

Divine Tours

By Amy Lee

Iris looked at her watch and compared it to the huge clock overlooking Washington DC's busy Union Station. Her clients were definitely 40 minutes late. She looked at the dark man sitting on the floor beside her. "Is this normal?" she asked.

He laughed, without humor. "Nothing is 'normal'."

"Excuse me?"

He sighed heavily and started unfolding himself. He was tall and thin, with a taste for long black leather coats that made him look positively vampiric -- and not in a good way. Iris was short, soft, a bit round in the middle, and aggressively normal.

As he rose before her, she closed her eyes and said a little prayer that she wouldn't end up talking to his pelvis.

"You work for Divine Tours now," said Griss Wulfmangler, Iris's "mentor" for her first day of work. "Your clients are gods." Griss had a vaguely Norse accent with a Midwestern U.S. twang that he somehow managed to twist into a bored monotone. "'Normal' is no longer part of your life."

"Gods?"

He glared at her from under dark, overhanging brows. "Didn't HR explain this to you?"

Iris cleared her throat. She had been laid off as an architectural project manager when the DC real estate market crashed. She hadn't worked in over a year. She needed this job and had, admittedly, glossed over some of the more unusual bullet points of her job description. "Well, yes... but they didn't get into a lot of details. They thought it would be best for me to... ummm... see it for myself."

Griss frowned.

Iris straightened her shoulders and tried to look taller... but without *looking* like she was trying to look taller. Griss finally shrugged his shoulders. "It's your life. It probably won't be a very long one, though."

Iris gulped and considered just going home. Then she remembered that she was two months behind on her rent. She couldn't walk away from this job. "I've dealt with difficult clients before," she said bravely. "I won't embarrass you. It would *really* help me out, however, if you could give me a few tips about dealing with our clients."

He scowled down at her. Iris ignored the scowl. "*Your* clients, not mine." he said. "I'm just here to answer questions and to make sure you aren't turned into some kind of vermin."

"Ah! Good," Iris said. "Let's definitely avoid getting me turned into vermin. Now, back to our... sorry, *my* clients. I have their names here, somewhere...." Iris pulled out a small notebook. "... here we are: Gofannon, Olwen, and..." she tried the unusual name, "... Colluck?"

Griss smiled. "Close enough."

"I should pronounce his name correctly, shouldn't I?" Iris asked, a touch of sarcasm on her tongue.

"He's not the one you need to worry about."

"What do you mean?"

"He's not the deity," said Griss. "He and Olwen are more like his... entourage."

"So Gofannon is the real client?"

Griss nodded. Iris was on more familiar ground now. In every meeting, there is always a "real client", who was often not the person who engaged the services. She looked at the odd spellings in her notebook again. "Where are they from?"

Griff inspected fingernails of his left hand. "Wales."

"Good. Then they'll be speaking English," Iris said, starting to feel better about the whole situation. "Wonderful."

Griss nodded slightly. "I need some coffee." He shuffled off toward Starbucks with Iris tagging along as best she could, making little notes in her book.

"What is Gofannon a god of?"

"Metal craft."

"Why didn't they tell me all of this before I left the office?" Iris huffed. "A quick one-pager would have helped a lot."

Griss shrugged again and ordered a Java Chip Frappuccino. Iris hesitated, expecting Griss to ask her if she wanted anything. He didn't. He took the huge, frosty cup from the downtrodden barrister and sat down. Iris tucked in across from him.

"OK," she said. "Metal craft... so he is he an artist or something?"

Griss yawned and stretched, making the wooden chair creak alarmingly. "Not really... he runs a smithy."

"A businessman, then." Iris envisioned a large, heavy, middle-aged man with calloused hands and a bright open face. "Do you know what he wants to see here?"

Griss shrugged again. "Metal?"

Iris glared at him. "Let me rephrase. Where are we going to take him?"

"Not we, just you."

Iris' heart skipped a beat. "Aren't you staying?" she squeaked.

"Gofannon doesn't like me."

"Why not?"

