

Sebastian Lopez

The Domain (Kate: Chapter 1)

Kate Washanger was a woman of many talents. Sneaking through the city at night with a broken rib was not one of those talents. It wasn't the sort of thing she practiced, though considering her line of work, it surprised her that something like this hadn't happened before. Kate was a thief, and an extraordinary one at that. She'd managed heists so elaborate that she needed to use a small army just to pull them off. Many had tried to stop her. Police, detectives, and rival thieves had nipped at her heels like puppies, but none had ever pinned her down. Until *him*.

Kate rounded a corner on Peabody Street, concealed amongst the shadows of the alley. There she lay in wait, staring across the street at the apartment building that was her final destination. Her grey eyes scanned the empty streets looking for carts, horses, or automobiles, anything out of the ordinary. Nothing caught her eye, but Kate's suspicions were rarely ever abated at first glance. Still holding her injured left side tightly, she slunk back to the second building of the alleyway. From what she remembered of this borough of Brottberg, she was at the back room of a cigar store. She removed one of her hairpins and attempted to pick the lock to the shipment door.

As the tumblers fell into place, she hoped that if the owner of the store lived in shop, they were at least a sound sleeper. Doing her best to control the ragged breaths emanating from the pressure on her lungs, she crept inside. The store offered little room for movement. Wall to wall were cabinets full of cigars behind glass displays. That and the choking smell of tobacco caused

Kate to trip over an open crate and fall into the edge of a table. It took all her willpower to silence the instinctual scream of pain the mistake caused, but she did.

Standing upright, she searched the tables and countertops until she found the owner's landline. Like most things in Brottberg, it was an antique. Kate fingered the holes of the rotatory, focusing attentively with each dial filing back to the start. She finished the last number and held the phone close to her ear, listening to it ring. On the third ring, it picked up.

"Hello?"

"Mrs Trawley," Kate said into the phone, keeping her voice low. "It's Kate, Kate Wasthanger. I'm terribly sorry to wake you."

"Hmm? Kate? Good lord, it's three in the morning."

"Yes, I'm afraid I have an emergency."

"Where are you calling from? I can barely hear you."

"I'm still abroad. I'm lucky-hm." Kate grunted, attempting to keep the pain out of her voice. She'd have to get to the point sooner than she would have liked.

"Are you all right?" Mrs Trawley asked.

"Quite. Do you happen to still have the extra key to my flat?"

"Oh yes. I have it in my dresser. It's in the envelope, I believe."

"Brilliant. I'm afraid I have a bit of a situation. You see my friend Moya has been stopping by to feed my cat but she caught the flu yesterday and I've only just discovered."

"Heavens!"

"I know. She's completely indisposed. Would you be able to pop in and give him a late supper?"

“Of course. I’ll head right over.”

“Oh, thank you. I’m so grateful. I...” Kate trailed off as a bad breath caught in her chest, causing her to sink to the floor.

“Kate?”

She hung up the phone, betting on Mrs Trawley chalking it up to a poor connection. With great difficulty, she brought her knees out from under and sat back, leaning against the counter for support. She breathed in and out slowly to regain stability. As she did, she noticed her reflection in the glass of a cigar cabinet. A blotched bruise was swelling across her right cheekbone. She knew she’d been hit there but didn’t realize how big the mark would be. Entranced with horror, Kate slowly brought a finger to her face and pressed it against the blueing skin. A dull pressure set into her face, and she pulled away, wincing.

One minute later Kate was back in the shadows watching the window of her tenth-floor apartment. The property was one of many she owned throughout the city, yet this one sat apart from all the rest. It was her personal safe house, known only to her closest allies and hidden under a false ownership. At the moment, it was the only place that had the greatest guarantee of safety for herself. After what seemed too long, the window of her flat shone with yellow light, before the unmistakable sound of a gunshot thudded across the city street. Swearing to herself, Kate hurried away, leaving the alley and heading towards the Parisian district of Brotberg, her last option. Behind her, other lights in the building turned on at the sound of gunfire. Shortly after that, two men brandishing pistols emerged from the building entrance to search the nearby alleyways.

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Getting into the Chateau Beaux-Arts unseen was easier than Kate expected. It was late enough that the doorman had gone to bed. In the lobby she turned into the nearest stairwell, avoiding the elevator operator and the security guard whose attention laid on a magazine of some sort. She could have gone for the elevator and given her side a rest, but she couldn't risk someone recognizing her bruised face. Word of the unnatural always got around in Brotberg. Gossip as a currency was so strong there it rivaled the standard of gold. As a habit, Kate had a tendency to take matters of her secrecy like this with cation. While most thought her actions idiosyncratic at best and obsessively paranoid at worst, they had rarely done her wrong. Very rarely.

The Chateau Beaux-Arts was one of the nicest apartment buildings in the Parisian district. Only the finest of servants would climb the gilded mahogany emergency stairwell as Kate was. While she knew she had to make haste, her body was giving up on her. Every step now felt like she was driving a hot knife deeper and deeper into her torso, and her legs had grown numb from the night of running. She stopped midway up the fifth floor to regain her breath. The second she sat, a wave of nausea came over her and the weight of her body nearly sent her tumbling down the stairs. She linked her arm in the wooden railing to stop herself and lolled back her head to keep it above her heart.

