

CHAPTER 19: THE FETE OF THE WORLD

by Paul Watson

“Wakey-wakey, you slugabeds!! Time to get up and face the day!”

The reactions to this morning intrusion, accompanied as it is by a handbell tuned for maximum volume, can be said to be....varied.

Peaseblossom, awake since the first light of dawn, interrupts her work clearing her ‘camp’ in the potted plant and grabs her sword, looking around for the source of the attack, .

Griffin pauses in his exercise routine for a moment, and then returns to his press-ups, pushing his hands off the ground and clapping before he lands.

Latitia bolts upright with a start, visions of black flames, leering toothsome smiles and screaming of the damned filling her head, not sure if she’s one of the screaming or the one causing it. Her hand flies out and a gout of black flame scours the wall. *“Very good. That masonry will know its place now.”* her inner demon sneers.

Diana mumbles “Five more minutess, Mum.” and pulls the covers back around her head as she turns over.

”Whassatnoise?!?” Manny looks up from his nest, the bells ringing, a pink nose snuffling deeper.

“What time is...who even made half-past bloody seven a real time?!?”

Lord Stone unwillingly opens his eyes. “Adam!!” he bellows.

”M’lord?” Adam asks as if he’d been waiting outside the door.

”Is there a reason for that ungodly racket, by any chance?”

”The fete is today, as I’m sure you recall, m’lord. You usually prefer plenty of time to fortify yourself before the arduous task of opening proceedings.”

“And you assumed I’d quite like the dead for company. How nice.”

”Not the dead, certainly, but some of our guests are certainly trying their best to impersonate them. Perhaps breakfast will rouse them.”

”You are a cruel man, Adam James. A cruel man, indeed.”

”Yes, m’lord. I trust you’ll be down presently?”

”Yes, yes, you vicious bastard.”

”Very good, m’lord.” he turns smartly and heads to the kitchen.

”Why did I employ him in the first place?”

”Probably because he’s one of the few people who’ll put up with you, Peter.”

”Et tu, Lizbet?” he asks grumpily as he sits up in the bed.

Shortly, Adam serves breakfast to the four conscious members of the household. Muesli, served with yoghurt and fruit, for Latitia who picks at it, staring down into the bowl; nectar and honey for Peaseblossom; ackee and saltfish with fried plantains for Griffin, vanishing into his invisible mouth; and kedgeree and game for his Lordship who spends the time looking through the newspaper. The door opens and Diana walks in, still yawning, a washed out t-shirt and very little else.

”Ms Eurayle!”

She stops, ”What? And whatever it is, can it wait until I’ve had something to eat?” she dips into the beans with the ladle.

”You’re not dressed.”

She looks down at herself, ”I’m decent.” she protests, “I’ll get dressed properly after I’ve had a shower. And I’ll have that after breakfast.” she piles some more toast onto the plate, adding sausages and bacon.

Stone harrumphs and returns to his paper.

Diana cuts up the sausages, feeding the pieces to her hair like the writhing, hissing serpents crowning her head are pets that greedily swallow it down.

“Shall I go and rouse, Master King?”

”Don’t bother, Jeeves. I’m here.” he piles his plate high, sharing it out with his rat as she scampers eagerly sniffing around the table.

Adam stiffens into erect formality, nostrils flaring. "So you are. Aren't we lucky?"

Somewhat later in the morning, but still 'too early' according to Manny with grudging agreement from Diana, a Rolls Royce pulls out of the garage, the silver phantom decal polished mirror bright. "Posh ride. I call shotgun."

Stone keeps his face still as Manny clambers onto the front seat, and Diana and Latitia sit at opposite sides, the former looking out the window as they move off, the latter looking down at her lap.

Adam waves from the doorway, as Peaseblossom flitters around the manicured lawn, "Well, now that the children are off, Mr Griffin..."

"Just Griffin."

"Well, Just Griffin, would you care to accompany me on the ready rounds?"

"Ready rounds?"

"Ensuring our defences are online, and, in this case, familiarising the only other military man here with where the weapons are in case of emergency."

"Weapons?"

"Oh, yes. Come with me." He walks through the house, unlocking and opening a cabinet. "Here are the registered weapon. Shotguns, rifles, pistols, all locked away and registered with the local constabulary."

"There's enough there to equip a whole squad with some to spare."