Griss took a long sip of his ridiculous drink and unfolded his impossibly long legs into the walkway. "He says I'm too tall."

Iris tried not to smile.

Griss tensed. "He's here. I have to disappear."

"Wait!" Iris sat up, banging her elbow into the table painfully. "Who is he? Where do I take him?"

Griss lifted his cup and pointed his freakishly long finger toward a large group of people being burped out of the double doors that led to the train platforms. "He likes bright colors. He has to be back here for a 7:18 train to New York. Do whatever you'd like."

Iris looked toward the doors. "Bright colors? But who...." She turned around. "Griss?"

Griss was gone.

"Perfect," she muttered sarcastically as she walked out of the Starbucks and toward the crowd. She took a deep breath and pulled out her little notebook, reviewing her notes:

- likes bright colors,
- runs metal smithy,

- doesn't like tall,
- do whatever (?)
- back for 7:18 train to New York.

The orderly list made her feel better. She glanced at a nearby television with a schedule of departing trains. She added another detail: train number 729.

She looked up to see a very short person closely examining her. He was dressed in a hot pink velvet suit with lime green trim. His hair was thin, black, and greasy. He had combed it over unevenly at the top and it stuck to his head as if pinned there. His skin was so sallow, it looked almost green... but that might have been the effect of the suit. He had a broad, unwrinkled face, a large mouth, and a flattened nose. His eyes were small, dark, and a bit watery. His lips were thin and only marginally darker than the skin around them.

Iris's first thought was that he looked like a frog: A very brightly dressed frog.

He seemed to be sniffing her. She controlled, with some effort, her urge to run. "Uhhh, Mr. Gofannon?"

"Aye."

His voice and manner were gruff... pretty much what Iris expected from the owner of a metal smithy.

"Very good. I am Iris from Divine Tours." She glanced the clock. "We've got a bit of time before your next train. Is there anything special you'd like to do?"

His lip curled as if he smelled something unpleasant. "No."

"Well, the Capitol building is just across the street. Perhaps we could walk over there."

Gofannon turned and started across the concourse. Iris stuffed her notebook back in her bag and hurried to catch up with the little man. "I was told that you own a metal smithy," she said, trying to make small talk. "What sort of metal work do you do?"

"We make tools."

Iris stopped short. "Wait a minute. Weren't there supposed to be others with you?"

"Aye."

"Did we miss them?"

"No."

"I'm sorry, but I don't really understaaa...." Iris turned around and found herself face-to-face with an unhappy man in a white robe.

Iris didn't like surprises at the best of times. She planned things carefully and efficiently and preferred it when others around her did the same. She also felt very strongly about boundaries and personal space.

This man was decidedly in her personal space.

"Who are you?" she croaked.

He sneered under the white hood. "Culhwch. Who are you?"

She opened her mouth and closed it again. *Be calm. You need this job*, she thought. She took a breath and smiled.

"Ah, Mr. Colluck. So sorry we missed you at the platform. My name is Iris from Divine Tours. Welcome to Washington, DC." She hesitated and fumbled in her bag for her notebook, "Wasn't there someone else...."

She glanced up and found herself nose to nose with another white-robed figure. She gasped and took two steps back. "OK," she said, trying not to sound as exasperated as she felt, "Lovely. You must be Ms Olwen. So we're all together now. Shall we go visit the Capitol grounds?"

The woman in the white robe clapped her pale hands. "Will there be flowers?" Her voice was oddly and beautifully melodious. Iris had a mental flash of a Disney Princess poised over adoring singing animals. "Why, yes," Iris said, "the Capitol grounds are full of flowers this time of year."

"No flowers," grunted the frog man. "Metal."

Olwen's hands flew to her face and she squeaked a charming Disney-princess-like squeak of dismay.

"Oh, bloody hell. We're not going through this again, are we?" Culhwch whined, throwing back his hood. He was very handsome. Iris thought he would have looked at home playing the lead part in a big budget action/romance film, but the look on his face was wrong.

He looked like he was about to cry.

