

CHAPTER 9: AFTERMATHS

by Paul Watson

Manny twitches, his ears straining at the quiet, whisperings just out of his earshot tormenting him. His nose picks up the human smells around him: the slight hint of brimstone coming off of the chained girl; the snake's dry, cracked skin with a hint of ozone still clinging to her; the floral scents of the Tink. He can't smell anything from that Lady Mary, and the whole place smells faintly of dust and age and other scents he can't place that gnaw at his brain, telling him to fear.

"Just one moment, all." Lady Mary's voice, calm and pleasant. There's a click, a smell of metal and oil. He hears the door swing open, the scents becoming more familiar, and yet very far from what he's used to in London. "Out, out, so I can lock up before anything untoward escapes." That spurs them into motion, following swiftly through the doorway. It closes with a sharp click, the key rattles in the lock. "You can open your eyes now."

Manny opens his eyes. Some fancy house corridor. The walls lined with polished wood. Dark and somewhat oppressive despite the sunlight streaming in through the wise windows. He can scent plants on the breeze, and a natural cleanliness he's not used to. The rat in his hood chitters excitedly. "Adam!" Lady Mary shouts, "Medevac! Right. Lady Peaseblossom, would you be so good as to find Adam? Tell him we'll be in the infirmary." Peaseblossom salutes and zips off along the corridor, "And don't fight with the house fey! Latitia, King Rat, if you'd help me with Miss Eurayle?"

The procession walks slowly down the corridor. Manny looks up at the pictures as he passes. Mostly landscapes, some industrial, very few family portraits stretching back generations. Latitia spends her attention on Diana, watching the shallow rise and fall of her chest for any sign of improvement, or worsening.

They walk in silence, until Peaseblossom returns, Adam in close pursuit, wiping his hands as he hurries.

"Lady Mary, how good to see you. What happened?"

"One of the demon things..." Latitia starts, "...it tasered her and..."

"Mmmmm." he replies, putting his fingers on her limp wrist. He nods. "Pulse is good. She probably just needs rest. I'll give her a proper check-up, of course, but there's probably no reason to worry."

"But she..."

"Probably no reason to worry." he repeats, opening one of the locked doors that look almost identical to the others, "I assure you, Miss Morn, I have long experience with the occupational hazards that confront this lifestyle." and revealing a small, pristine white surgical room beyond.

"Just lay her on the bed. And then you can go and wait in the receiving room. I'll be along once I have news."

"But..."

"Patient privacy is vitally important, even here, Miss Morn."

"But..."

"I will be with you shortly, I promise."

Lady Mary puts her hands on Latitia's shoulder. "Come on, leave Adam to his work. He'll do what's best for her."

The door closes behind them.

"Now, let's see if I really should be that confident. A taser should not leave you in this state." He pulls out a pair of large tweezers, pulling the barbs from her chest. He sniffs at the oily residue.

"Hmmmm. That is not a positive sign. Stone will want to see what that is." he puts the barbs into a sterile bag. He rolls up her black top, pressing his fingers on her ribs. She squirms. "That's a good sign, at least. Nothing broken. The bruising is already beginning. Oh, I take that back." he looks at the two small puncture wounds, the skin puckering, blackening the edges. "That does look bad. So, poison, no known antidote, unknown effect. Wonderful."

He walks to a locked cabinet, pulling out a tiny bottle. He squeezes a pipette, dropping a single

clear drop onto her skin. The liquid bubbles and hisses over the blackened skin, like fat over a fire. He waits for a few moments before wiping the area clean, the black stain of dead flesh removed. "Hmmm." he feels her pulse again, "Still strong. Ok. Second drop it is." He straps her down to the bed with heavy leather bindings before pulling on her jaw and pipetting a second drop down her throat. She swallows and immediately convulses, thrashing against the bindings. Carefully, he returns the bottle to its cupboard, "Nasty stuff, whatever it was."

Elsewhere in the sprawling mansion, Manny lounges back on the plush leather sofa, pulling crumpled croissants from his jacket, raining flakes of pastry onto the floor, idly flicking through channels. "Do you have to do that?"

"It's not like I get a lot of opportunity to watch TV normally. Although I don't seem to be missing much. Oh, look, you're on the news again."

"I'm what?!" she turns to the TV, her demonic image plastered clearly in the upper corner.

"...dangerous. We go now to Daniel Sandford. Daniel, I understand there's been a development?"

