

CHAPTER 2: MEET THE NEW BOSS

by Paul Watson

The kitchen of Stafford Hall, “Well, that is most unfortunate. Adam, take Ms Morn to the priest hole. Take those papers with you and get them secured. My study should be good enough.”

“What? You’re not going to turn me over?”

“Of course not. We haven’t finished our cosy little chat.” he takes up the folder and heads to the door. As he leaves the room, he pulls a small glass sphere from his pocket and crushes it in his hand, a sulphurous taint spreading around the room.

“This way, Miss.”

Still utterly off-balance, Latitia follows him, stumbling at the speed. “Priest hole?”

“Something built to protect Catholic priests when such was looked on with disfavour. Since then it’s been improved to avoid detection. You don’t suffer from claustrophobia, do you?”

“No. But...”

“Good. The hole is rather small, even for someone of your stature.”

She follows numbly into a closet, watching as Adam levers open a hidden doorway, into a space barely big enough to fit a person within its grey stone walls.

“You want me to get in there?”

“Yes, Miss. I’ll return to get you as soon as possible.”

Latitia scratches at her wrist, her breathing shallow, this whole experience pressing in on her. She steps carefully inside and shivers as Adam closes the door. Darkness presses around her like a solid thing. She closes her eyes, trying to control her breathing, her heart hammering. *It’s ok. They won’t leave me here. Not for long. But what have I done to get the Deputy Director involved? That’s... that’s serious stuff. Jacob, what have you got me into?*

Outside, Deputy Director Malcolm Fergusson glowers at the gates as if the force of his glare could influence them. He does not like being kept waiting under the best of circumstances. This does not, in his view, qualify even close to those. He should be above having to go after one rebellious agent, but with Lord Stone’s bolshy reputation, a show of departmental seriousness is required. “What does he think he’s playing at?! Doesn’t he know who I am?” Always a dangerous question to ask, given the most common answers are: No, they have no idea who you are and you’re clearly not as important as you thought; or yes, they do know and you’re not important enough for special treatment. This particular instance has a rarer answer: Stone knows exactly who Deputy Director Fergusson is and, at least in part, is holding him up, at least partially, out of spite and contempt. Fergusson sweeps his hand through his sandy brown hair, still lush despite entering middle age a few years ago. He’d acquired his position through his own merits, regardless of the vicious rumours that his father had pulled strings and he would not allow some pampered hooray Henry to... “Sorry, Malcolm.” the speaker chirps, “Adam’s got tangled up with something and I’m having to figure out these buttons myself.” The gates swing open, “There we go. Come on up, old chap.”

“Finally. You heard him, get moving.” he snaps. The sleek black car heads along the long drive with a crunch of gravel, leading the van with its more menacing human occupants.

Under Latitia’s car, Peaseblossom examines the sealed black box, one red light blinking like an eye. “What are you? You don’t belong here. And, as guardian of this place, that means I need to get rid of you.” she pokes the plastic with her sword. “On the other hand, removing you is going to be... challenging.” She flits up, wings beating hard to keep her hovering as she slides her blade between the box and the car. Sadly, nothing happens. “Well, no sense having a ladybug and eating my own aphids.” she moves to go back to the hedgerow to gather her squad when a sleek black car pulls up. A human angrily steps out the back his patent leather soles polished brightly as he stomps towards the door. The van behind opens the back doors and heavy boots follow in a steady beat. “Curiouser and curiouser. But they’re on their way to the big house, so let them handle it.” she lets out a high-pitched, shrieking whistle that moves well out of human earshot, summoning her squad. They arrive

swiftly, and far too noisily, quickly getting into good order before she has to raise her voice. *They're getting there*. She smiles inwardly but keeps her stern countenance trained on them as she orders them to remove the offending technology.

At the door, Fergusson fumes as the doors wait and wait, "What is keeping him?!" The door opens. "Hello, Malcolm, what brings..."

"Don't you Malcolm me, Stone. You know very well what brings me here. Where is she?"

"She's in the kitchen."

"Well, get out of the..."

"One moment, we don't want you running afoul of the wards, do we?"