"Gofannon, why do you do this to us?" Culhwch whimpered. "You raise from the dead to go on these bloody vacations of yours and then you drag us into the filthy bowels of these buildings to go look at..." Culhwch was getting angry now, "...at *metal*."

Iris looked around nervously. They were starting to attract attention. "I was happy being dead," shouted Culhwch. "So was Olwen."

There was an evil smile on Gofannon's face. "You owe me," he said.

"Oh, come on," cried Culhwch. "A few centuries ago, you helped me out with a little favor. *Centuries*, Gofannon! It's been *centuries*! Exactly how long do we *owe* you?"

Olwen's sobbing was getting louder and decidedly less princess-like. They were starting to attract the attention of the station employees. "We should probably take this outside..." Iris suggested to the group.

Everyone ignored her.

She stepped between the angry Culhwch and the smirking Gofannon. "We. Will," she said, turning at every word to look each man in the eye. "Take. This. Outside."

Olwen blew her nose into her robe.

Culhwch threw up his hands. "Fine!" he stalked toward the doors with Olwen streaming behind him. Iris was left staring at Gofannon, who was still smirking.

"Shall we?" Iris asked, leaving no doubt what the correct answer to her question should be.

Gofannon shrugged. "No flowers."

"Understood." She started toward the doors and Gofannon followed. "That gives us something to work from, then. What *would* you like to see?"

"I like metal."

"OK, good... good. Any particular kind of metal?"

Gofannon just sighed.

"Right. Let me rephrase that question. Would you like to see an art exhibit of metal crafting or an architectural tour of some of the historic buildings?" Iris wasn't sure she could arrange any of those things in the time before Gofannon's train left, but she was

getting desperate. "I know," she said brightly. "Have you ever seen DC's Metro subway system? There's quite a lot of metal down there."

He shook his head.

"Lovely. Let's start with that."

They walked through the huge double doors at one side of the station. Culhwch and Olwen were arguing with a vendor who was set up to sell flowers to the commuters heading from the station to the subway. Olwen had, apparently, grabbed a handful of lilies and was now cowering in a corner, whimpering. An elderly Asian woman was shouting at her in Chinese and threatening Olwen with a heavy-looking plastic grocery bag. Culhwch was trying to get between the two women and narrowly missed being whacked on the head by whatever was in the bag.

Gofannon shook his head. "I said no flowers."

Iris stared back at Gofannon. "Does she always...."

He nodded and settled against a massive marble column, pulling out a long clay pipe from somewhere in his odd coat. "A willful fault has no excuse, and deserves no pardon."

Iris had no idea what he was talking about. Rather than arguing, however, she closed her eyes and, for the second time in an hour, thought seriously of just going home. Then she hefted her bag more securely on her shoulders and stalked over to the little drama.

"Excuse me," she said loudly, tapping the Asian woman on her shoulder. "May I...."

The grocery bag swung and caught her ear. Her eyeglasses -- her prized, designer eyeglasses -- went flying across the concourse.

Iris sat down hard and held her head, trying to see through the pain. The Asian woman was looking down at her. The bag in her hand looked oddly lopsided.

"You dead?" asked the old woman.

"No," Iris said, "I'll be all right...."

The old woman looked in her bag. "Aiyaa! You stupid girl! You broke my melon!" She turned around and grabbed the dripping lilies out of Olwen's hands. "Twenty-five dollars!" she shrieked and stalked back over to her stool.

Olwen started crying again.

Iris pinched the bridge of her nose. She felt a hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right, Miss?" An elderly homeless man was holding her unbroken eyeglasses out to her. Iris took them gratefully. "Do you need an ambulance?" he asked.

"No. Don't call anyone. I'll be all right," she mumbled, getting up. She felt a little woozy. Did the homeless guy have a vaguely Norse, vaguely Midwestern accent?

"...For the lovely lady," he went on, offering Olwen a wilted daisy he had in his jacket.

Olwen sniffled and took the daisy, bowing low. "Thank you," she said sweetly. "Yes," Culhwch added sarcastically, leaning in between the two. "We *both* thank you."

