

## Ted Harper, Wizard of Mystery

Mythical creatures rarely saw their fair day in court anymore. Theodore 'Ted' Harper felt responsible that he couldn't get them any closer to 'right'. Work in the business was tough, but recently Ted had seen fewer and fewer happy endings. Private Eye work was demoralizing when you kept coming up empty, but Ted tried to be positive. An end was an end, happy or not. In Ted's mind, no one deserved a happy ending, not really. No one, that is, until Vicky.

On a cold, November night, Ted sat in his office, enjoying a moment of quiet. It had been a long day, chasing down leads and looking for clues. The only thing he'd managed to get to the bottom of was a bottle of gin he kept in his desk drawer for emergencies. He used to keep it for celebrations but hadn't celebrated for quite some time. He'd closed another case today and a fairy had turned up dead, fried on a bug zapper. It stuck out to Ted as especially cruel. Fairies didn't lie, as a rule, so Winky wouldn't withhold information from someone to the point of torture. In Ted's mind, it was like a kid ripping the wings off an insect or pulling off a spider's legs. Just cruelty for the sake of cruelty. Not that it brought Winky's wife, Dimple, any sort of comfort when Ted called her to break the news. No amount of clapping would bring the poor bastard back.

Stewing in his sour mood, Ted had poured himself a second glass when there was a knock on the door. Ted waved his hand and the latch unlocked, opening for a young woman to enter the room. Long, dark hair ran down her head, settling in a wave between the shoulders of her red dress. Tall and rail-thin, the young girl had a certain air about her that Ted had seen on a handful of witches before. She hated the dingy, sad office and Ted did not doubt that his mood was making the room darker than the small desk lamp could make up for. The way she looked around made Ted think that this was the last place she wanted to be.

"Ted Harper? My name is Vicky Fairbanks."

*A Fairbanks witch? Ted thought to himself No wonder she looks so uncomfortable consorting with the likes of me. But what would a girl like her be doing coming here for my help?*

"Can I help you, Miss Fairbanks?" Ted asked, containing his surprise.

"I've heard you help people."

"From, time to time," Ted said, gesturing to an empty chair. He stashed the bottle of gin

under his desk and dismissed the glass away with a flourish. "Been a bit tougher recently, what with the new Collective Laws limiting contact with the Non-Magically Trained."

"That's actually why I'm here," Vicky said. "It's about my brother, Tommy."

Ted had heard the name. Tommy Fairbanks was worth a hundred Teds, magically speaking. He trained at the Sonart School, graduated at the top of his class, then spent six years in magical law, and another four in Magical/Non-Magical policy. Behind the scenes, Tommy was the right hand of Magical Imperium Benedict Grayson when the Collective needed things taken care of. Quelling the centaur riots? Shaking down the giants? Putting the hurt on the local goblin's union? All in a day's work for Tommy. Tommy Fairbanks was ruthless when it came to getting what he wanted. He was most famous for setting up Monster Town to lock away the non-humans from the rest of the Collective. It had been a furious passion project of Tommy's that earned him the nickname 'Firebrand Fairbanks' in some circles.

"I'd assume your brother could handle himself?"

"Well, it's...partly my brother and partly someone else."

If someone was obstructing Tommy Fairbanks, Ted knew that was a different problem. Three of Tommy's enforcers had swung by Ted's office not long ago when he had "meddled in their affairs" or something similar. It resulted in a trashed office, two broken windows, and a very rude note. Ted was glad he'd been out at the time.

"Who is this someone else?"

"A friend of mine," Vicky said. "She's non-magical, but she's been wanting to learn. Had hopes of getting into Sonart, if she could get the money for tuition, but it ain't easy. She's got real talent, Mr. Harper, and Tommy even wrote her a letter of recommendation. But I haven't seen or heard from Claire in almost a month."

"You think Tommy--?"

"I hate to think he would!" Vicky said. "But it wouldn't surprise me. He may have written her a recommendation, but he never thought highly of her beyond the good press. I mean, 'Fairbanks Wizard takes tutelage of magical savant' certainly sells papers. But I know Claire wouldn't go this long without reaching out to me."

"Well, people rarely do," Ted affirmed, "but it's not always pleasant when ya find them."

"I just want to know she's not in trouble. I worry she ended up in Tommy's crosshairs because of me and I can't bear to think she got hurt."

"Well, I'll ask around a little bit, but if your brother is involved, I would expect some resistance."

"I'll keep Tommy off your back," Vicky said.

*That'd be nice protection for a rainy day, Ted thought. Tommy Fairbanks had a bite like a hydra, but if his kid sister was willing to talk on Ted's behalf, it would be a relief not to worry. Or she'll just piss him off more and use you to send a message. Glorious victory or agonizing defeat. Is that worth the roll of the dice?*

"I'll take your case, Miss Fairbanks," Ted said. "Bound to be some trace of her, but I can't promise you'll like what I find."

"I need to know what happened," Vicky said. "My emotional response won't affect our business relationship. Expect the other half when you come back with what happened to Claire Cheshire."

Vicky set an envelope on the table and turned to walk away. Ted opened the package to find Miss Fairbanks's contact card, a picture of another young woman, and \$500. That was more than enough to cover Ted's rent for a few months. He hadn't made this much money off a job in over a year.

Claire, Ted assumed from the photograph, was almost twenty years old with brown hair that curled and twisted around her ears. Bright, vibrant green eyes complimented her smile, and had a look in the photo that seemed like she was genuinely laughing. Ted liked her just by a look. He hoped she met a better fate than Winky.