The scene cuts to the street outside St Chads, a middle-aged man with a thick head of black hair staring seriously at the camera, his sober dark suit and blue tie in stark contrast to the two people behind him.

One stands with his arms folded across his broad chest, concealing any symbol on his gleaming white tabard. The sunlight glints off his polished chain mail and the golden circlet across his brow before it vanishes under the coif. A white cloak trimmed in red and gold flutters from his shoulders, a sharply clipped brown beard covering his chin, a golden sword-hilt jutting from the black and gold scabbard hanging from his belt.

The other is dressed in a black police uniform, but its fingers are brassy coloured, mechanical joints clearly visible, its face plate smoothly curved, camera eyes whirring to focus, a lower mandible moving as it talks.

"That's right. Pendragon and C.O.P.P.E.R. are joining in the search for the gang who attacked police at two separate locations today."

"Those guilty of this assault on this unit's fellow officers shall be brought to justice." C.O.P.P.E.R. replies with the odd cadence of synthesised speech

"Aye, forsooth those who dare attack the brave yeomen of the law shall face its full might."

Pendragon's baritone rolls out.

"Oh, good, that idiot's involved now. The sword is smarter than he is. I swear I'm going to have to deal with the Lady of the Lake's penchant for giving out magic swords to any imbecile who has a trace of Arthur's bloodline. The randy sod fathered enough bastards, they must have made up half of Mordred's force. Guinevere wasn't the most unfaithful in that household by a country mile. And as for that wretched clockwork policeman, it can't even compute the existence of magic. What good is it going to be against demons masquerading as people?!"

"I'm the only one who can hear you, Peter. Do keep the righteous indignation to a minimum, would you? It's very tiring. Latitia, that's it, right? Do stop pacing. You'll wear a hole in the carpet. It's been ten minutes. Adam knows what he's doing."

"But she's..."

"She'll be fine. Whoever they were, they were out to capture you, so they wouldn't use anything lethal. I know she's clearly special to you, but worrying won't help her."

"She was hurt protecting me..."

"Protecting you? From what?" Manny gestures at the screen where they're rerunning phone footage again of Latitia cramming the taser into the mouth of the scrawny policeman.

"You don't understand."

He shrugs, "Fair enough." and goes back to channel surfing.

"Lady Mary, when will Lord Stone arrive? I need to get back to my patrol."

Lady Mary glances at her wrist and sighs. "He'll be here shortly, I'm afraid. And speaking of that, I have to get ready."

"For?" Manny asks.

"Never you mind." she rises and glides out of the room.

"Anyone else think that's weird?" he asks.

"I don't understand humans in general. You're all obsessed by such strange things."

"Yeah, yeah. Comfy as this place is, I hope this Stone is back soon. I have people counting on me in London and I'm not leaving until I get the dosh I'm owed."

"Speak of the devil, and he shall appear." Stone replies dramatically, walking back in flowing black robes trimmed in gold and scarlet, a golden design stitched over his breast, a circle around a triangle enclosing a square with a line slicing vertically through it.

"Dressing up box raided?"

"Quite, Mr...Rat, wasn't it?"

"Sure, sure. Just pay me and I'll get out of your hair."

"Shortly, I promise. I have one matter to attend to first."

"Yeah?"

"Escorting Lady Peaseblossom to her clan. I need to discuss matters with her Oberon. We can discuss you when I return."

Manny locks eyes with Stone. The older man smiles. "Yeah, sure, I guess I can wait a bit longer."

"Excellent. Lady Peaseblossom?" he offer her his arm like a courtly grace and when she alights on his shoulder sweeps from the room.

Outside, "You don't have to escort me back, Lord of the Stones, honour though it may be."

"I do, however, need to discuss something that's arisen with your Oberon. And escorting a pretty fae home serves that purpose as well."

"Why thank you."

As they approach the hedge, the sigils stitched around Stone's robes begin to glow, pulling him lower, shrinking until he's the same size as his companion, the hedge looming above them. "Halt!" a fairy in green jerkin demands, raising her bow.

"Buttercup?! What is the meaning of this?!" Peaseblossom demands.

"Orders, ma'am." Buttercup replies, wilting a little under the glare, "Uhm, we're to, um, take you into custody when we..."

"You're to what?!"

Buttercup flits back. "It's orders, ma'am. I'm supposed to take your sword and bow and knife."

Peaseblossom glares. "Fine." she mutters darkly as she unstraps her weapons belt.