The elderly man nodded stiffly and hobbled away. "You need to keep up that other fellow you were with. He just went back in the station."

Iris, Olwen and Culhwch looked toward the door just in time to see a very small, very pink figure push through. Culhwch put his hand to his temples. "Oh, gods. Now what is he doing?"

"Do we follow him?" Iris asked, hoping they would say "no".

"Of course we follow him," Culhwch snarled, grabbing Olwen by the wrist. "If we don't, then we'll be stuck haunting this place forever."

They raced across the main hall of Union Station after the pink figure. The station was crowded with tourists and keeping up with him was difficult. They thought they had lost him at the Au Bon Pain, but spotted him again just outside the men's bathrooms. "Oh, no," moaned Culhwch. "Not again."

Iris's heart skipped a beat. "What... again?"

"He's headed for the trains," said Culhwch.

"He can't go to the trains," Iris squeaked. "Tourists aren't allowed to just roam the platforms like that. He'll be stopped."

"You don't know Gofannon."

"Why," Iris asked, "does he bring you along if he's just going to leave you behind?"

Culhwch grabbed Iris's arm and propelled her toward the bank of doors that led to the platforms. "When Olwen and I were dating, we had to ask her father for permission to marry. He came up with these crazy tasks I had to do. Gofannon was a friend of a friend

and I asked him if he could help me out with one of the tasks. It was one task of many, mind you... and all he *really* had to do was talk to his brother for me." Culhwch looked down the line of platforms and pointed to a bit of pink peeking out from under one of the train cars on track 11.

"Terrific," muttered Culhwch. "He's off the platform and on the track." He grabbed Iris' elbow again and they started power walking toward track 11. "Gofannon asked me what I would give him and I said something idiotic like 'my eternal friendship'. Never say something like that to a deity. We've been dragged along on his stupid 'vacations' ever since."

They reached the edge of the platform. It dropped five feet to gravel that smelled like fruit-flavored urine. Culhwch was already running after Gofannon, his angelic robes flapping majestically behind him. Olwen was scampering along beside him, deftly negotiating the moving rocks beneath her feet.

"Oh, well, crap," said Iris.

Iris was a practical woman: A woman of washable slacks and flat shoes. She had an appreciation of quality and bought top-notch whenever she could. She looked sadly down at her imported British loafers. They were wonderful shoes with a burnished copper look to the leather.

She knew they would not survive the heavy, sharp gravel that served as ballast for the train tracks. She felt a tear swelling in her eye and wiped it away. "These crazy people are your responsibility," she said, "and I'll be damned if I will lose my first clients." Iris hitched up her belt, slung her bag across her chest like a bandolier, and ran down the concrete platform. At the end of the platform, she leapt a mighty leap and landed in a perfect crouch in the gravel five feet away.

A man with dirty hair and missing teeth watched her from the cab of another train. His mouth hung open and his limp cigarette toppled out to burn black smoldering holes in his oily Amtrak employee shirt. His name was Ed and he fell immediately and passionately in love with Iris. He would pine for her for the rest of his short, carcinogenic life.

Iris, however, didn't notice. Thrilled that she had landed on her feet instead of tearing up her slacks, she bolted across the train yard toward her three charges.

"Excuse me!" she yelled, waving toward the trio. "We need to go back inside the station! Hello? Gofannon?"

No response.

Iris stopped, took a mighty breath and yelled: "*GOFANNON!*"

Everyone stopped: Gofannon and Culhwch stopped running. Olwen stopped scampering. The four guys checking the tracks across the train yard stopped checking. The fifty people in the Metro car passing by stopped typing into their Blackberries. The four Amtrak police officers back on the platform stopped talking to each other.

Everyone stopped and stared at Iris. Iris did her best to ignore them. "*We cannot be here,*" she said. "*We must go back in the station right now.*"

Gofannon sat down on a rail and pulled out his clay pipe again. "Why?"

"*WHY?*" Iris shrieked. She looked at Culhwch and Olwen for support, but they were bent over, still catching their breath. "Because," she said to Gofannon, "this is illegal... and it is illegal because it is dangerous." She gestured toward a train lumbering by, its power and bulk bending the very air around them. "The engineer wouldn't even notice running over us. We need to get back on a platform."