Fergusson fumes, mostly internally. "Well, get on with it."

"And we don't need half-a-dozen armed agents clattering through the halls here. You won't need more than a couple to apprehend one lone barely probationary agent, surely."

"Fine. You, and you. With me."

"Come inside the three of you. You others, make yourself useful and cover the rear entrance. Just in case."

They start off.

"Yes, go cover the rear section." Fergusson adds to make it his command rather than Stone's.

Stone closes the door, making sure he walks along beside Fergusson, "Don't touch anything. Most of the stuff out in public is largely harmless, but we don't want to take chances. I certainly don't want to fill in the accident forms. Now, Malcolm, what brings you here? This is below your level, surely."

"You do. We don't want anything to go wrong."

"No, no, we most assuredly do not. Should I be flattered I merit such important attention?"

"No." he strides to the kitchen door and flings it open. "What is that stink? Where is she?! Stone, what are you up to?"

"I assure you, Malcolm, when I left to answer the door she was here." Stone enters the room, sniffing the air, as Fergusson glances down at the white pearl in his ring, "Bah. Brimstone. Your report didn't hint she could access the Devil's Road to escape."

"There's nothing to suggest she could."

"Well, I'd say there is now, wouldn't you? Still, she's very young to...oh, of course. Morn, I'm really letting retirement dull my edge to miss that. She's a Morningstar, isn't she? No wonder she can do more than you expected."

"You're the one who left her in the kitchen and let her get away!"

"Because I wasn't given full information. Of course, I doubt anyone expected her to come here after the murder."

"No, I doubt anyone did. Anyway, you two!" Fergusson barks at the agents, "Scour the house!

Stone, I'm going to have to insist that you allow my team inside for the search."

"Yes, that seems reasonable. Although, I'm not sure if it will be enough if she's a Morningstar in her full power. Last time one of those appeared, the department's precursors had to blame some poor sod of a baker in Pudding Lane for the devastation." he walks to the back door, "All of you men, the Deputy Director wants your help searching for the suspect. Get in here." he turns back, "I just hope, for her sake, she hasn't gotten into the grounds. The hounds won't leave enough of her to question."

"Quite."

The agents file in. "If a door's locked, leave it. Those rooms are warded against any intrusion and I don't want to deal with any of you unleashing anything worse."

"Sir." the lead agent replies before heading out into the sprawling corridors, leaving the two of them alone.

"Do you have the report on this regrettable incident?"

"Mmmm? No, I don't recall so."

Fergusson's pearl goes black, "Would you like to reconsider that answer?" he asks with enforced sweetness.

“Well, I suppose I might have it with the other tedious reports Westenra sends to me.”
“Shall we go and get it? I’d hate for it to be lost accidentally.”
“Of course, Deputy Director.” he replies with the air of a Victorian schoolboy being sent to the headmaster.

Once they arrive at the study with dark wood panels and papers on every surface, Stone moves to a pile of official folders that sways precariously as he approaches, pulling out one file. “There you go. ‘Report on the death of Jacob Samuels’.”
Fergusson takes the report and flips it open. “Nice try, Stone.” he shows the cover-sheet inside referring to a ‘mysterious affair at Stiles’.
“Must have got the folders muddled up.” he pulls out another folder, opens it, and hands it over.
“Yes, that must be it.” Fergusson replies thinly as he checks the sheet and closes the folder.
“Care for something”
Fergusson pauses, “Maybe just a wee nip. But then I need you to show me the Vault. God help us if she’s got in there.”
“Malcolm, really, it would take Lucifer himself to get through those...”
“I must insist. And please refer to me as Deputy Director.”
“As you wish...Deputy Director.”

Latitia waits in the darkness. She can barely hear anything beyond her own heart and breathing... and the voice in her ear that says she shouldn’t put up with this. That she is better than these fools, these worms, so why is she hiding from them, when they should be the ones cowering in fear of her vengeance? Fortunately, she has heard that little voice for a long time, always whispering with the worst ideas. But everyone has a shoulder devil whispering dark thoughts in their ear...don’t they? Then voices, noises outside, complaining about how pointless it is. She can hear scrapes as they move closer, clearing things that she couldn’t possibly hide behind. She holds her breath, hoping her heartbeat isn’t as loud as it sounds in her ears, even drowning out the little voice. And then, they leave. And so she waits in the darkness, counting the trickles of condensation running down the rough walls.