"And, uhm, we're supposed to, uhm, restrain..."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary." Lord Stone replies, a hand on Peaseblossom's shoulder. "As Oberon of the Hall, I vouchsafe Lady Peaseblossom's good behaviour."

Buttercup looks mightily relieved, still wilting a little whenever Peaseblossom's glare passes over her. "Very good, sir. If you'll both accompany me." she flits ahead, the leaves rustling as the rest of the patrol falls in around the pair.

They head deeper into the hedge, passing through old growth of twisting thorns that would prove an impenetrable barrier to any predator, but turn away from the patrol.

"It's always a surprise how much changes each time we're here. Constant renovation and growth. We should maybe make a few more changes around the house like this."

"Not now, Eleanor." he mutters, "Yeoman Buttercup, why is Lady Peaseblossom being detained?"

"I would quite like to know that myself." Peaseblossom mutters.

"Don't know, sir. Just know she has to be. Orders come from the Oberon, sir."

"Well, isn't it lucky I've come here to speak with him, Oberon to Oberon? I'm sure I can get this whole thing cleared up in no time."

"Hopefully, sir. Ma'am, I don't want do be doing this, but it's orders..."

"No, I understand. You have a duty to perform. And, by the Green Lady, you will perform it! Or I will break out of whatever prison the Oberon sees fit to send me to and make damn sure you do."

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am!" she salutes instinctively.

The city opens up before them, twisted branches spun together into bowers, dwellings and the giant

palace they march towards.

The gates of thorny boughs open and they march in under wary eyes and readied bows, the wood creaking with strain of holding the arrows ready, across a courtyard with sunlight filtering through the leaves and into the throne room. The Oberon and Titania of the Hedge sit on paired wooden thrones, resplendent in green and gold. The Oberon has hair of glittering silver-gold and eyes of ice, while his bride is darker, hair of pure spun sunlight and eyes like spring leaves.

"My Oberon, at your instructions, we have detained " she gives Peaseblossoms harshly musical fairy name, "and brought her to you."

"Why is she not restrained?"

Buttercup swallows, under the Oberon's steady gaze, "The...the O-O-Oberon of..."

Stone gives a shallow nod of the head, a gesture of respect between equals, "I have vouchsafed her good behaviour, Oberon of the Hedge."

"I see. Of course you have. This whole affair is down to you, after all. Now, Sergeant, please take the prisoner to the cells."

Buttercup swallows again, the patrol warily leading Peaseblossom away.

"May I speak with you? In private." Stone asks.

"We do have much to discuss, Lord of the Stone, Oberon of Stafford Hall. You will attend me in my chambers."

"I thank the Oberon for his invitation." Stone replies with thinly forced politeness, "Which, of course, I accept."

A few minutes later, the Oberon shoos his servants from the room. "What have you done, Stone?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

The Oberon sighs, pouring out a glass of clear amber liquid, "The Clan of Hyde Park has requested a blood restitution for Peaseblossom."

"For what offence?"

"Invasion."

"I'm not sure a single fairy, even Peaseblossom, could count as an invasion."

"They're claiming she was an advance scout."

"I see. And how is this down to me?"

"She followed you."

"On her own initiative. I didn't ask her."

"Well, then, to maintain peace, she'll have to be handed over."

"Ah. I see. I'd rather that didn't happen."

"So would I. But the alternative is war between the clans."

"Is it?"

"Husband, it seems the Oberon of Stafford Hall has an idea."

"Well, let's hear it."

"First, Oberon, an apology for the difficulties my recent visit through your gate has caused your clan." The Oberon waves the apology off, "Second, on that journey, the Archive of Bone gave me a prophecy that I believe Peaseblossom is part of."

"And in service of that you would have war between the clans?"

"Not if I can avoid it. Third, I was coming here to ask that you release her to my clan. I will, of course, meet your blood price for it. However, if she was acting on my behalf and not yours, and if, as a result of that action, she were to be of my clan and not yours, there is no quarrel between your clan and the Hyde Clan."

"If she had been part of your clan before the incident, perhaps..."

"Who's to say she wasn't? If we agree, who's to say we weren't discussing it before the event?"

Which is why she recklessly followed me."

"Which is not true."

"It is not literally true. But there are many levels of truth, are there not?"

"You wish me to lie, Oberon of the Hall?"

"Of course not. If we have an accord, I will take responsibility for Peaseblossom's actions in their entirety. She unquestionably acted on my behalf, even if not with my knowledge. In recompense for that, and to avoid your clan being drawn into this, I will include her in my clan and if the Hyde Clan wish to press the matter, they may do so to me."

