

CHAPTER 4: COUNTY FAIRY, CITY RAT

by Paul Watson

Peaseblossom flies out of the kaleidoscopic green passage between the Hedge and the other end of the portal. Immediately the air tastes differently. She looks round for her invisible quarry only to see levelled spears on guardsmen in dark purple tabard instead. "Halt. Who goes there?"

She replies with the discordant music of her true name, "I travel under security of passage on lawful business. A thief has used the portal and threatens those who paid true."

"You're the first person to emerge since the two big ones."

"He's invisible, you numbskulls."

"Is he now? Well, that's a likely story. You can tell it to the Sergeant."

"Oberon and Titania!" she curses, "I do not have time for this." One of the spears jabs threateningly closer. She grabs the haft, ripping it from the guard's hand and swings it into his companion's side.

As he staggers, she swings it back under the first's chin, before dropping the spear and diving between them while they're staggered, "Pathetic. You two wouldn't last a mayfly's wingbeat in my patrol." she flits into the path, "Now, where are he and his hellbound?" she sees the tall figure near the entrances and sighs, setting her wings to beating fast to try to catch up before their invisible pursuer does.

By the time she reaches the gates, she's breathing fast, too fast even for a sprint like that. She coughs, "What are they putting in the air here? It tastes like charcoal and poison. How can anyone stand it?" She looks around, but there's no sign of Stone, just dozens, hundreds, uncountable numbers of the humans' metal chariots spewing smoke into the air. She gives another hacking cough. "Oberon and Titania! I cannot catch a break. How am I supposed to find him now?" Glancing behind her she sees an ominously purple haze in the air approaching. "And doesn't that just make things perfect. Those incompetent fleawits have brought friends!"

"Hey! Little bug, hey!"

She looks around. A human, skin bronzed, hair scraggly, body hidden inside a voluminous puffer jacket sits under a blanket, a paper cup in front of him and is beckoning her. Well, she assumes it's her. The people walking past seem to be giving him a wider berth now, walking further around him. She shrugs and flits down, hovering imperiously just above his eye level, "Are you addressing me?"

"Yeah. What'cha doing? Ain't never seen any of you lot outside the park before."

"I'm on a vitally important mission. Did you see Lord Stone come past here?"

The man shrugs, a dark brown furred shape resettling itself in his hood, "Maybe. What's he look like?"

"He's...human? Tall, taller than a hedge by some margin. He was in a black jacket and trousers, as was his companion."

"Hair?"

"Yes, he had hair. Both of them do."

"Colour of said hair? Come on, Tinkerbelle, work with me a little, huh?"

"My name is not Tinkerbelle. I am the Lady Hermia Peaseblossom."

"Pleased to meet'cha. I'm Manny, King Rat. Lots of important personages coming and going today. This Lord you're looking for, you a Lady."

Peaseblossom acknowledges the informal greeting with a nod, while simultaneously cursing humans for not being clear in their questions. No wonder they never get what they want from the Fair Folk when they don't ask for it properly. "He has hair like a summer cloud, still full on his head and a short beard, less than yours but neater. She has hair like a coal lump, a block of it on top of her head. She's not as tall as he is, but has a good dark wood colouring to her skin. Her aura is..."

"Can't see no aura. Don't suppose you got a scent description?"

"How can you smell anything over those foul things?" She shakes her head, gesturing at the cars honking impatiently.

"Well, can't expect everyone to have my sensitive nose, can we, girl?" he reaches up to scratch the

rat that's emerging from his hood, "Anyways, I think I saw your bloke."

"Where? When?"

"Hold your horses, Tinkerbelle. Guys got expenses to make. So, this lord guy, he's rich, is he?"

"Oh, yes, he gave me two whole pounds of butterscotch to use the portal."

"Yeah, yeah, what's that in real money?"

"Money?"

"You know, money? Pounds? Coins? Gold?"

Peaseblossom shrugs helplessly.

"Ok, so, what's his gaff like?"

"Gaff?"

"His home?"

"Oh, the House. It's huge. Big enough for four whole clans to fit in without conflict. You could wander lost for days and not see all of it. It's..."

"I get the picture. Pretty big place. 'Spect it's got 'grounds' as well."

"Oh, yes. My clan lives in the Hedge, but the gardens we protect are..." she gestures, "...not as big as that clan's but big."

"Uh-huh. So pretty big. And your mission to find him is important you say?"

"Oh, yes, yes, you see..."

"I don't need the details. Just reckon there'll be a reward if I get you to him."

"Oh, I'm sure he..."

"Good, good. And those Tinks buzzing around the gates? I'm guessing they ain't friends of yours."