“This really isn’t necessary, you know.” Stone protests.
“I disagree. Given she escaped, I think it is vital that the Vaults are checked.”
“Yes, Deputy Director.” Stone growls out the word.
“It wouldn’t take much, Father. He’s soft. I could gut him from stem to stern in a heartbeat. Just imagine how rich his pampered blood would taste.”
Stone ignores the growling voice in his mind and the taste of blood on his tongue as he reaches a set of dark oak doors. Fergusson reaches out for the handle, but Stone grabs his wrist hard enough to bruise before he makes contact with the carved brass handle. “Now, now, Deputy Director. I’d hate to have to report your death or injury to Westenra. He’d certainly blame me for it.” As Fergusson nurses his wrist, Stone pulls out a set of thick keys, twisting them into locks hidden in the grain of the wood.
“That seems an excessive amount of locks, when anyone could just blow the doors open.”
Stone smirks, “They could certainly try, Deputy Director. And good luck to them if they could breach all of the wood, iron and adamant layers. Anyway, these aren’t for the locks, they’re disabling the wards. Try in the wrong sequence, or with the wrong key? Well, it certainly wouldn’t be pretty. But it would probably be mercifully short.” he slots another key into the lock and swings open a section of the door. He puts his hand into the hole, wincing slightly as the hatch irises tight around him. A sliver of blood beads on his wrist and drains into the wood. The door slowly swings open, revealing midnight black darkness behind. “It would probably be best if I went first, Deputy Director. Stay close and don’t touch anything.”
“I’m not a child, Stone.”
“To me, Malcolm, you’re all children.” He steps into the darkness. Fergusson follows, the darkness

stretching around him, the walls seeming to bulge or breathe, neither a particularly comforting image. Still, you don't get to be Deputy Director of MI13, the most secret service as it's called, without some steel in your spine so he presses forward.

When he emerges from the long tunnel into the stale air, he looks over his shoulder and can see the corridor barely three feet away. "Spatial pocket?"

"Quite. If necessary, it can be jettisoned out into the voids between worlds, but obviously we're loathe to do that."

"Why on Earth would we want to..."

"In case it is ever decided that burning the world down is better than defeat. This place is the magical equivalent of the nuclear deterrent as well as a storage facility. And, of course, there's always some researcher who wants to see how these work to guard against them. Or to improve them."

The light is dim, but crates bound with heavy chains abound among some few display cases holding leathery wings, eyes that turn to follow and focus upon the pair, or a giant arm ending in fingers capped with black iron claws like cruel curved dagger.

"There. I trust you're satisfied, Deputy Director?"

"Where's the stone?"

"Which stone in particular? We have a number of occult geodes and gems here."

"Stone, I know you don't think much of me, you've made that clear, but please don't insult me. Morn was here after the Philosopher's Stone."

"Which isn't here."

"What do you mean it isn't here?"

He shrugs, "It is not stored in the Vaults. The last time it was recorded here was in the reign of good Queen Bess, Elizabeth I."

"It was lost?"

"After...his wife and family died in some kind of magical conflagration, it isn't detailed in the records, my ancestor lost interest for a number of years. He could have sold it, or destroyed it, or lost it, but it hasn't been part of this collection for several centuries."

"So why was Morn here?"

"Records say here was the last known place, so even now, centuries later, some people think the records have been faked. Which would be nice if they were. I could do with the ability to turn lead into gold to pay for the upkeep of this place. Anyway, was there anything else you wanted to confirm?"

"No. It's clear she hasn't been here."

They leave the unnerving room, its edges lost, if they exist at all, in depths of shadow.

Later, the lead of the tactical squad approaches them. "Sir, we've scoured the house. Number of locked doors, but no sign of any intruder."