"I see. It is an interesting idea, Oberon of the Hall, but I cannot just discharge my obligations to my subjects so easily."

"Of course not, but if Peaseblossom's choice is between the jaws of a stoat or the road, she will choose the road and your obligations are satisfied."

"He has a point, husband. Everyone's honour is satisfied by that arrangement."

"And I suppose you'd want a cut-price contribution for this?"

"Of course not. I was prepared before to offer the honest blood price you see fit before I knew of this. I would be a poor ally to offer less now. But, I might knock some off for being treated as your inferior supplicant in the hall. There are forms to be observed, after all."

"I like this not, Lord Stone."

"Nor I, but needs must be."

"I suppose they must."

Long minutes later, they approach the house, Stone's robes growing him back to his normal height in the open air, Peaseblossom's green uniform replaced by black and gold, "So, my new Oberon, what am I to do for your Clan?"

"Our clan."

"Maybe."

"Well, someone is going to need to knock the others into shape..."

Peaseblossom gives the faintest of smiles, "Well, that I can do..."

The door opens.

"Your Lordship."

"How fares the patient?"

"Recovering. She is awake, if still a little weak. We should inform her family."

"And by we, you mean me."

"You are the Lord, my Lord. And frankly, I'd rather run at the guns of Kabul again than face Evanthia Eurayle in a mother's rage."

"Very well. I'll call her."

"Yes, m'lord."

Stone sighs and picks up the phone from its cradle. "Sstone." the voice at the end of the line says coldly. "I might have known. Where iss Diana?"

"Evanthia, how good to..."

"Don't you ssweettalk me. You've already done enough damage! I've had police coming into my cafe, demanding all ssorts of thingss! I've sseen the newss, Sstone. They're calling her a criminal, a terrorisst, a murderer!! Sshe wass going to be an architect and now, sshe'ss...where iss sshe? If you've gotten her harmed, well, do you remember what my father ssaid he'd do to you when you recruited me?"

"Being threatened with becoming a statue in your garden is something I tend to remember."

"Yess, well, if you've done ssomething to my Diana, I will make that promisse look like a ssummer camp! Now where...no, Minoss, I am not sstressssed, I am furiousss!"

"She was poisoned in the..."

"Poisssoned?!"

"She's fine, she's fine. Adam is taking care of her. She's just a little weak. I'll have her call you as soon as she's able."

There is a very long silence on the other end of the line, "You had better, Sstone." the line goes dead.

"Well, that went better than I thought it would."

Shortly, Stone is back in the living room, having changed into the slightly less formal suit he favours. Manny looks up from the screen, "Ok, man, you going to pay me so I can get out of everyone's hair?"

"Certainly." He reaches for his wallet, "How much?"

"Well, got to cover getting back to London, and the hassle I'm going to get until things calm down, and my expenses..."

Stone nods along sagely. "Does £100 do it? And I'll pay for the travel back as it is my fault you're here."

Manny stops recounting how much today has cost him. He licks his lips slightly. "That sounds quite reasonable, but..."

"£200, then." he pulls out a mix of red and purple notes.

"Uhm...have you got something smaller? I can't exactly spend a fifty without people talkin' about how I stole it or cheatin' the system."

"Oh, of course, my apologies." he puts the money back and pulls out a thicker set of purple, mixed with orange and a couple of greens.

"Yeah, that....that's better." Manny stammers staring at the money.

"Of course, I could use someone with your talents, and a regular..."

"Nah, thanks. Don't like being tied down. That way just leads to trouble."

"If you're sure, son, but..."

"I'm sure. I am very sure if today's gonna be typical." he snatches the money, secreting it around his person, "And I ain't your son. I've got a dad and one is two too many for me."

"As you wish."

"So, about that trip back..."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but there's an important call for you."

"Now really isn't a good..."

"An *important* call, sir."

"Oh, one of those. Fine. Can we discuss getting you back later, Mr...?"

"Manny's fine. And I can wait. Not like I've got a lot else to do."

"Good, good." he takes the phone, walking out of the room, "Yes, Westenra?"

"Well, I admit you've overachieved yourself this time, Stone. And all in public, too. What were you thinking brawling with the police like..."

"Your demons, you mean."

"My what?"

"They were demons. The ones that confronted Misses Morn and Eurayle were the same."

"Demons."

"Sloth, Gluttony and from Morn's description, Wrath and Envy. Don't tell me you didn't authorise them."

"I did not."