"Thank you, sah. They're for shooting parties and the like. And, officially, this is our armoury."

"Officially." Griffin repeats.

"Quite." he walks into the lounge, pulling out a long, deep draw from the skirting. Griffin whistles at the arsenal revealed.

"Now, the black shells are regular, white are silver, red is incendiary, blue are dum-dums..."

"Those are illegal. At least they were in the Army."

"Quite. But a regular bullet is barely a pinprick to an ogre or, heaven forbid, a dragon. The silver shells are for the shotguns only. A modern machine gun, like this," he pats the heavy gun, "has too high a muzzle velocity. Reduces them to molten silver goo. Will still burn a werewolf like the devil, but not as effective as putting a bullet right between his eyes."

"And the grenades?"

"Similar colour scheme. Blue is hi-ex. Can you handle a 50 cal?"

"If I have to."

"Excellent, but I'm assuming downstairs is my area. You'll make a much better sniper from the upper floor."

"More guns?"

"Exactly." he leads them into Griffin's bedroom, extracting another array of weaponry. "Now, the Enfield's a bit out of date, but it holds the silver shot. The L96A1 has the range and in a skilled hand..."

"I'm familiar with it."

"Good. Also some more grenades and the hand howitzer to get some length on them."

"You're set up for a war."

"Thank you, sah. There's similar in every room up here. Just in case."

"Just in case. Of what? An invasion?"

"We are one of the repositories of magical relics in the country. His Majesty's government prefers we have some defence."

"Some? And just you to use them all?"

"And now you, and his Lordship, of course. I mean he's admittedly more officer class, but he's competent. Haven't had to use some of these in anger, but better to have and not need."

"Well, that shouldn't be a problem. You've got everything but the kitchen sink."

"That's on back order." he replies with apparent earnestness.

Griffin's invisible eyebrows rise up.

The Rolls-Royce pulls up onto a gravel car park, tented pavilions dotting the nearby field. A woman stands at the gate, her short black hair shot through with white, a pair of thick-framed square glasses perched on her nose. She wears a tweed jacket and sturdy boots over her spreading frame. She looks meaningfully at her watch, "Do you always have to leave this until the very last minute, Peter? Every year? I have quite enough grey hairs without you trying to add to them and furthermore, I..." she stops as the others climb out of the car, "...oh, I see you've brought guests without mentioning it this time. Always a new and lovely surprise with you."

"Not honoured guests for the fete, Jess. Just regular punters here for a good time. People, this is Ms Arbogast, who organises this event for more years than either of us likes to recall and conspires with Adam to keep me in some semblance of good order for it."

"Which rarely works." she mutters in reply.

"Do treat her with as much respect as you give me, or, ideally, more."

"Anyway, if you're not official guests, that'll be five pounds entry each, please." she holds out a card reader.

"Allow me." Stone pulls out a card, placing it on the reader. "Go forth, young people and enjoy yourself."

"Oh, thank you, guv'nor. Very generous, guv'nor." Manny tugs his imaginary forelock, "Us 'umble..."

"Oh, give it a resst for onsce, Manny. We're here to have ssome fun, sso let'ss go have ssome."

Manny gives her a two-fingered salute as he walks through the gate, heading off into the fields.

Latitia stops on the edge of the field, "Uhm, Ms Arbogast?"

"Yes?"

"You're, uhm, taking all this well. Don't you..."

"...care that the young lady there is a gorgon, you're, I'm not sure what, but clearly you know you're not fully human, and the young man is rude?" she finishes as Latitia looks away, "Peter's companions are always a varied lot. We've learned to take them, I mean, take you as we find you. The worst one of the last lot was that dreadful Merlin boy and he looked quite, well, not respectable, exactly, but certainly norm...a regular person." she tilts her head, "Actually, now that I think of it, there is a family resemblance, I suppose, but so few come here, are you related to Ms Eurayle?"

Diana blinks several times. Her snakes swivel to stare at Ms Arbogast, "That'ss my name but I don't..."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'm probably getting things mixed up. You two go and have fun while us old people take care of things."

"Old people?"

"I mostly mean you, obviously." she replies, taking his arm as she bustles off.

