

CHAPTER 31: THE TRIALS OF LADY PEASEBLOSSOM: THE LAW

by Paul Watson

Lady Peaseblossom tries her best to maintain a calm, neutral expression. Which is not easy when your immediate future and imminent execution are the subjects of the debate. Even harder when every glance from Lord Prince Brandywine towards her practically radiates hatred. But she tries to emulate Lord Stone's relaxed, confident manner. He is her Oberon now and she has to trust that he knows what he's doing. However, hard that is.

"Shall we take the charges one by one, my lords? I find that focus can bring clarity whereas bundling everything together only produces an emotional muddle."

"We..."

"As you wish, Oberon of Stafford Hall." Cromwell of the Serpentine replies.

"Let us start with the charge of unlawful travel."

"Yes, let's. Your..." the Lord Prince flails for a word that can be used but won't be overly offensive and confrontational, "...soldier there used the portal between the Clan of the Hedge here and Hyde Park on the..."

"I am familiar with the dates involved, Lord Prince. I used the same portal only minutes earlier. I trust you do not think I travelled through your territory unlawfully?"

"Of course not! I am not suggesting..."

"But, somehow, my soldier, as you put it, travelling the same path on the same day is somehow unlawful. I must confess, I fail to see how that can be. But I'm sure you'll explain."

"I know you think this a trap, Lord of the Stones. However, she did not pay the blood price for her travel as you did and..."

"Is that not a crime against the Clan of the Hedge? Do you act on their behalf in this?"

"It is a crime among many that harridan has..."

"What the Lord Prince means is that the crime penalises both our clans. It deprives the Clan of the Hedge of their due payment, and, in turn, deprives the Clan of the Park of ours."

"Very well. I can see that there is sufficient there to allow a determination to be made."

Lady Peaseblossom stiffens at that.

"So, we move onto invasion, most certainly the most serious charge."

"I'm glad you at least agree on that."

"Indeed. Invasion is the crime of entering another clan's territory with the goal of claiming it, goods or clan members without the clan's permission, is it not?"

"It is." Cromwell agrees.

"And it is your contention that Lady Peaseblossom entered your territory with that intention?"

"That is not the..."

"With respect, Lord Prince, it is precisely the point. If Peaseblossom did not enter with that intent, then it cannot be invasion. I have conceded that there may be a case against my soldier for trespass, but invasion? No. Not unless you can show by her actions that her motives meet the criteria. Which, I trust you can, of course." he fixes Lord Prince Brandywine with a stare.

"Of course." Lord Prince Brandywine replies sourly.

"Did she perhaps take some possession of the Hyde Clan?"

"She..."

"There is no evidence to support that, no." Cromwell admits.

"Oh. Did she lay claim to any of the lands of the Hyde Clan?"

"That is also not the case, as I understand it."

"Oh, I see. Then she must have attempted to carry off one of your clan mates, which I accept is a most serious charge."

"None of our Clan is missing."

"So, she has not claimed your territory, kidnapped your kin, nor stolen your possessions?"

"She took my third best spear!"

"And returned it to you!" Lady Peaseblossom finally interjects, "Butt first! For which you should be

grateful.”

”Grateful?! Grateful?!!” his hand drifts towards the sword at his side, “A mere guard dares to speak to me in that manner!! I should...” he stops as Cromwell lays a hand on his shoulder.

”My apologies for this display, Oberon. The Lord Prince takes this matter very seriously, as you can see.”

”I can indeed. And likewise I extend my apologies for the disrespectful interjection of Lady Peaseblossom into our discussions. Lady, please, calm yourself. You will get your chance to speak.” Lady Peaseblossom looks down to hide the boiling anger on her face, “Yes, Lord of...my Oberon.” she growls.

”Now, as Lady Peaseblossom has explained, no theft occurred. I am sorry, Cromwell of the Serpentine, but I cannot see a case for a charge of invasion. I will not let that charge stand. I request you withdraw it. Unless you have other evidence to present to show the strength of your case?”

”We...” the hand returns. He turns his head and glowers at Cromwell.

”We have no further evidence on that matter.”

”I see. Then my decision stands.”

”As you wish. May we return to that decision later.”

”We may. But do not expect me to change it.”

”As you...” Cromwell begins to reply before Brandywine tugs on his sleeve, jerking his thumb towards the corner where the two guards are looming impassively. “Apologies, Oberon of Stafford House, but it appears I need to discuss matters with my Lord Prince.”

”Of course.”

They retreat. Stone pulls on a cord. In the distance a bell chimes. And shortly a small door opens and trays of food scurry into the room. Peaseblossom takes note and then looks away as the house spirits lay the table in a swirl of activity that blurs their forms and leaves the table spread for a feast: nuts, mushrooms, honey sweetened treats. The door closes. Peaseblossom looks over at the corner, not bothering to be surreptitious. The Lord Prince’s hands are waving angrily, finger occasionally jabbing towards her. Cromwell’s shoulders slightly slump, as he makes placating motions. Their differences resolved, they return, the Lord Prince snatching up one of the sweets.

