

CHAPTER 30: PURPLE REIGN

by Paul Watson

Lady Peaseblossom leaps from her leaf camp bed as the dawn breaks, a shrill alarm whistle yanking her out of sleep. Her sword is in her hand before she's fully awake and only then does she look around the quiet of the mansion's lounge. "Dreams." she mutters, "Always the..." the signal sounds again. She flies to the window sill, peering over the frame of the window. In the Hedge, she sees the warning lights flashing. The gate activated. Foreign intruders. A purple flash and her heart sinks, her stomach fills with lead: the Hyde Park Clan is here. She flies back to her camp and dresses, polishing her armour to parade shine, before trying to find Adam to rouse his Lordship.

And so, minutes later, a less than enthused Lord Stone finds himself being dressed in his Oberon robes, while Lady Peaseblossom flits to the window and back, reflexively gripping the hilt of her sword. "Don't fuss, Adam. I am perfectly capable of dressing myself."

"Yes, m'Lord." he replies, arranging the robe around the protesting shoulders.

"Don't wake the others unless there's violence. We don't want them blundering into fairy politics."

"No, m'Lord."

"Tell the house sprites to clean up the guest house, and to have food ready, but do not serve until I tell them."

"Yes, m'Lord."

"Lady Peaseblossom, do stop that flitting about. You'll wear your wings out and I need you sharp."

"But, Lord of the Stones, it's because of..."

"Belay that kind of talk. Their decisions are not your responsibility."

"But they might have harmed..."

"Then they will pay the full price for it. I have to assume they aren't complete idiots." he yanks the golden sash from Adam's hands. "Right. Let's be ready for our 'honoured guests'. And get me some tea!"

Shortly, Stone stands beside the front door. He takes a last sip, draining the china cup and returns both it and its saucer to the low table beside the doorway. "Ahhh."

"Refreshed, Lord of the Stones?"

"Mightily, my dear lady." he opens the door, steps outside and pulls the sash closed, dwindling down to match her height, "Shall we?"

Across the lawn, an open square of the fey march towards them. The outermost layer are in the dark green of the Hedge, warily looking both outwards and especially inward, leaving the front of the block open. Next come two layers of guards in heavy purple armour, hands on their sheathed weapons. And finally, at the centre, are two figures, one in fine purple robes, the other in ornate dress armour of the same deep purple.

"That is a lot of muscle."

"You are taking this lightly, Lord of the Stones. Too lightly."

"I assure you, Lady. I take this seriously." he drops off the step. "Hail the guardians of the Hedge." the company halts. One fairy in green peels off.

"Oberon of the House. We have encountered trespassers in our domain. They claim business with you. Do you vouchsafe their behaviour?"

"I am sure the denizens of the Hyde Park Clan shall cause no trouble for the Hedge while they are here. Is that not correct?" he asks towards the centre, now only visible from their tall hat and helmet.

"We have no quarrel with the Clan of Stafford Hall Hedge." the helmet replies.

"Then I vouchsafe their conduct within your domain."

The fairy nods, "In future, do provide notice of your guests."

"My apologies, Guardian of the Hedge. I shall certainly endeavour to do so."

The Guardian nods curtly and turns, "Company! About! Face!" The outer square of green turns and

begins to march back to the hedge in something approaching good order, jostling as they close ranks.

"Now, shall we adjourn to the guest house?" Stone asks calmly. "I am sure we have much to discuss and I'd rather do it somewhere other than my doorstep."

"We..."

"We accept your generous hospitality," the tall hat replies, cutting the helmet off.

"Excellent." He sets off over the loose gravel to a tree stump. An artful door blending in with the bark opens. "Your guards will have to wait outside, of course."

"They will not!" the helmet responds loudly, "I will not be defenceless with your assassin standing right there."

"And I will not have an army looming over me as we discuss matters. I vouchsafe your protection in my halls, if that is the problem, of course."

"Of course." He sneers.

"And, if you need them for your comfort, two of your bodyguards can accompany you."

"I will..." The hat leans in. There is a whispered argument before the helmet finally relents, "...I... accept your..." more whispers, "...most generous offer." he finishes. "Mountbatten, Montgomery, you are with me." The two burliest of the guards step forward as the others spread out to reveal their august charges. The fairy in purple robes is lean, even spindly, tall, his height added to be the tasselled mitre. His hands vanish into voluminous sleeves, a darker purple mantle over his shoulders giving him greater width. The other is shorter, more muscled and in impressively maintained breastplate and gleaming mail. His flowing conquistador helmet sweeps over his smooth face, with the fey's terrible beauty and angular features more pronounced than usual.

