Merton Vale had redrafted his final will in favour of Clunie. He really had intended to set up a new life - a classic middle-aged crisis response to boredom - exchanging stability and security for the excitement of a new female in his life, not to mention the challenges of running a joint like the Starfield Club. It was all a far cry from the stolid accountancy practice that had made him his fortune.

Alva knew about the previous version of the will, of course, and pre-emptively moved to make herself the beneficiary. She must have been surprised, even shocked to learn that Merton planned to give the lion's share of his worldly goods to Clunie. Panicked, she asked Clathy, as an early part of their bloody deal, to hide the impenetrable briefcase which held the latest will but without succeeding in impressing on her the importance of the case and its contents.

Clathy, after - I imagined - some debate with her grandmother Argaty, started feeling nervous about the whole affair, and thought she could fob off the case on me, relieving her of the responsibility. Only later did Alva realise that the case might be found and opened - thanks to an unsolicited offer from Garrick, no doubt. She must have been furious with Clathy. She tried to buy it from Garrick, but Merton's family out-bid her, then tried to get it off me. She was already out of control.

At about the same time, Alva must have tired of Hosh. Certainly, in terms of his company in her bedroom; Hosh's unimaginatively brutal approach to sex might have been exciting at first but a sophisticated female like Alva would soon find herself bored with unrelieved rough sex. She had probably also become frustrated by Hosh wanting to continue to run the Starfield Club his way, not recognising that Alva thought she was the rightful owner.

All this drove Alva to strengthen her deal with Clathy and the stooge Drummond, to persuade them to dispose of Hosh and give Alva undisputed control of the Club, no doubt on the promise to promote Clathy and Drummond to positions of real power in the Club's management with the concomitant perks and benefits.

Millearme's recitation in Kirkton's chambers ground to a halt. There were no questions, no objections. Nobody was showing any emotional reaction, not even Clunie, the major benefactor of Merton Vale's last will and Testament, and now the undisputed owner of the Starfield Club.

\*



Although I never received any kind of formal feedback from the wonks from the internal investigation division, I did manage to find out what happened to Captain Wester after his very public altercation with Luncardy. This information came from a much more reliable source: the tabloid press.

Fowlis Wester's removal as Police Captain and the news that he was charged with taking bribes was a 48-hour wonder in the newspapers. As always, the reports on the front page were worth reading closely, not least to discover exactly what was *not* being commented on by journalists. The column-inches carefully omitted to indicate from whom Wester was taking bribes, or what they were intended to achieve. And there was no attempt to link Wester's exit to events at the Starfield Club.

Old Man Madderfy's influence was clearly hard at work behind the scenes, efficiently suppressing any hint of a connection. One of these days I'll figure out how that kind of pressure is actually delivered. I doubted it was the blunt influence of cash money in unmarked brown envelopes, not at this level. What managed to avoid the newspapers altogether was that, shortly afterwards, all charges were quietly dropped. Wester was allowed to resign his post without formal disciplinary proceedings and even, I was given to understand from the water cooler gossip in the police house, managed to keep his pension. Nice work if you can get it.

The upside to all this was that Harriett Luncardy was promoted to Captain. I guess that was always on the cards, but in reality these things so very rarely pan out the way you would like it to, so that the actual announcement was quite a surprise. Still, Luncardy already had most of the required attributes: hard-working, honest, and a no-nonsense approach to police work, not to mention a willingness to shout loudly in order to get things done. On balance, I considered, it would be a good thing for more conscientious an officer to be in charge of the 14th precinct.

And, yes, Luncardy could be a right bastard when the situation warranted it. It was part of the specification. Police officers spend altogether a worrying amount of time in a state of conflict, sometimes with members of the public and suspects - telling them apart if part of the trick, of course - but more often with other cops. These are the people who you rub shoulders with every day, who stand between you and your career objectives, your promotion, your pay rise. As the old adage has it, keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.

## **Chapter 27 - Distant Friends**

I would hear - to nobody's great surprise - that Clunie wasted no time in installing herself in the Starfield Club. One of the few facts which were incontestable - and one which was endlessly repeated in the newspaper reports - was that a former waitress had suddenly become the proprietor of the Club. From conversations I had overheard in bars across the caverns, it seemed that everyone had heard that the new owner - now styled Madame Clunie Ford - had a dark past: tales of being a floozy, a kept woman, and even darker rumours of involvement in murder and mayhem.