Fergusson sighs, "Well, it was a long shot, I suppose. If she was going to escape by the Road, she wouldn't want to stick around. Stone, thank you for your hospitality and cooperation. If she contacts you again, please inform my people and we'll come in more prepared for her."

"As you say."

"Until then, we'll continue the hunt elsewhere."

"Good hunting."

"Quite." he shakes Lord Stone's hand as his men file to the van. As he follows, he fishes his phone from his pocket and turns, walking over the gravel.

Stone follows him with his eyes and turns slightly, "Adam, when did we start getting mobile reception out here?"

Adam looks over, "We have not, to my knowledge, sir."

"And yet there's Fergusson talking animatedly into his phone. Curiouser and curiouser."

On the drive, "Griffen, where are you?"

"Right here, sir." Griffen's rough voice sounds from beside him. Fergusson stiffens.

"Don't get so close, man. I almost had a heart attack."

"Sorry, sir." he replies, sounding not very sorry at all. "Your orders?"

"She doesn't seem to be here. But looks can be deceiving, eh?"

"Sir."

"Anyway, I want you to remain behind and observe the place in case she comes back."

"Yessir." he looks around. Not many places to rest easily. A distance to the trees.

"Do not engage her. On your own, you're no match. Just observe and report."

"Sir." he replies with no sign in his voice of any resentment at his skills being dismissed by someone who hasn't seen anything close to combat since the playground.

"Off you go."

"Gone, sir." he replies, a slight crunch of gravel the only sign of his leaving. Fergusson replaces the phone and heads for the van.

Griffen moves carefully across the grass, hairs standing on his neck as something large and hot starts to coalesce on the grounds. Four legs, body as big as a horse but much more of a predator's frame, hot spittle dripping on the grass. Not the sort of thing he wanted to meet personally. He increases his speed, sprinting for the tree. The branches too high to grab them directly, the tree too broad for easy climbing. He gives the gardener, whoever he was, a nod of security professional respect, and clambers ungainly up the trunk. He stops at a decent height, testing the branch to hold his weight, and makes sure he's securely braced, watching over the house, before that guardian fully manifests. He watches the two-car convoy leave and begins his vigil as the patch of warmth fades away, leaving a howl lingering on the wind.

Latitia feels a shiver run through her as an unearthly howl penetrates her sanctuary/prison. The hairs on her neck stand erect, something primal calling to her that predators are around. The door to the priest hole opens, light spilling into her face, her square pupils contracting back into circles of black in her eyes, the golden tinge to her corneas fading.

"Out you get, ma'am." Adam says to her, holding out his hand. "His Lordship regrets he cannot spend more time with you today, but he has other matters to plan for."

"Oh." Latitia says, disappointed. *Stupid. To think he'd drop everything to help me. He didn't turn me in, but that's as good as it's going to...* "I see." she says, trying to keep her voice level, "I'll get out of the..."

"You misunderstand me, ma'am. His Lordship asks me to convey his apologies and requests that you join him for breakfast tomorrow to discuss matters. Further, he requests you do him the honour of remaining here as his guest until then, at the least. I have one of the guest rooms prepared for such an eventuality, as unlikely as it ever seemed to come to pass."

"Oh." she follows him towards a room at the back of the house, the windows giving a view of the extensive grounds.

"Would you care to join me for dinner later, ma'am? His Lordship is unlikely to attend. He can get a little preoccupied when he has something to get his teeth into."

On the winding country lanes, Fergusson sits sullenly in the back. This should have been so simple. How did it go so wrong? Well, at least he has the files so Stone won't involve himself further. He opens the folder, turning over the cover sheet to reveal details of the mysterious affair at Stiles.

"Stone!" he flings the folder against the interior of the car resisting the urge to demand they turn around and go right back to deal with that impertinent, disrespectful...

"Problem, sir?" the driver asks, interrupting his internal stream of invective.

"Just drive." Fergusson snarls as he drums his fingers on the leather upholstery. "Let's see if she's gone back for that rattling deathtrap she drives." he opens a tracking program for the device under her car only for it to show quite clearly his own position on the winding roads, "Arrrrrgh! Isn't this a perfect fucking end to a perfect fucking day?" he snarls rhetorically.