"Ah, Lord Prince Brandywine, His Excellency Cromwell of the Serpentine, Guardians Mountbatten and Montgomery, please, enter. Under my protection."

Lord Prince Brandywine gives Stone a hard glare, a harder one for Peaseblossom and, after Montgomery has entered, strides forward through the door.

"Lord of the Stones," Peaseblossom whispers urgently, "I fear the Lord Prince was one of the Guardians at the gate."

"Well, that makes this more interesting, doesn't it?" Stone replies breezily as he walks inside.

Shortly, in a warm room decorated in greens and golds, recessed windows providing a view of the outside, the guards glower from their positions behind Lord Prince Brandywine. Stone maintains his serene, beatific pose across the table. "So, gentlemen, shall we..."

"We are here for restitution," Brandywine says, "You, sir, are harbouring a dangerous criminal and the Clan of Park of Hyde demands..."

Cromwell of the Serpentine barely visibly winces, his companion one step away from banging the table with his mailed fist.

"One moment, Lord Prince," Stone smiles predatory slyly, "there are some formalities to be observed before we get of the meat of things."

"Very well." he sits back, arms folded petulantly.

"For the first, it may have slipped my mind, I'm sure, you know how it is, but are the Clan of Hyde Park and the House of Stafford allies, deep and true?"

"You know very well that we are not."

"Thank you, Lord Prince. Then, can we confirm that you do not come here by invitation?"

Brandywine's face darkens, "We..."

"We are here seeking justice." Cromwell interjects quickly. "We have alerted you to our complaint against yon guardian and, as such..."

"Of course, you are right, your Excellency, but it is still..." he pauses as if searching for a word, "...bordering on impoliteness not to inform me of your coming. I have had little chance to arrange refreshments. I do hope you and Lord Prince Brandywine make allowances for the poor fare."

"Of course, Lord of the Stones, we will take no offence on that score."

"Excellent. And, by what right, do you bring a dozen armed guards into my domain, unannounced?"

Some might question if that is an invasion.”

”You’re a fine one to talk! You sent that to invade...”

Cromwell again interrupts, “Surely, Lord of the Stones, you must concede that someone of the Lord Prince Brandywine’s status requires protection.”

”Of course. And, had you informed me of your coming, I would gladly have seen to it. To bring quite so many guardians could be seen as...aggressive.”

”How dare...!”

”We apologise if our party has caused offence, Lord of the Stones, but, under the circumstances, it was thought proper to ensure the Lord Prince’s safety.”

Stone’s eyebrows rise. “Are you suggesting the Lord Prince has something to fear from me, your Excellency?”

Cromwell spreads his long, delicate fingers, palms up in apology, ”These are quite dangerous times. Even your influence cannot guarantee security through the byways.”

”I see. Well, then, would you like some wine before we get to your business? Is the Oberon of Hyde well?”

”What do you mean by...”

”He is well, yes. The Clan expands and, as always, that tests him.”

”Ah, the burdens of the crown are wearying, it is true. I trust his wounds from the most recent Battle of the Serpentine are healing well. Do convey my regards to him, and my condolences on his recent loss. It is good that he is able to place his trust in his eldest to handle the clan’s business at this difficult time.”

”I shall convey your regards to the Oberon.”

”Can we get on with this?”

”Of course, Lord Prince, should I call for wine before we begin?”

”No. No more stalling. You have delayed too long already.”

Another eyebrow raise, ”As you wish, Lord Prince. So, to your quest for justice, could you remind me of the accusation you bring to my attention?”

”You know exactly...”

”We bring charges of assault and invasion, of absconding and of unlawful travel against yon guardian.”

Stone nods. ”Serious charges.”

”Demanding serious sanctions.”

”If there is merit to them, Lord Prince. It is traditional in Stafford Hall to determine guilt before punishment. I believed the same principle extended to the Clan of Hyde Park. Was I mistaken?”

”How dare...!”

”Of course, the Clan of Hyde respects that principle, Lord of the Stones.”

”I am so glad to hear that is still true, your excellency. So then, let us hear the evidence.” he sits back expectantly.