"Well, isn't that something? I assume the Archive has been forthcoming?"

"She has. And I can see where your mind's going. You, Morn, Evanthia's daughter; that's Stone, Chain and Snakes covered in an afternoon."

"Yes. And at least one other."

Westenra sighs, "I need to see you. In person. Immediately."

"There might be a problem with using the green paths. I'm rather on the outs with the Hyde Park Clan, it seems."

"You certainly still know how to make friends, Stone, I'll give you that."

"And your sense of humour is a legendary as ever, Director."

"I wasn't joking. I'll open the Path to the offices. I assume you still have the runegate in place?"

"That you even ask the question is insulting."

"See you soon, Stone."

"I'll have a guest. One of my prospects does not feel like cooperating. So we'll just have to wait until prophecy gets to work on him or finds a suitable replacement."

"Which one?"

"Manny something. Calls himself King Rat. The boy who got into it at Kings Cross."

"Hnnnnh. Fine. Bring him, but he gets escorted out before he sees anything important."

"I assumed that would be the case."

The line closes. Stone walks back into the living room. "Ok, Manny, we're going back to London. Follow me."

"What? How? Wait!" he scurries after Stone's strides as the older man walks through the halls, unlocking a door and once inside, tracing a new rune on a demicircular stone lintel. "What's this? Another portal?"

"Yes. Not as dangerous as the liminal gate in the safehouse, but much more observed. Now, just wait until it glows, and then we can walk through. Once there, comply with everyone's instructions and don't mouth off. The Department does not select for sense of humour."

"Sounds like cops."

"Quite close. Hence, don't give them an excuse to take an interest in you."

"I'm good at people not taking an interest."

"Good, good." a pale glow opens in the heart of the space, iris-ing outwards until it fills up to the edge of the stonework. "And here's our ride." He and Manny step through, emerging in a cramped corridor, made more so by the number of men and women in black suits.

"Lord Stone, welcome back to the Department. You, this way."

"Sure thing, 'boss'." Manny replies as a large number of the suits peel off to escort him to the door.

"This way, sir."

"I know the way."

"Yes, sir." she replies without changing her stance, falling into step ahead of him as a larger agent walks behind him. No one tries to make conversation.

Eventually, after a ride through several floors, all equally anonymous, she knocks on a door. "He's here, Director."

"Send him in." she opens the door and steps aside, closing it once Stone is through. Stone glances around the room, shifting a chair to give him a view across the entire sunless office while still somewhat facing Westenra as the latter sits behind his desk, papers spread across the surface.

"So. Explain."

"I found your bait and took it. Fergusson tried to take it away and I imagine is in a foul mood for failing."

"You don't have to provoke him at every chance, Stone."

"No, I don't *have* to. Took Miss Morn to see the Archive where I first heard her prophecy. She's also probably told you that there is a mole in the Department, specifically in the Deputy Director's Office."

Westenra nods.

"Subsequently, on our exit, we were confronted by a pair of false police officers. There was a struggle, when my Flowers and Rat made themselves known. One of your Griffens gave chase, I assume you know about him at least. He and I had a brief confrontation."

Westenra looks at the notes, "And he disabled you."

"He did. That let Daniel out. Too much adrenaline added to a knife in the leg was quite a distraction. And I believe Daniel turned the tables as I haven't seen him since." his eyes flick at the empty space in the office. "Not that I saw him directly at the time, but you know what I mean. Once he was driven off, Mary took over the situation. Meanwhile, Morn had reached my first rendezvous point and Diana Eurayle was escorting her to a safehouse I maintain in the area."

"Which you have no intention of locating for me."

"A man has to have some secrets. They encountered another pair of false officers. There was a confrontation. Ms Eurayle was poisoned and Morn..."

"...broke her chains. The very thing we are concerned about with her. As a result, she was sloppy and I'm dealing with dozens of cameraphone videos uploading across the Internet."

Stone shrugs, "She overpowered the demons and escaped to the safehouse. Mary, and the others

liberated them from there and, apart from Manny the Rat King, cocky arse that he is, are recuperating at my estate.”

”And your intentions?”

”As much as I despise prophecy, trying to fight it usually gets nowhere. So I intend to find the conspiracy and unravel the threads of the Archive’s vision. I assume they’re connected given the inciting incident.”

”And you expect me to go along with that? To allow a dangerous unchained entity loose under the dubious and highly unofficial sanction of an ex-agent.”

”I was rather hoping you’d also clear up Ms Eurayle’s involvement. Her mother is not happy.”

