

CHAPTER 6: TROUBLE

by Paul Watson

Latitia strides confidently towards the two policemen, Stone scurrying nervously in her wake. Both policemen look up. The shorter licks his thick lips, the taller flexes his long fingers and both wait.

"Alright you." the shorter one holds up his hand, "Latitia Morn, you're coming with us."

"Well, it was a good run. Thank you, Stone, for your help, but...time's up." she leans over to kiss him on the cheek, holding out her hands. The long-fingered officer pulls out handcuffs, locking them around her wrists, ratcheting them tight.

"Mine." he smirks.

The shorter licks his lips. "And as for you..." he jabs his finger at Stone, "we should run you in too but orders are to leave you alone. So you can fuck right off now." He makes shooing motions. Stone looks nervously at Latitia but backs away. "Smarter than I gave him credit for, eh? Felt sure from his rep he'd kick off. Wet lettuce, all of 'em."

The long-fingered one pats Latitia down and stops.

"What's up?"

"Not her."

"What do you mean it's not her? She's right there, trussed up tight as a turkey."

"Not her. Taste."

The other scowls. His tongue launches out, leaping across the distance against Latitia's chest.

"Hey, buy a girl dinner at least."

He licks his lips, "You're right. Who are you? Where's the girl?"

"I'm right here."

"No, you're not. You don't taste infernal. You taste like a sodding alchemy lab."

"Well, that's just hurtful."

"Switch."

"So this is Lord Stone, and the girl is..." his eyes track the departing Lord Stone as he enters the crowd. He spits. "...oh, you're in trouble now, mate. Hey! You get back here!" he starts after the faux Stone and immediately trips over the real one's leg.

"Ooops. How clumsy of me."

"Orders or not, you're getting fucking chewed for that."

"You can drop the illusions, Mary. It's done all it can."

"Well, if you insist." Stone replies and gives him a kick across the stomach as he rises.

King's Cross Station, the crowd surging past like breaths from the station's lungs. "You see your Lord?"

"No. Are you sure he said he'd be here?"

"That's what he said. He..." he stops as the mood changes, his nose twitching at the smell of adrenaline. The crowd surges again, much more in one direction. Manny grabs one small man by the arm. "Hey. What's going on?"

"Get off me."

Manny's grip tightens, surprisingly strong, "What's going on? You let me know, I let you go."

"Some old bloke's gone nuts. He's fighting with the police. No one wants to get near him."

Manny's heart sinks. "This old guy? Well dressed, right? Tall? Proper toff?"

The man nods, pulling his arm back from Manny's grip.

"Fuck my life. That sound like your Lordship?"

"It could be."

"Well, let's go and see." he shoulders his way against the crowd, keeping close to the wall, Peaseblossom floating above the crowd. Manny scowls, but keeps his head down until he gets outside where the crowd spreads out a bit more.

As soon as Peaseblossom sees Lord Stone outnumbered, she draws her sword and flies straight towards him.

"Bloody Hell. What kind of mad Tink is that? You don't start a scrap with the Rozzers." there's a squeak from his hood, "Don't you start. I'm not going to..." another squeak, "Yeah, I did offer her protection, but I didn't expect she'd start swinging at the cops. That's..." another squeak, "Oh, you like her, huh? She was most respectful when she shared my hood, huh? I don't respect you?" another series of squeaks, "No, you're right. I won't get paid if they get locked up. Fuck my fucking life." he heads towards the fight.

Griffen lopes across the roads, weaving through the cars as they crawl along. Crowd ahead. Panic. Cause? "Control. Griffen. I'm outside the Archive. Stone seems to be fighting with two police. The signatures aren't right for humans. No sign of the girl. Intervene?"

"Stone will look after himself. Find the girl."

"Acknowledged." he ploughs on, skirting the edge of the crowd, trying to find the signature of Morn.