Peaseblossom looks over her shoulder, soldiers swarming on the other side, pikes and swords drawn, the humans walking under them in complete obliviousness. She swallows. "They may think that in my haste and urgency I was less courteous than the local clan thinks is appropriate."

Manny pushes himself up. "Ok, m'lady. Well, you've got King Rat protecting you now. Let's go get you to your Lordship."

"Oh, there's no need to trouble..."

"Big fan of London, are you? Know all the streets, huh?"

"Well..."

"So you'll be needing a guide. And I just so happen to be free. Can you keep up?"

"With a human?!" she asks in outrage, "For your information, King of the Rats, my clan race horses!"

"You won't need a ride, then." he picks up the blanket, offering an open pocket.

"No, thank you. I can manage quite adequately. If your stupid city air doesn't poison me first."

"Sure thing." He sets off, walking around the edge of the double roundabout. Peaseblossom flits to catch up as he approaches the stairs down to Marble Arch underground.

"Down there?"

"Sure. Your Lord took off in a taxi, no way we'll catch up with him walking. Well, flying. So we'll have to take the Tube and hope the London traffic's it's usual self."

"But..." she look into the yawning chasm as people push past Manny, complaining about him just standing there in the middle of the way.

"You're not scared, are you?"

Peaseblossom sets her chin defiantly, "No." she flits down to the first turn, "Well, aren't you coming?"

Manny saunters down, standing at the ticket machines for a few moments. "Yeah, he'll do. Keep up, your Ladyship" he falls in inches behind a middle-aged man in a business suit as he taps his phone on the pad, the gates opening. As he walks through, Manny hustles in behind him, pulling his jacket as the gates close on it. He jostles into the man, who gives him a glare and turns away. "Easy."

Manny smirks, leafing through the man's wallet, only to curl his lip in disgust, "Typical. Just bloody cards. Doesn't no one carry cash anymore?" he raises his hand, "Hey, mister! Mister! You dropped your wallet." he holds it up. The man pats his pocket and doubles back against the stream of humanity.

"Thank you." he says curtly, taking the wallet and walks off.

"There's gratitude for you."

"You stole from him."

"I never. I gave it back. Blimey, even Tinks are prejudiced these..."

"I saw you take it, so don't try none of that sweet talk on me." she argues, following him onto the escalator, too intent on arguing to notice the mechanical stairs moving.

"Hey, a guy has expenses, you know." there's a distant rumbling. "We'd better hurry." The line of people has sped up as the tube pulls into the platform, the wind battering at Peaseblossom. She grabs onto Manny's hair just to keep from blowing away in the storm, staring at the huge creature emerging from the tunnels, its eyes glowing with harsh light, thundering to a stop on the platform. She still holds onto Manny's hair as he pushes in with the surge, the Central line crowd pressed close, no matter how little any of them want to be pressed so tightly to Manny.

Peaseblossom tries to calm her heart. They're travelling in the belly of the giant metal worm, the lights above them harshly illuminating, the metal ribs a brilliant scarlet, people sitting on its sides. And before she's got used to it, Manny is hustling her off, walking through a confusion of white-tiled tunnels, up and down stairs without reason.

"Are we there already?"

Manny snorts with amusement. "Nah. Need to hop on the Victoria line now." Another thunderous rumble heralds another of the metal worms, but Peaseblossom is significantly less bothered by this one. The ribs are a cerulean sky blue, and, although there isn't enough space for any newcomers to sit, it's not quite as crowded. As Manny holds onto the pole beside the door, she dares to flit out in front of him.

"Just a word of warning, Manny, King of the Rats, I advise you not to try those tricks on the Lord of the Stones."

"Oh? Do tell."

"He's much cannier than most mortals. And even if he wasn't, I'll be watching your hands at all times."

"And what'll you do if I do someth..."

Before he can complete the sentence, Peaseblossom has flown right into his face, somehow drawing her sliver of fairy steel in the process. "I know what you are, beastkin. And I'm told your kind heals fast and true from anything but silver. So tell me, just how long would it you take to regrow, say, an eye?" she pushes the tip of her blade closer, Manny's eyes crossing as he tries to focus on her. He blinks.

"Message received, your Ladyship. Message definitely re-fucking-ceived."

Feeling rather pleased to have established the proper respect, Peaseblossom spends the rest of the four-stop trip asking him questions about London and the Tube that he just grunts answers to.

Manny climbs the escalators at Kings Cross, clenching his thin fingers in anger as she exultantly returns into the, well, not fresh, but at least free air of the station concourse. "This better be worth it, 'your Ladyship'. Fuckin' Tink thinking she can talk to me like that."