”Oh, of course, I’ll just get right on that.” Westenra snaps, “It’s not as easy as it used to be, Stone. Technology makes secrets damn hard to keep.”

”I’m sure you have plans, though. and we don’t need them kept secret, just muddled. Can we really be sure of the identity of the gorgon involved?”

”We’ll see. I’ll expect your cooperation in other matters, of course.”

”I expected no different. It’s always convenient for a spymaster to have unofficial and deniable operatives in their back pocket.”

”It is. But I’m not sure I can let you run around completely unsupervised.”

”Oh, really?”

”Stone, be reasonable. There will be questions on this and the way it is being handled.”

”And who is my nanny to be?”

”Your Ghost. Allow me to reintroduce Griffen Seven.”

Stone turns to face the empty space directly. “I...reintroduce?”

”No hard feelings, I hope, sir. Not keen to be on the business end of that right hook again.”

”No hard feelings?” he reaches into his jacket, and presents empty air to the invisible man. “You forgot this. Could you try not to leave it in my thigh next time?”

”I’ll try, sir. If you’ll try not to carve me open like a Sunday roast.”

”I’ll try. Fine, Director, as I clearly have no choice in the matter, I accept your watchdog into my team.”

”I’m glad you understand, Stone.”

”You are too kind. By your leave, I...we will return to the Hall?”

”Yes, yes, off you go.”

”Introducing you to Morn should be fun.” Stone remarks as they leave the office.

”Be on my best behaviour, sir.”

Back at the mansion, they find Diana in the living room with Latitia hovering solicitously and guiltily around her, not that Diana appears to have noticed. “Ah, Miss Eurayle, you’ve recovered?”

”Feeling a little better.” she replies hoarsely.

”Good, good. Well, you’re welcome to stay until you’re recovered. And then I’d like you to think about joining us. I understand your desire to be an architect, but I’m sure we can...”

”Mum’ss dessire.”

”And yours?”

”Ssomething a little more exsciting.”

”Well, I think I can promise you that. Day one’s already been rather interesting.”

”Sso I notiscd. But you can explain thingss to her.”

”Oh, no, think of it as a test of your courage.”

”Coward.”

”On that matter, I’d also like to introduce Griffen Seven to you.” he indicates the empty space to his right, “He’ll be joining...”

”Just Griffen is fine, sir.” he replies from the other side.

”You did that deliberately.”

”Just a little joke, sir.”

”A Griffen with a sense of humour? Whatever next.”

“A Griffen?” Latitia looks up from Diana, worry lining her face.

“Yes, ma'am. Not here on a capture mission, I assure you.”

“For what it's worth, Miss Morn, I believe Mr Griffen...”

“Just Griffen, sir.”

“...I believe Griffen is trustworthy on this matter.”

“I don't really have a choice but to trust you on that.”

Diana laughs, turning into a cough.

“Miss Eurayle? Are you all right?”

“Sso, we're a bunch of missfitss and oddballss, who barely know each other, asssembled by a myssteriouss, controlling man in a manssion, chossen for innate abilitiess that sset uss apart from the resst of humanity, ssworn to defend thosse who hate and fear uss...” she cough-laughes again, “...don't you ssee? We're the fucking Xs-men!”

“The who?”

Manny starts awake, the starchy sheets of the shelter thrown back. Hackles rise on the back of his neck. Someone is in the room. The light flares, his pupils shrinking, dazzled. “Manny Weston.”

“Who're you?” he bravadoes, trying to focus on the tall man in the well-fitting black suit and immaculate sandy hair.

“You're not the easiest person to track down.”

“Yeah? You're here aren't you?”

“Yes. I am. And I have a job for you.”

“Everyone seems to have a job for me lately. Not interested.”

“Don't be so hasty. My job pays well.”

“Sure it does.”

“And all it requires is that you take up Lord Stone's offer. And relay the details of what he's up to to me, of course.”

“Which part of not interested don't you....aaargh!!!” he cries out in pain as Deputy Director Fergusson presses a small device in his hand.

“Mr Weston, the trouble with having supernaturally enhanced hearing is that sounds that a human can't even hear can be quite painful to you. I strongly suggest you reconsider your position. I am a very good friend to have. And if you're not my friend, well, it's always a bad idea to leave enemies behind you, wouldn't you say, 'King Rat'?”

Manny lies panting as the noise stops, “I don't seem to have any choice.”

Fergusson smiles, “Splendid. I knew you were a smart one.”