Stone jumps backwards to avoid a wild swing, the warty fingers capped by curved claws. The remains of the handcuffs dangle from his wrists, the central bar dripping away, the dark grey drops splattering onto the pavement. He reaches into his jacket, pulling out a small frosted glass vial. Impossibly long, many jointed fingers snatch it from his hand. "Mine."

"You're welcome to it, old boy." he replies, grunting with effort as he brings his hardwood cane down on the vial. The clear liquid spills over the long fingers sizzling and burning. The hand snatches back.

"Not nice, pal. Not nice at all." the sticky tongue hits his back like a particularly hard football pass. Stone braces himself against the concrete as best he can, feeling the muscles behind the tongue start to work him towards the wide frog-like mouth.

A streak of green buzzes over the thing's warty head, a flash of silver slashing across the tongue. The tongue jerks back. "Lord Stone."

"Lady Peaseblossom, you are a sight for sore eyes."

"Bloody fairies. Grind you up good." the tongue stabs out again. Peaseblossom dives suddenly out of the way.

"Too slow."

"Lucky. Think you'll stay lucky every time?"

"Not that I don't appreciate a good bit of assistance," he slams his cane down on fingers grasping towards Peaseblossom's back, "but, really, what are you here for? It's a long way from the Estate." Peaseblossom loops around another strike of the tongue and buzzes up to his face. "Invisible man. Following you. Warning." she buzzes off again as the toad creature lines up its next strike.

"The Griffen made it through the portal? Devil take it all!" he looks around, his eyes glowing white, spotting Griffen making his way into the crowd. "Oh, no, too close. Much too close. Lady, can you deal with these brutes?"

Peaseblossom grins savagely. "They're only lesser sins, and only two, at that."

"My thanks." he tips his imaginary hat, tosses a vial at the tall figure, green vines a finger width across coiling around it as the ground shatters, and heads off into the crowd, barging his way through.

"Bad idea, toots."

Peaseblossom hovers in front of its face. She presents her sword vertically and slashes it to the side. "You can still surrender, should you so wish."

It responds by spitting a gob of mucus at her. As she dodges, he tenses his tongue, and Manny crashes into his back, "What the fuck..."

"What are you?" Manny asks, struggling to find a neck to wrap his arms around, feeling the rough warty skin instead. For a moment, the image of the squat policeman in front of him wavers, overlaid with a disgusting humanoid frog, and then the latter seems to become real. Hook-clawed fingers reach over its shoulders as his grip slackens, hauling him over and onto the hard ground.

Griffen hates crowds. Always has done, even before he became a Griffen. No one ever pays any attention, lucky if they're looking around rather than at their phone, and now he's literally invisible to them. He'll never find Morn in this mess of heat signatures, and that's unacceptable on a personal as well as professional level. A lone figure splits off from the crowd heading down a side street. *Got you.* He picks up the pace, leaping over the metal fence running down the road. He makes it into the alleyway before Lord Stone barrels into his back. Griffen sprawls over the ground, far too much weight on his back. Stone can see him. He swings his shoulders around, his elbow connecting with Stone's cheek. Good. Can't see well enough to dodge everything. He rolls out from under the older man, clambering to his feet as Stone does the same, levering himself up on his cane. Griffen turns to continue his pursuit, but a swing of the cane disabuses him of the notion that that will be easy. "Ok, old man. Take your best shot when I can see you."

"Hardly sporting when the whole point of your serum is that I can't see you." Stone bounces loosely on the balls of his feet. Experienced fighter. Problem. Even if he does win, and he should, it will take too long. Morn will escape. Unacceptable. Griffen feints to run, stepping back as the cane cracks against the floor.

"Can I persuade you not to engage in violence?"

He doesn't shake his head. "Orders, sir. Can I persuade you to give up defending the girl?" he reaches into his belt-sheath, sliding out a blade as invisible as he is.

"I think we both know the answer to that."

"Thought so." he releases the blade, sending it flying into Stone's left thigh. Stone grunts in pain and drops to the floor as his leg gives way. "Sorry, sir."