"I like to be close to metal," said Gofannon.

"Do you see those men over there?" Iris said, pointing toward the Amtrak police officers gesturing at them and talking into their shoulders. "There are going to be ten guys with guns here in about two minutes. If we leave now and explain to them that I have a head injury and you are from Wales, they might let you get on your New York train."

"Nah," said Gofannon, standing up and brushing gravel dust off his pink pants. "I dun not want to wait. We'll take this train."

Iris looked behind her and saw a train moving toward them.

"Not again," whined Culhwch. "Can't we once -- just once -- board a train the normal way."

Gofannon shook his head.

"The engineer can't see us. We need to *move!*" shrieked Iris.

The train was picking up speed. Iris tried to run, but Gofannon grabbed her arm. Iris squealed and squirmed but couldn't get loose from Gofannon's iron grip.

She closed her eyes and waited for the train engine to squash her.

Her ears blocked like they would if she was in an airplane. Without thinking, she moved her jaw to clear them. Then she noticed the air conditioning.

She slowly opened one eye, then the other. They were sitting in facing seats on the inside of the train. She peeked out the window to see the familiar shapes of northeast DC rushing by. Gofannon was sucking on his pipe. Culhwch was bent around his seat, looking down the aisle.

"So which direction do you suppose the cafe car is?" He looked at Iris. "Any idea?"

Iris shrugged.

The door to the train car opened and Iris heard "Tickets please! Please have your tickets out and available for inspection."

"Ah," mumbled Culhwch. "He can tell me where the cafe car is."

The conductor walked up and turned to them. "Tickets please."

Gofannon, Culhwch and Olwen all held out train tickets. Iris could feel a nervous breakdown tickling somewhere near the base of her skull. "I don't have a ticket," she whispered.

"That's OK," said the conductor smoothly. "I can sell you one here. Are you going to New York?"

"Excuse me," interrupted Culhwch. "Where's the cafe car?"

The conductor pointed. "Two cars back."

Culhwch handed his ticket to the conductor. "Hey, Olwen. Do you want a drink?"

Olwen nodded "A diet Red Bull if they have it."

The brief exchange gave Iris just enough time to get hold of her senses again. She was digging in her bag when the conductor turned his attention back to her.

"No. I'm not going to New York," she snuffled. "I just need to go to New Carrollton. I can take Metro back from there."

"That'll be \$25."

Normally, Iris would have bristled at that much money for such a short trip, but today it seemed like rather a good price for a clean getaway.

"New Carrollton is our next stop." He glanced at Gofannon as if noticing the frog-like man in a pink suit for the first time. "There's no smoking on the train, sir."

Gofannon smiled and nodded, putting his pipe in his pocket. The moment the conductor was out of view, he put the pipe back in his mouth.

"What happened?" asked Iris quietly.

"One o' me little tricks is all, said Gofannon, grinning. "Ye did well. Usually they scream more -- especially the men." He turned to look out the window. "I can not abide by men screaming."

"New Carrollton!" sang the conductor, walking back through the train. "Please be sure to take all of your personal belongings with you when you leave."

Iris found her way to the Amtrak part of the New Carrollton station and sat down. A tall black figure sat down beside her. He held out a half-melted Frappuccino.

"How's your head?"

She reached up to the bruise at the side of her head. "Not bleeding." She took a long sip of the cold, sweet drink. "Thanks for getting my glasses for me."

Griss grunted and stretched his legs out. They reached almost to the next row of seats.

"Are they all like that?" Iris asked.

Griss shrugged. "Some are, some aren't." He stood up, taking the drink back from her. "There's a mandatory staff meeting every Wednesday morning at the office. Don't be late."

Iris pursed her lips and stood up. She glanced at her reflection in a glass door and carefully straightened the wrinkles out of her blouse and slacks until she again looked aggressively normal. "Right, then," she said, heading out the double doors toward the Metro platform and home. "See you there."