

CHAPTER 8: GETTING THE GANG TOGETHER

by Paul Watson

In the coffee shop, the waitress carries a tray over to the window. Mary looks up, smiling. Manny sits across the table, his puffer jacket a gleaming white, hair only slightly darker, his face clean of the scraggly facial hair. He practically snatches his croissant from the plate, flakes of pastry falling around as he scarfs it down, occasionally reaching up to offer some over his shoulder. Lady Peaseblossom sits invisible on the side of the plate as Mary opens the pot of honey for her toast. Peaseblossom pulls out her field cutlery and skims the fork over the sticky surface.

"So, Mary..."

"Lady Mary, please." she replies, sipping at her tea.

"Like in Downton?"

"I have no idea what a Downton is, so let's say yes, and if it's an insult you get away with it."

"So, you know this Lord Stone, the other Lady is looking for."

"You could say that."

"And where is he?"

"He's where he's supposed to be, don't worry. I wouldn't let my brother-in-law come to any harm."

"Yeah, but..."

"Why does it matter to you?"

"Well, I done my bit, brought the Lady across town to get her to the Lord, even got involved in a fight on their behalf."

"Indeed you did."

"Well, we had an arrangement that the Lord would pay me..."

"We most certainly did bloody well not!"

"Did you really?"

"Well, me and the Lady did." he replies sulkily.

"I see. Did you and the Lady agree a price for your invaluable service?"

He shrugs.

"I see. So, why don't you tell me what you think you...oh. Excuse me, dear, could you turn the volume up on that, please?"

The server turns the TV volume up. "...the scene now where police were attacked outside the British Library. No officers were killed, but the attackers escaped. Police are looking for..."

Manny turns to see a grainy CCTV image of him on the screen. "Fuck me."

"Yes, it's not a good shot. You can barely make out your features."

"That's not the point."

"Can't I make a joke?"

"No. Why is it just me? Why not Stone or her?"

"I have a name, King of the Rats."

"I doubt the normals even saw Lady Peaseblossom."

Peaseblossom sniffs derisively, "I should say not. Not unless I wished to be seen. Which I most certainly did not."

"...armed and dangerous. The public is advised not to approach..."

"Better and better."

"I think you'd better stay with me for a bit, don't you, Manny?"

"Staying with you lot has not been good for me so far."

"Oh, really? If I drop my shadow mask on you, how long do you think it will take for that girl behind the counter to notice how similar you look to the man on the screen up there?"

Manny grabs a second croissant and stuffs it into his mouth.

"Oh, don't sulk. You're a survivor. I appreciate that. Both of you aren't Stone's ideological knights. You're much more interesting. Practical, ambitious..."

"Ambitious? I serve the Oberon..."

"I'm sure you do. But you didn't have orders to pursue and rescue my dear brother-in-law, did you?"

You were looking to make a name for yourself and pull yourself up.”

”That did not even cross my...”

She says something harsh and musical, ”please do not try to lie to me. I know Stone has a reputation amongst your clan as being devious for a human, but he considers me to be devious.”

”Well, maybe I thought it a little bit...”

”Exactly. As I said, it’s not a problem. I trust ambition far more than lofty ideals. You know where you are with ambition.”

”I...is that Stone’s hellbound?” she points at the screen.

”...have not made a connection between this woman, seen leaving the scene, and a later fatal incident in nearby St Chad’s Street.” More images appear, Diana and Latitia, after her demonic transformation, and the aftermath of their conflict, a shattered statue of a broad policeman and a body still twitching. “Police advise the public to report any sightings immediately. These women should be considered extremely dangerous.”

”Well, that’s inconvenient.”

”*Inconvenient?! Mary, you have to let me...*”

”Do I? You promised me an hour, Peter. And an hour I shall have.”

”*At least get to the safe house. Can't you see her wrists? At least one link is gone!*”

”Oh, very well. Drink up. We appear to need to move.” Manny stuffs the uneaten treats into his pockets, gulping down the bitter black coffee. Mary carries the tray back to the counter. “Thank you for that.”

”It’s terrible, isn’t it? And St Chad’s? That’s only a couple of streets up. Do you think we’re safe?”

”Oh, I’m sure we are, dear. Make sure to call the police if you see them and hide and I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

Outside, “What was that about?”

”What?”

”Back there. When you were whispering to yourself.”

”I’ve no idea what you...”

Manny grabs her arm with his strong, bony fingers. “You might be devious, but I know when someone’s up to something. And I have much better hearing than most people.”

Mary carefully pulls his fingers free. “That...is a secret I am not at liberty to divulge. I swear it does not threaten you.”

“Fine. For now.”

”For now will do. Shall we?”

”Where are we going?”

”Argyle Square. We’ll meet up with the others there.”

“Others?” he stops, “You mean those two on the news?”

“The very same.”

“Should take my bloody chances on being recognised.” he mutters, before a chattering urges him onward.

Inside the safe house, Latitia paces the dusty, narrow floor, glancing frequently at the figure lying still on a small cot, “Oh God what do I...” she glances in the mirror. The horns are gone. As are the fangs, the claws, and the confidence. The weird goat eyes remain.

