

CHAPTER 3: PASSAGES

by Paul Watson

Breakfast is not an affair as grand as the house suggests, merely bacon sandwiches, the fat slightly seared and crispy, and uncomfortable conversation. “Now, Miss Morn, for the sake of argument, let's say I believe your protestations of innocence, who did kill Mr Samuels if not you?”

Latitia closes her eyes, “It could be any...”

“No, in fact, it couldn't. He was killed in the Stacks, which, while not the most secure area, is still a secure zone that you need a pass to access.”

“So the killer had a pass...”

“...And the only place to get such a pass is from within the department, yes.”

“You mean...”

“That your conspiracy likely has at least some elements within the department. It would have to have known what he was investigating that needed silencing, but his death confirms it. Which presents us with a problem: Any official involvement would potentially alert the conspiracy and therefore make progress more difficult.”

“And you're not just saying this as an excuse to avoid talking to Jonathon, are you, dear?”

“So we shall have to rely purely upon ourselves.”

“Ourselves? But...”

“Oh, come, you're an agent, I'm an ex-agent, as much as anyone can be ex in this business. What do we have to lose? You, especially. The conspiracy's already made note of you as a scapegoat if nothing else.”

Latitia swallows nervously. “That...makes sense. For me, but why are...”

“Well, I was looking for something challenging in my retirement, and the good Lord has delivered you unto me. I was always a sucker for a damsel in distress.”

“Were you really? Do I need to contact my divorce lawyer?”

“Quiet, you.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just old man muttering. Now, first we need to investigate the crime scene.”

“Won't that alert...”

“Probably. The plan is to be in and out before they mount a response. We'll also be going in on my ID, which might delay things a little. I am known to visit from time to time. I'm not a complete pariah, despite what Adam might tell you.”

“How are we going to get to the Stacks? They've got to be watching this place. For me.”

“What? Oh, yes, they are. Adam will distract him while we make our way to the hedge and from there to London.”

“Him? Hedge? To London?”

“Probably a him. There's a Griffen perched in my generational oak tree, and they tend to be....”

“A Griff...an invisible man is following me? I thought they only...”

“As with the Deputy Director yesterday, his involvement is almost certainly as much a message to me to steer clear as a necessary resource for you.”

“Steer clear? Are you...”

“Sadly, I can be a little slow at getting a hint. If they just told me not to intervene, at least I'd be ignoring them directly. So get yourself ready, we'll be departing in half an hour.”

Griffen shifts on the branch. Not the most comfortable place to rest by any means, but a long way short of the least. Not that he got any sleep, or that there was any sign of anything untoward in the house. There were witchlights in the hedgerows overnight and the occasional glimpse of the outline of one of those giant watchdogs patrolling the grounds, but the house itself was normal. No sign of the girl. Which means nothing of course. The house is too big to watch everywhere, and you could hide a regiment in it, if you know what you were doing.

Now it was morning. The weak British sunlight warming him as it passes through his body. At least

it hadn't rained for once. The weather had it in for him on these...hang on, the door's opening. No, just the butler, walking down the path. What's he up to? It's too early for a delivery. He glances at the gates to make sure, but no vehicle hoves into view. He kept his eye out. His gut tells him something was up. Adam veers off the path with no sign of the hounds reacting. Good to know. Familiarity or some device? If the latter he might be able to grab it. Would certainly make things easier than another sprint that might end with phantom teeth in his leg. Adam approaches and the tangy smell of bacon wafts up to Griffen's nose. That was low down on the list of things he was expecting.

Adam stops at the base of the tree. "Good morning, Mr Griffen. I'm afraid I don't know your precise rank."

Griffen stiffens. How could this...

"His Lordship sends his regards and offers the suggestion that next time your superior might want to check on the mobile coverage before he tries to conceal giving his men orders by talking into his phone."

Griffen lets out a short snort that doesn't carry. The pompous twat had been too clever by half. Not his business. He makes no acknowledgement. Even if they suspected an invisible man was around, they couldn't know exactly where.

"Further his Lordship wishes to extend his hospitality and to ensure you have a breakfast more pleasant than those revolting protein bars the forces are wont to dish out."

That's tempting. Griffen's mouth waters. It wouldn't be poisoned. An attempt to bribe him? Pretty low value if so. Tempt him down for the hounds? Or...he looks up at the house, two figures outlined against the cold stone, using cover. Distraction. He slides down the trunk, pushing past Adam. No sound of pursuit as he snatches up a sandwich, biting into it as he rushes along the gravel. "Hmmf, not even a thank you." Adam huffs as he returns towards the mansion doors. A loud snuffling approaches, "No." he says firmly, "This isn't for you and don't you dare whine about it. You know cooked meat gives you the runs." the spectral hound slinks away, looking plaintively over its shoulder at Adam's retreating back.

Nearer the house, Lord Stone and Latitia make their furtive way around the gravel, past her car and through a track you wouldn't notice if you didn't know about it and into the thicket of the hedge itself. Small branches swing against them, stinging Latitia as Stone swings his backpack into his hand. She stops, almost running into Stone as he stops suddenly. "Lady." he bow slightly.

"Lord of the Stones." Peaseblossom's high-pitched voice replies as she flits in front of him, standing about a third of a Smurf tall "Why are you and the bound one trespassing upon our ground?"