Manny looks across the tents, all pristine white against the grass. The smell of farm animals sets his hackles off after his recent experiences. Too many cosy people being twee. Everyone making such an effort to get along. "What am I doing here?" he mutters to himself. He pulls the hoodie up, hands in his pocket and continues to look around at the disgustingly bucolic scene. He feels the glances first. He's an outsider, after all. He doesn't fit in. Never has, never will, and that's just fine. He squats down behind one of the tents, pulls out a hand-rolled cigarette and lights it.

"Do you have another light?"

He looks up. The speaker is in jeans with a loose t-shirt and blonde hair waving. She has the sort of understated jewellery on that only people who are stupidly rich wear. Probably dates back to her great-great-grandparents. Smells of flowery perfume, sweat, excitement and horses. He flicks the lighter. She places her cigarette to the flickering flame, taking a long drag.

"It's all so fake, isn't it?"

He grunts. Daddy's little princess continues without noticing.

"I mean, look, at Daddy being all chummy with Stone. Any other day, he'd be fuming about how the

old man keeps interfering in his business, but now he's all smiles, laughing and joking along. I hate it."

Manny shrugs. "That's life."

"It makes me sick sometimes how phony it all is." she finally stops, "You're new here, aren't you?" she holds out a manicured hand, "Anunciata Kennsington. Daddy owns the Lodge and the Bull in the village."

Manny grunts. "Manny."

"Just Manny?"

He nods.

"You came in with Stone and those two women."

"Keeping an eye on me?"

"What if I was? You're different." she pauses, "I like different." her hand wanders onto his shoulder.

"Perhaps you and I could..."

"I've got a girlfriend."

"Oh, really? Those two looked very much like they were into each other."

"It's...complicated."

"Oh, a complicated girlfriend situation. Is she here?"

Manny shakes his head.

"Well," she breathes huskily, her hand slipping down his chest, "what she doesn't know won't hurt her, will it?"

Manny pushes her hand away. "Not interested in being your bit of rough, luv. Never ends well."

She pulls back, sitting back against the tent. "Your loss." she pouts, "Thanks for the ciggie anyway. Daddy doesn't even like me vaping."

"Uh-huh."

"Truthfully, he barely notices me if he's not yelling at me."

"Could be worse. My old man was always noticing me. In the wrong place, hanging with the wrong friends, doing the wrong thing."

"Fathers. Who needs them?"

"Right."

She blows out a stream of smoke through her scarlet-painted lips. "Well, I can't sit here all day.

Daddy might notice I'm not where I should be. And if you, or your mysterious girlfriend, change your mind, I'm sure we'll meet up again." she wipes the grass off her jeans, leaving Manny sitting in the shadows.

Meanwhile, Diana and Latitia are having more fun, with Diana dragging Latitia through game after game, tombolas, guessing the number of sweets in a jar, a test of strength bell-ring, coconut shy, popping balloons with darts blurring until the only reason Diana can still see as she walks are the snakes rising up like periscopes over her prize haul. "What can I say? I was raised to compete."

Latitia replies by holding the candy floss just out of Diana's reach as her forked tongue melts the spun sugar in her mouth.. "We've got a following." she nods her head at the gaggle of children following in what passes for a stealthy fashion. "Well, you do."

"Me?"

"Why would anyone be following me? You're the exotic one."

"Well, that's true." she stops, her hair turning to look behind her, "Okay, kids, I see you."

The children freeze, "It's ok. I promise not to bite."

"You've got snakes for hair!" one observant child states, pointing at them.

"That's right."

"How do you get a haircut?"

"Is all your hair snakey?"

"Why aren't we all turning to stone?"

"Do you want to turn to stone?" Diana asks as she squats down to their height, leaving her pile of prizes behind her

"Would it hurt?"

"Would I turn back?"

"Really? You could turn people to stone?"

"I could."

"Cooooool. Could you turn Ms Turnbull to stone? Then she wouldn't shout at us in class."

"I could, I ssuposse but..."

"Yay!"

"I ssaid I could, not that I would."

The disappointment becomes palpable. "I'll give you my pocket money!"

"Why do you have snakes for hair?"

"Because I'm a Gorgon." she turns her reptilian gaze on the little dark-haired girl with glasses who spoke.

"Like Medusisa?"

"Very good. Jusst like Medusa. Sshe was my great great great oh, too many great, grandmother. Or aunt. The family tree getss a bit...tangly that far back."

"But she turned people to stone by looking at them. And you looked at me. And I'm not stone."