”Poor little Latitia. Always so helpless. You make me want to throw up.” Latitia stares as another face stares out at her from the mirror instead of hers. It’s not quite hers, sharper, prettier, and, of course, with prominent horns and fangs, her forked tongue flickering as she talks. “Always so scared. And now it’s cost you the object of your affections before you even knew if she reciprocated. Such a shame. I trust you’ve learned your lesson.”

”Who-who are you?”

”I’m you. Well, a better you. One who’s not afraid to take and defend what’s rightfully hers.” Latitia glances at the cot.

"Exactly. Her. You wouldn't call on me to save your own life, but her you would? And you haven't even had a date yet. Would you like me to help? She's young, hormones boiling over. It wouldn't take more than a little nudge in the right direction for her to lust you back."

"I don't want that!"

"Of course you do. You're prettying it up with twue wove hearts and flowers, but that's not what's driving you, is it? It's pure lust. You don't know a thing about her, but you want her. I can help her want you, too. It won't even cost you anything right away."

"That's wrong..."

"Is it, really? Everyone's driven by their sins. So much so that I doubt you can even remember four of the 'virtues'. You're not special in that regard. People call it love when all they want is to fuck like rabbits. They flatter their pride with talk of noble service. Greed and envy are built into the fabric of the world. Your society literally can't work if you don't see someone with more and want it for yourself. And as for gluttony..."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Latitia shouts, covering her ears.

"Can't even handle the unvarnished truth? Such a shame. How someone as weak as you emerged from the Morning Star's line, I'll never know. Too afraid to live, too scared to die. Pathe..." the mirror splinters as Latitia's fist slams into the glass. Her own fractured features stare back, as mocking laughter echoes around her, blood dripping from her fist.

Latitia's tears run down her face as she tries to pull the glass shards from her knuckles.

Above ground, "Where are we going?" Manny asks as Mary skirts the edge of the police cordon, heading into a small green park surrounded by brick buildings.

"Peter keeps a safe house around here. That's where he sent the girls. We need to get them out before someone else finds them."

"Lots of rozzers around to do that subtly. They're already watching us."

"Well stop watching them back. We're innocent so why should we fear the police. They're like sharks with blood. If they sense fear, they'll pounce." she walks up to one of the newer buildings, built after the Second World War. Mary moves down the sides of the building. "Now, where did you put it, Peter dear?" she runs her hand over the bricks until she finds one that's loose, pulling it back.

"We're doing this in broad daylight, are we?"

"It's quite alright, King. They aren't watching us, they're watching what I want them to see. Now, Peter, the key, if you please."

"*Let me out, Mary, and I'll...*"

"I don't think so. For one, that would disrupt the charming scene I'm painting for the police, and, for two, you haven't paid me my due yet. So, the key."

Stone mutters but when she reaches into her pocket, she finds an ornate brass key. "Lady Peaseblossom, would you be a dear and unlock this? King Rat, you keep watch."

Peaseblossom takes the heavy key in both hands, crawling down the gap in the brickwork about the length of a person's forearm. She finds the keyhole. There's a click as she grunts at the effort of turning it.

Outside, a door opens. "Quickly, dear."

Peaseblossom drags the key back, flitting into the door just before it closes, dropping the key into Mary's hand. Mary walks confidently in the darkness, her boots making an echoing metallic sound on the spiral stairs down. Manny sniffs at the dust in the air, following down carefully.

Inside the safehouse, Latitia hears someone on the stairs and panics. Her nostrils flare, breath coming in short bursts, her black iron claws pushing through her fingers. She stares at them in shock and thus almost misses the door opening. As the tall blonde walks through in her black dress, Latitia finally snaps out of it, raising her hands to strike.

A streak of green interposes itself, "Back. These are under my protection." Peaseblossom raises her sword in warning, "And, while Lord Stone would undoubtedly prefer I not cut you, I assure you I am quite willing to do so."

Latitia looks confused, eyes crossing to focus on the figure floating in front of her. "You're the guard. From the hedge gate. What are you doing here?"

"That's rather a long story, dear." Mary replies as Peaseblossom doesn't lower her sword. She looks over her shoulder at Diana still prone on the cot, breathing weakly, the blood running over Latitia's hand, and the shattered mirror, "And one we do not have time to get into right now." she walks across the room, to a doorway leading to a rubble-filled room. "King Rat, please help..." she pauses, struggling for a name, "...help Latitia to carry young Diana over here. We need to get her to a proper medical facility."

"Through there? I'm not carrying her over that."

"Yes, dear, and no." she traces her finger over scratches in the door jam, leaving glowing sigils behind. The doorway goes completely black, no light escaping. Manny's nose twitches, sniffing with some trepidation. "Now, everyone through the door, quick as can be, but close your eyes and don't open them until I tell you. We don't want anyone going mad, do we?" She waits as they move carefully through the black doorway and follows, the darkness vanishing as her skirt clears the entrance.