”Do you wish to pause for repast, honoured guests?”

”Don’t try that trick on me.” Lord Prince Brandywine warns around a honeyed mouthful, “I can eat and argue at the same time.”

Peaseblossom bites her lip to prevent an ungracious comment.

”Of course, Lord Prince.” Stone replies. “Do your guardians wish to join?”

Brandywine looks over his shoulder. “No. I don’t think so. You won’t poison my guards.”

”As you wish.” he takes up a nut, cracking it against the table edge. “So, shall we move to absconding?”

”As you wish.” Cromwell repeats, “The Lady Peaseblossom did not surrender herself to the guardians and did, instead, flee their...”

Peaseblossom grinds her teeth at the accusation of fleeing.

”By which right were your guardians detaining her?”

”...their...I’m sorry, Oberon, but I don’t...”

”What was their reason to detain my soldier on her errand? She did explain the circumstances of her arrival, did she not?”

”She spun some tale of an invisible assassin and needing to protect you. But as that was clearly nonsense I decided...”

”Ah, yes. Clearly nonsense. The wound in my thigh from my invisible pursuer’s blade must have been my imagination.”

”You don’t mean to tell me...”

”That she answered you with candour and honesty? I do, indeed. She was in pursuit of an invisible stalker. She did warn me before his assault, although not by much. So, I ask again, under which right did you attempt to restrict her lawful and urgent business?”

”She did not pay the...”

"Which you could not possibly have known at the time, Lord Prince Brandywine, so, I have to ask a third time. Under which of the ancient rights did you attempt to impede her travel?"

"Her story was preposterous! She did not treat the clan with proper respect! She..."

"Are those sufficient reasons to detain someone?"

"Do we not control our own lands?! Would you have us allow strangers free roaming of..."

"Lord Prince, I would have the laws be followed. Without a cause, passage through the portals and paths should not be impeded. You have advanced no good cause. Cromwell of the Serpentine, can you explain the rationale? I fear the Lord Prince is again becoming too involved in the case."

"How dare..."

"The Lord Prince feared that three uses of the portal presaged more trouble. He decided to use his authority to control the situation."

"By detaining a guardian on urgent business? Business he had been informed of?"

"He did not..."

"He did not believe my guardian? Is that it? Is the accusation that my clan cannot be trusted, Cromwell of the Serpentine?"

Cromwell looks to the furious Lord Prince. "My Lord Prince felt he was justified at the time."

"I'm sure he did. But does he still feel justified? Knowing the full facts as he now does?"

"I would..."

Cromwell leans in, whispering.

"No. I will not be lectured like some common urchin! I am Lord Prince of the Serpentine. I would do the same thing then, today, tomorrow! That wench could not be trusted with the takings of a 'shroom stand never mind the safety of the realm! And furthermore..."

Stone rises from his seat, his hand slamming on the polished wooden table hard enough to make the trays jump. "Enough! I have heard enough. Lord Prince Brandywine, you dare to come into my house and insult me so? To upbraid me and my clan for liars and thieves? To impugn my hospitality? To question my probity? You dare!? If this is the grave with which you interrogated the Lady Peaseblossom, you are fortunate to have escaped with as little damage to your thick skull as you received!"

"Lady? Hah. To the mortals, perhaps. She is not fit to lick my boots."

"I will have no more of this! I have tolerated your disrespect out of respect for my comrade in arms, the Oberon of the Serpentine, but there are limits to what I will tolerate and you, sir, have breached them. I cast you out, Lord Prince. I will have you in my presence no more. Cromwell of the Serpentine, you and the honourable members of the Clan of the Serpentine will remain honoured guests at Stafford Hall, should you wish to visit in the future, but the Lord Prince is no longer welcome here until he makes recompense!"

"Recompense?! You want me to make recompense to you?! When I am Oberon of the Clan I shall..."

"When you are Oberon, may that day come blessedly late, if you have not learned to still your tongue, you will be at war with half the clans of England within the week. And one of those will most assuredly be Stafford Hall. You are dismissed. You may leave in peace, but under penalty of death, you shall not return."

"I will not..."

"Go. Trouble this house no more." he points at the door, his finger trembling with rage. Then, with a deep breath and force of will, he turns, "Cromwell of the Serpentine, I will ensure the price of travel is paid for that is a valid charge against my clan. But I dismiss the rest of this vindictive snipe hunt for the petty nonsense it is."

"You cannot dismiss me like this! I am the scion of the Hyde Clan! You are nothing but a provincial lordling! I do challenge your honour! If you even possess any, given your employ of this harridan."

The hall falls silent with a collective intake of breath. Cromwell of the Serpentine stares open-mouthed. Stone leans forward darkly, his knuckles pressed against the table. Montgomery and Mountbatten tighten their grips on their weapons. Lady Peaseblossom's hands twitch with the effort of not drawing her sword.

“Well, oh mighty Oberon of Stafford Hall, what do you have to say now?”