The ranks of the Club regulars were diluted by an influx of newcomers, by all accounts, Goblins anxious to see the places mentioned in lurid reports in their evening papers and, perhaps, to catch a glimpse of the mysterious lady that featured so prominently. I don't suppose more than a small fraction came for a second time, but it is the repeat business that really is the money-spinner for a place like the Starfield Club.

I took it into my head to pay a visit to the Club, early one evening. I made the familiar journey to the front entrance. The bouncer on the door did not recognise me, I'm sure - I was not in disguise, exactly, although I had tugged down the brim of my hat more than usual.

I paid the entrance fee like anybody else and once again declined to deposit my hat with the hat-check Goblin. Inside, nothing seemed different. The band and the torch singer were just the same - why change a winning formula, after all? - belting out the same numbers and wearing, if not the same dress, then at least one cut from the same pattern. All of the tables in the casino area seemed to be working, and the place had a buzz, an aliveness, which had been absent on my previous visits.

I pushed my way around the back of the room - it was certainly more crowded than on any previous occasion - and sat at the same table - what was it about this particular spot that nobody else ever seemed to sit here? I tossed my hat on the table and looked around. I didn't bother with cigarettes or matches this time.

Everybody seemed to be ignoring me. The local management team - the tough guys in business suits with extra space under the armpits - seemed to have their attention elsewhere. The bouncers

stood like oversized tuxedo'd robots by the exits. The working girls plied their trade uninterrupted - no doubt the new Madame was taking a cut there, too.

The waitress didn't recognise me, either. They probably had quite a turnover of staff in this place. But she was much in the mould of most of the other waitresses in the joint: young, buxom enough to fill the tight-fitting uniform with not an inch to spare and a smile permanently fixed below bright but somehow slightly vacant-looking eyes. Clathy had always been something of an exception in this company.

"What'll it be, Mister?" she asked brightly. They all spoke the same, too.

"Bourbon and branchwater."

It's what I always drink in places I don't trust. Too popular a drink to be tampered with. The drink appeared swiftly - the faster drinks arrive, the more is drunk, and the more profit is made. I sat and sipped my whiskey, idly watching the floor show and glancing over the punters.

Ten minutes later, I spotted Clunie approaching through the crowd. She was wearing a long dress made from some rustling black fabric I could not name and fitted with a plethora of sparkling black sequins. The dress covered her from neck to ankle. It must have been quite a challenge to her dressmaker to make it fit so snugly around the swelling curves of her breasts.

I stood up politely at her stately approach.

"Madame Ford," I said, "You're looking well."

She looked at me with calm eyes, eyes that has seen a lot and weren't telling. She seemed completely in control.

"Mister Gask, thank you," she acknowledged, "And welcome - again - to the Starfield Club."

"Thank you, Madame."

She declined my unspoken invitation to sit at the table with a slow shake of her head. We both stood facing each other, the hubbub of the Club somehow fading around us.

"I just want you to know you are always welcome here, as my guest" she said formally, graciously.

There was no sign of the nervous and faintly shy girl who had cried on my shoulder over Merton Vale's death and the disappearance of his briefcase. I wondered if she really ever existed.

"Again, thank you, Madame."

I was under the watchful eyes of several of the rotund bouncers, who seemed to have materialised around me, not close, not obvious, but clearly there to discourage me from doing something stupid. It was too late. It was stupid for me to have come here in the first place. There was nothing at the Starfield Club for me.

Clunie signalled a waitress, who materialised almost instantaneously at her elbow.

"Another drink for Mister Gask, on the house."

The waitress scurried away. Madame Ford nodded politely to me, a salute I returned, then she turned and swept away across the floor, tailed by a couple of the bouncers. I watched her go, then slumped back in the chair and drained my drink.

A few second later, another waitress brought another glass - a large scotch, a very good single malt - and placed it carefully in front of me. I left it there, un-drunk, just on principle. I just tucked my hat back on over my eyes and left the Club.

\*

In the months that followed Alva Vale's arrest, her arraignment and her eventual conviction, the grand house that she had once shared with Merton Vale came on the market. I guess Alva needed the money for her legal defence and her father had stood firm in his threat not to pay a cent to help her. The asking price was surprisingly low, almost too low to believe. Perhaps the realtor believed that nobody would be interested in a house with such a background, associated with such notoriety.

To everyone's surprise - even mine, I'll freely admit - the property was snapped up within hours. The buyer was Clunie Ford, a fact which came to the attention of the newspaper reporters and thence to the public at large, one which refuelled the speculations in the papers and the bars.