"Father, I can stop him. Just let me out."

"No." he pushes himself up onto his knees and collapses again.

"Stop this. No gain in dying for her."

"Father!"

"No!"

"You're stubborn. But it's over." he turns to pick up Morn's trail again. And stops, hearing a feral growl behind him, filled with rage and pain, mixed with the sound of muscle tearing and bones snapping. He turns warily. The figure on the ground pushes itself up, a shaggy face framing a muzzle filled with sharp fangs. Fur-covered hands lengthen, claws stretching out of its fingers, as they dig into the ground. "What the fuck?!"

Outside the British Museum, Manny scrambles aside, the claws raking the concrete slabs, "Stay still, you mangy little morsel! I'm going to fillet your scrawny little liver and have it with fava beans and chianti! Or maybe I'll just eat it raw while you watch!" he swings the flat of his hand, towards Peaseblossom as her sword carves into the taller figure's pale skin. "And as for you...you'll barely make a mouthful, but I'm going to enjoy it. Fairy dust is the best spice."

"Mine."

"You can keep her little bugsticker, just grab her!"

Manny flails wildly to stand up, pulling out his shiv.

"Ooooh, look at the rat's little knife. Maybe I'll use it to carve out your eyeballs!"

Manny swings wildly, the tiny blade bouncing off the warty hide. The beast laughs.

"You're barely workin' up my appetite here." a streak of green slashes across his shoulder, flying away trailing viscous black blood.

"King Rat, take the greedy one, I can deal with this one."

"Oh, can you? Well, come on, you little snack!"

Back in the alleyway, Griffen backpeddles as the creature that was Stone pads forward on its lupine feet, hunched over hands used as paws. "You'd think someone would mention that he's a bloody werewolf in the briefing, wouldn't you?"

The wolf rears on its hind legs. Its crooked claws tear gashes across Griffen's arm. The second slash leaves bloody trails across his chest.

“This is pointless.” he dodges under the next, reaching into his pouches, “Where are you, you stupid little arrrgh?” the claws rake his back, digging deeper. His face twists into a grimace that can't be seen as he finally finds what he wants, emptying a package of cayenne pepper straight into the wolf's muzzle. It stops its assault, whining as it paws at its nose. Griffen chooses the better part of valour, heading fast down the alleyway. He touches his chest, his fingers coming away damp and sticky. He pushes himself into a slightly recessed doorway, hoping the creature's had enough.”Control. Griffen Seven reporting. Got tagged by Stone, bleeding. Cannot pursue in public without being sighted. Target last seen heading towards Birkenhead Street.”

“Stone is there?”

“Hopefully ditched him. Could have done knowing he was a werewolf ahead of time.”

“His condition?”

There's a pause as Griffen winces, pulling out his first aid kit, “He'll live, but not unmarked. Like me.”

“Copy that.”

A howl of feral agony rings down the alleyway as Griffen unrolls the invisible bandage.

Back outside, Peasebloosom continues to flit around the toad demon, her sword wet with its blood. She buzzes under a swing that still blows her off-course and backs off. Meanwhile, Manny is having much better luck with the one-handed demon, the knife puncturing its skin much more easily, even if very little clear blood leaks out. Neither notices they're being herded together until Manny back up into Peaseblossom's path. “Ooooof.” the demon spits at them, the wad of mucus sticking her to Manny's jacket. It coils its tongue out to launch it as its companion plucks the shiv from Manny's surprised hand.

“Mine.”

The world around them turns to grey, everything vanishing into fog and shadow. A slender hand rests on Manny's shoulder, “Come with me, if you want to live.”

“What?”

“Come on. I can't have them chasing shadows forever.”

“Yeah, but...” the grip turns surprisingly firm and drags him away.

“Wait, who're you supposed to be?”

As the world resolves into reality around them, the blonde woman pulling them along replies in a cut-glass accent, “You, dear boy, can call me Mary.”