"Bound one?"

"Shhhh." he hisses, "By our agreement, made between the House and the Garden long ago, I wish to use the Green Road."

The tiny woman licks her lips, her gleaming sword never wavering. "By the agreement, there is a toll to pay."

Lord Stone pulls out an amber wedge from the pack. "And I have it here. Butterscotch, a pound per traveller. Plus a little extra for the inconvenience."

There's a buzz in the leaves around them. Latitia becomes aware of the fairies gathering.

"Get back into position, you lackwitted dirtbrains!" Peaseblossom barks. "I swear, they'll be the death of me, if I'm not the death of them." she flexes her sword. "Now for the other part of the payment."

"Other payment."

"Blood."

"Blood?"

"Three drops. Buttercup, fetch the leaching cup."

"We don't have time for this." he reaches into his pocket. There's a hum as a dozen tiny bowstrings tighten. Stone pulls out a small medical prickstick, pressing it to his finger. "My payment, Lady Peaseblossom." he tosses a stick to Latitia who fumbles it for a few seconds before catching it.

"Really?"

"Yes. And do hurry before our mutual 'friend' notices what we're doing."

She looks over her shoulder and reluctantly presses the stick into her finger, wincing at the sting as she squeezes the blood out.

Peaseblossom sniffs suspiciously at the sticks.

"If this is funny business..."

"I'm not that stupid, Lady."

"Probably not. You're quite smart. For a human. Very well. The Road is open, Lord of the Stones. Enter and begone from our territory and take the hellbound with you."

Latitia blinks as the air inside the hedge thickens with a scent of summer flowers, a glow appearing ahead.

"As always, Lady, it is a pleasure doing business with you. Come, Ms Morn." he walks through the glow. Latitia looks around and follows quickly under Peaseblossom's direct, almost threatening, gaze, still rubbing her finger.

At the other end of the Green Road, Lord Stone emerges into Hyde Park, stepping out of a particularly tangled part of the woods and onto the winding cycle paths, walking at pace. Latitia follows, trotting to catch up.

"What was..."

"The fair folk have faster hidden ways of travel than I do normally. If you're willing to pay their price. If we didn't have the agreement to fall back on, it might have been a high price indeed."

"They called me a hellbound."

"Yes, the fair folk and Hell do not have the most amicable relationship. Too much competition for mortals, I suppose."

"But..."

"Yes, it's terribly unfair to blame you for your ancestor, but ancestry is too often destiny among the older races. And they are not a people given to benefit of the doubt."

"I thought we were going to the Stacks."

"We are."

"Wouldn't it be better to go to Regent's Park, then?"

"It would. But those paths are closed. They take the domains of kings very seriously."

"I suppose it's only a few stops on the Tube."

"Don't be ridiculous. That's far too easily tracked." he walks out through the gates, the patinaed metal horse's head of Still Water dominating the view across the road. He throws his arm out,

"Taxi!" he barks with the voice of someone expecting the universe to comply with his needs. This time, the universe complies, the black cab pulling to a stop in front of him, "After you. King's Cross, driver. In a rush, if you don't mind. We've got a train to catch."

Latitia gives him a questioning look as the cab pulls away.

Griffen stumbles out of the gate, his skin itching like he'd fallen into a forest of stinging nettles. He jumps back to avoid an unaware cyclist careening past him. Where did they go? It was only a few seconds. Huh. Halfway across the park already. He starts off, jogging lightly through scattered groups of unaware Londoners and tourists, closing the gap, but not fast enough. They leave through the gates and a taxi just appears for Stone. Griffen curses his luck and breaks into a run. He reaches the gate, just soon enough to watch it drive off. He slows his pace, and swears some more. "Griffen Seven to Control. The girl and Stone are in a black cab driving up Edgeware Road. Didn't get the number."

"Edgeware Road??! What are you doing in London?!"

Griffen takes a deep breath, "Stone used a fairy gate. I followed to keep them under observation but I lost time in the gate. We landed in Hyde Park, where I was too far behind to get more information before they were off."

"Understood, Griffen Seven. Proceed to the Stacks. There's a possibility Stone is arrogant enough to head there."

“Sir. Griffen out.” Two and a half miles, across central London, following a cab. He snorts. Best get started. Might just catch them leaving, if he’s lucky.

”Sergeant! Sergeant!”

”Yes, Cobweb?” she turns from organising the transport for the toll back to the king’s court.

”Another traveller entered the gate.”

”What?! How did you let someone get past...”

”They’re invisible, ma’am.”

”So how do you know they...”

”Ma’am,” he points at the ground, “three sets of foot prints, big ones over the Lord’s and the lady’s.”

”That was no lady.” Peaseblossom mutters, “So, his Lordship is trying to pull a fast one on us? And I thought he was smart.”

”Maybe, ma’am. But that invisible fella was going pretty fast, see how spread the prints are, like he was trying to catch up.”

”Well observed, Cobweb, we might make a tracker of you yet. So he may be a foe. Well, either way, I need to have words with Lord Stone. Well done, Cobweb. Buttercup! You’re in charge.” she points at the golden wedge of precious butterscotch, “If I hear that even an ounce of this does not make it back to the court, I will take an equal measure from your hide!”

”Yes, Sergeant!”

”Good.” The air shimmers and Peaseblossom dives through.