I followed the progress of Clunie Ford arriving at Vale's mansion at third hand, like everyone else, reading snippets here and column-inches there in the inside pages of the evening newspaper over my dinner in David's diner. It seemed that she installed herself in the house with efficiency equal to her annexing of the Starfield Club, even keeping the same housekeeper and most of the house and garden staff.

Clunie also kept much of the furniture and fitments unmodified. Her major change was associated with the master bedroom. In a fit of extravagance, she hired a famous interior designer and had her suite of private rooms extensively remodelled and redecorated,

so much so that it was much later featured in one of those glossy magazines with an exclamation mark in the title.

Her other change was in her practice of opening up the grand rooms on the ground floor one a month or so, for a society soiree. Very soon, a certain amount of fashionable cachet became to be attached to these events, especially amongst those glittering types who appreciated the frisson of being associated with a dark mystery, a person enshrouded in so much gossip and so few facts.

Needless to say, I never got an invitation to any of her parties.

\*

Luncardy and I did get that off-duty whiskey, although in the end it turned out to be her idea rather than mine. We had spent the afternoon, and much of the evening, dealing with the interminable paperwork that the police seemed to think necessary especially when a case is actually going to make it to court.

"You can buy me a drink," she said, throwing down the last bundle of folders in the already-overflowing "Out" tray on the corner of her desk.

"Sure," I replied, trying to mask my surprise, "Where d'ya want to go?"

"You choose. Somewhere I've never been."

I collected my hat and coat and took her to a down-town bar, where the lights were low and the booze prices were reasonable. It was well away from the excesses of the Starfield Club and from any police house that I knew of. Police bars have the worst kind of atmosphere. I ordered a double round at the bar, picked up the tray of glasses and the little bowl of spicy salty toadstool snacks that the barkeeper foist on me, and carried it to the quiet booth we had managed to snag.

Luncardy took off her mannish jacket and tossed it casually over the back of the booth. I slid in around the other side, placed my hat casually on top of her jacket. She really needed that drink, it seemed, or perhaps she had something else on her mind. As she leaned forward over the table to touch her glass to mine, I could tell that, mysteriously, one or two of her blouse buttons seemed to have come undone. It seemed that I had been wrong all this time. She was not quite as straight up-and-down as her bearing and clothing had led me to believe; there were some distinctly alluring curves hidden under that suit.

We toasted each other silently, Luncardy's eyes bright in the reflected candlelight, then both of us put down the first shot in one lump. She barely winced at the burn in her throat from the neat

spirits, while I did my best not to show any reaction to the whiskey.

We talked, for a while, carefully avoiding anything of the closed case. She told me about her family and upbringing: she an only child, parents dead, killed in a robbery which went wrong. Hesitantly at first, but with growing conviction, she spoke of her early determination to get into police work, then a drive to succeed in her chosen direction. What might have started as revenge for her parents' senseless death somehow morphed itself into determined career advancement for its own sake. She had never been married, never in a serious relationship, always lived alone. She was somebody without much in the way of small talk, sure enough, but when she opened up, she really opened up.

In return, I told her something about me, my past lives: my parents - also dead, of natural causes - my expensive education, my abortive marriage to my childhood sweetheart - who turned out to be a slutty gold-digger. With a little prompting, I told her how I got into private investigations after the experience of tracking down my drunken and dissolute brother Nether Gask, and getting him back to my mother's deathbed before she died. And then there was the experience of proving to my sister Trinity that her husband-to-be was a two-timing bastard, and later stopping her from taking the creature's ears off with the kitchen knives.

The shot glasses slowly accumulated on the table. Luncardy matched me drink for drink and I started pacing myself. I didn't want to be carrying a drunken police officer back home or, even worse, being taken home incapacitated myself.

"I like you, Gask," she said suddenly, her voice not at all slurred by the four or five strong ones she had consumed, "We should get married."

I was sure it was just the scotch talking, despite her apparent sobriety. After all, it's not as if I get propositions of marriage every day. As an offer, it did have its own attractions.

"It wouldn't work," I said, shaking my head sadly.

"Why not?"

"We'd end up hating each other, or maybe I'd just hate myself," I replied sadly, "I don't like policemen's wives, or policemen's husbands for that matter."

"It needn't be like that," she said, "We could be friends."

"Oh, we will be friends," I reassured her, "Distant friends. The kind of friends who see each other just occasionally. Not because they need something - not necessarily, anyway - but the kind that are there for you when you need somebody who will understand,

who will listen, who will - in the end - make sure that you do the right thing."

She took my hand across the table.

"Maybe I need a friend like that," she said softly.