"Aren't you lucky ssome mythss are jusst mythss." she opens her mouth, baring her long fangs, "I have to bite ssomeone to turn them to sstone." the children gasp in a mix of excitement and delighted fear.

"Could I grow snakes? They look nice." the snakes preen.

"Don't encourage them."

"What do gorgons eat?"

"Oh, we eat regular people food." she picks a small stone off the ground, absently crunching it.

"You ate a rock!"

"Did I?"

"You did! You did! We saw it." he looks around for support.

"Well, if all of you ssaw it, I guesss I mustt have." she reaches out as the children scrabble around,

"No, no, you don't eat rockss. Gorgonss have sstrong teeth."

"My mum says if I drink lots of milk, I'll have strong teeth. Did you drink lots of milk?"

"Of coursse. Always lissten to your mother, kidss."

"Bailey!! Come away from that...that woman!"

Bailey cringes, as a blonde grabs him, "She's not a woman, mum!" he protests as she drags him away by his hand, "She's a gorgon and..."

His mother's voice rises. "I don't care what she is! I will not have you..."

Latitia's fingers stretch into iron black claws. "*You're right. She does deserve it. Go on. She's got it coming. Stupid stuck up bitch. How dare she insult your...*" Her eyes go black as she glowers after the mother. The other children scream and scatter. She blinks, looking down at her hands.

Diana gathers up her prizes, not noticing. "Well, that'll teach me to ssay lissten to your mother."

"I...I've got to...I've got to go."

"Why? Because of that woman? Pfffft." she waves her hand dismissively, "Forget her. Sshe'ss not going to sspoil my day out. Now come on, there mustt be a scider sstall around here ssomewhere. I want to try ssome proper country sscrumpy." and before Latitia can muster a protest, Diana is off again.

Later in the day, Manny feels his ring buzz. He glowers down but dutifully finds a secluded spot, pulling out another cigarette to act as a disguise, "What?"

"Don't you adopt that tone with me. Why haven't you reported in?"

Manny rolls his eyes, "Because we're at some country fair."

"I don't care. I expect regular reports on Stone's activities."

"Sir, yes, sir. He got up at a stupid time in the morning, had breakfast and drove us out to this field where it's home counties day. He went and opened it and that's it." The ring gives a high pitched wail. "Owww! Jesus!"

"Don't provoke me, Mr King. I do not have the patience to deal with your particular sort of disrespect. He left the house undefended?"

"No. He just took me and the girls. He left the invisible soldier, the tink ball buster and his butler behind. Oh, and his sister-in-law. Well, I assume he..."

"What sister-in-law?"

"Figured you know about her. Lady Mary something or other."

"Stone doesn't have any relatives."

"He doesn't? Who the fuck is she, then?"

"I expect you to find out!" the connection closes.

"Yes, sir, no, sir, three bags fucking full, sir." he mutters, lighting the cigarette.

Across the site, Latitia lies down, her hands behind her head, her eyes blearily looking up at the sky. Diana lies beside her. "I'll admit it. This isn't too bad a day."

"I guess."

"Ok. What's up? You've been moping ever since we got Karened. You can't let her piss you off so much."

"I...it's not that."

"You're going to have to get better at explaining what it is then."

"Since the island, since I broke the chain again, I can...sort of see someone's sins."

"Is that why you've been hiding?"

She looks away.

"Have you told anyone?"

She shakes her head. "It's my penance."

Diana rolls her eyes, "One, that's bollocks. Two, you need to tell Stone, at least. Three, what does seeing sins even mean?"

"Like, I can see the..." she gropes for the right words, "...stains on their souls. Like...that mother was jealous of you. Not just being younger, and hotter. But her son was being better behaved with you."

"Ooooh, what's Stone's soul look like?"

"Pride. A mountain of stubborn, bull-headed, fuck-the-world-I-know-best pride. It's shot through with pain and regret and loss and death, but it's mostly pride."

"What about the others?"

"I shouldn't be saying..."

"Manny, at least."

"He's scared. That's why he keeps pushing. If there's no one close, no one can hurt him. I shouldn't..."

"I'll have to be nicer to the little tosspot. Bollocks. But now, the most important question..."

"What?"

"What sins stain my soul?"

"You?" Latitia asks, sounding confused at the question, "You're...perfect."

Diana laughs, rolling over towards her, "And you're obviously drunk. Poor little scity demon can't handle her scider."