\*

I walked Harriet Luncardy back to her door and declined her repeated offer to come inside. She took the hint eventually, pecking me on the cheek just once before turning on her heel. The last I saw of her that night was her bright eyes looking sadly in my direction as she shut her front door.

I stood on the sidewalk for a long minute, staring at her closed door. Maybe I should have gone in. Luncardy sure wanted the company, and she'd have made for a jazzy few days, and nights. But I would have ended up hating myself, if not in the morning, then in a week or two's time. Oh, I would see her again, I was sure of it. Some professional context or another, no doubt. And, when we met, both of us would carefully not mention this night, and we would remain coolly distant and excruciatingly polite to each other.

So I went home to my quiet little apartment, following a secretive and roundabout route that was second-nature to me, although the chance to walk and think uninterrupted was a boon. Not even the ghost of Monzie Hosh seemed to be at home, no restless ghosts left here.

I switched on a few lights, and hung up my coat and hat on the peg by the door. Off-duty at last. Then I poured myself a nightcap from the still-sealed bottle I keep for just such emergencies - having managed to track it down in the back of a cupboard in the kitchenette - and slumped in my favourite armchair. Somehow the scotch I had drunk with Luncardy had evaporated before it ever reached my brain. I doubted that one more would make any difference, but it was a comfort just to hold it in my hand while I thought.

All of the females in the case - and many of the males, too - seemed to have taken me in, bamboozled me. I had no desire for the experience to be repeated. Most of the males were dead, and Drummond seemed to have so little going on between his ears that he barely counted. Madderfy father and son were just trying to protect their position, although they would have done better if they had levelled with me in the first place. And as for Professor Urquhart Garrick, well, he was an amoral old bastard of the first water and I doubted I had seen the last of him.

As for the females, Clathy and her grandmother had lost big-time: one now dead and the other under twenty-four hour monitoring in a secure mental institution. Clathy had at least been partially honest with me - perhaps more than she should have - when I forced her to have that drink in the bar. But she hid her motivation well - a high-octane blend of revenge and greed - and I had been entirely taken in by her charms.

Alva Vale motives were still something of mystery to me. She was a rich Goblin's daughter and another rich Goblin's wife: privileged, pampered, never wanted for anything. Why did she get involved in something like this? Bored, perhaps? Wanted a degree of independence? I would never know for sure. But she seemed to like riding on the wild side of life; she might have taken up with a hoodlum like Monzie Hosh just for the hell of it.

Even Harriet Luncardy had come out on top, clearing up a murder case - two murder cases, even - and being promoted into the shoes of the disgraced Fowlis Wester. She was being very gracious about it, freely acknowledging that I had been no little help in solving the crimes, although I had asked to keep my name out of the newspapers. But she had ridden rough-shod over my objections, my better judgement. If she had listened to me, at least one innocent - Argaty - would still be alive.

As for Clunie Ford, the new Madame of the Starfield Club, there I had been taken for a prime sucker. She had used me to keep track of what was going on, making sure the real Last Will and Testament would be found and presented at the right time - even though I eventually had to retrieve the damn thing myself. Sure, I had been paid for my services, handsomely, but I had been lied to, as well. I hate that in a client.

There was nothing I could point at that she had done wrong, nothing illegal I could identify. What she had now was what Merton Vale had wanted for her, although personally I'm pretty certain he expected that the Club would be his to run for a long time.

How Clunie persuaded Vale to put her into his will I could not be sure, although I'm sure her ample feminine charms had a lot to do with it. Perhaps it was supposed to be a token, proof that he really did intend to leave his wife and set up with house with her. Only she would know for sure, and she wasn't saying. How much she had manipulated the situation, plotting to keep me, and Alva, and Clathy - and even Drummond - off-balance and confused, it was impossible to for me to know. Maybe it was all luck, coincidence. But I doubted it. She was a lot smarter than anyone thought, even me.



Oh, sure, I was well ahead financially. I still had more of Clunie's money - and Merton Vale's, for that matter - than I was owed for the days I had actually worked, and my expenses had been very modest - mostly in clothing repairs and dry cleaning. I had been over-paid for my services.

But I wasn't going to return any money - the dead don't need it anyway, and there was no way I was going to see Clunie again. Write it down as extraordinary expenses, I told myself, wear and tear on clothes and shoe-leather, on my body and on my mind.

I drained the last of my nightcap and went to bed. Maybe, in the morning, things would be clearer. Or maybe just a little bit closer to being forgotten.

**The End**

83188 words

217 pages

09/07/2010 09:34