Despite never having had a broken rib before, Kate had memorized enough medical books to know to keep her lungs as free as possible. The only thing that had overridden that knowledge was the fear for her life, a fear that continued now. The iron-willed rationality that governed Kate's life retook control, and she set a ten second timer in her head. Once those ten

seconds were up, she sucked in one more breath and pushed herself to her feet. From there, she continued her way up the stairwell.

Once on the ninth floor, Kate used the corridor wall to brace herself as she exited the stairwell. Keeping one arm on the fleur-de-lis wallpaper, and other around her ribcage, she walked down the hall, slowly passing the big wooden doors of other apartments, distinguished only by the difference in the large golden numbers adorning them. Five doors down from the stairs, Kate found the room she was looking for, 903.

Knowing the hour, she gave a quick succession of three loud knocks. She timed it precisely to convey urgency to who was sleeping behind the door, but not frantic in case she woke some neighbours. After thirty seconds without a response, she knocked three times again. The sound of rustling sheets and someone moving around the apartment followed this knock.

“Hello?” came a feminine voice from behind the door.

Kate knocked again, trying to keep her presence as silent as possible. She heard more shuffling, during which she assumed someone had come up and looked through the peephole.

“Kate?” came a voice.

Kate glanced around the hallways, trying to judge the nature of alertness of the other tenants.

“Suzanne?” she said in a low whisper. “Can you let me in?”

Suzanne quickly began unlocking several bolts and chains, before opening the door widely. In the many years that Kate and Suzanne had been friends, Kate had never known her to not be radiant. Suzanne’s platinum blond hair rarely looked anything but styled. Even this early in the morning she looked as though getting out of bed was naught but an inconvenience. As

Suzanne warmly greeted her friend, her tired smile gave way to a look of horror at the sight of Kate's bruised face.

"What happened?!" She screamed.

"Shhh" Kate said, making her way past Suzanne and into her apartment. Like the hallway, it too exuded with aristocratic French decorations. The crowning achievement of these was an ornate wine chest. The contents of which were meticulously sorted by region and price. Kate opened the cabinet and set about uncorking a rosé. Suzanne watched her friend with frantic worry, one hand still holding the door open.

"Please close the door," Kate said. "And keep your voice down."

"Keep my voice down!" Suzanne said, very much not keeping her voice down. "Look at your face! Who did that to you?!"

"I'll explain," Kate said. This didn't reassure Suzanne, and Kate had to stop her war on the cork of the wine bottle to cross the room and ease the door closed. Suzanne, still staring at Kate as if she was on fire, shrunk back towards her kitchen. She watched in horror as someone who had spent hours chatting with her about the contrasts of silk and velvet pried open a bottle of wine and drank from it like a faucet. It was all rather unseemly for her.

"Kate! Stop that!"

Kate, not stopping, held up a finger.

"Kate, that's quite unhealthy."

Kate released her mouth from the bottleneck, coughing.

"Seriously?" she said after recovering her breath.

Despite the pain in her rib, she locked eyes with her friend and dryly chuckled at the absurdity of Suzanne's worry. Suzanne couldn't keep a straight face and broke into silent laughter. Kate joined in, and finally free of her flight of terror, sprawled across the couch.

"Don't spill wine on my couch," Suzanne said.

This caused a louder fit of laughter that only ended when Kate grasped her side in pain. The uncontrollable giggles were too much and she slowly transitioned from a breathless wheeze to a desperate sob. Suzanne knelt beside her and cupped Kate's hand in hers.

"Kate," she said, "What happened?"

Kate wiped her eyes and took another sip of wine.

"I'm sorry, Suzie. I never should have come. I didn't have anywhere else"

"No. Kate, don't be sorry. I would-"

"-I am sorry. Look, I'm in a spot of trouble, ok. Well, a bit more than a spot, actually. I'm bloody screwed."

"Are you out of money?"

"No."

"Don't tell me you went to some loan sharks."

"I didn't"

"Kate! Did they assault you? We have to call-"

"-I DIDN'T GO TO A LOAN SHARK!"

Kate's outburst caused her to clutch her ribs again. Suzanne sprung to her feet in concern.

"I'm calling a doctor," she said, but before she could move, Kate gripped her arm.

"No," she said. "I can't see a doctor."

“Kate! Don’t be ridiculous!”

“No doctors!”

“Well then who the hell am I supposed to call?” Suzanne’s accent always slipped out when she became upset. “C’est pas vrai!” She exclaimed, continuing her rant. “You stumble into my apartment at four in the morning, looking like you fell under a horse-”

“-Suzie-”

“-You drink half of my favorite rosé without even asking if it’s ok, which it wasn’t and...”

Suzanne lost her train of thought. Kate took a deep breath and sat up. Suzanne had spent hours with Kate chatting, going about the city. She thought she’d seen every side of Kate from her most vulnerable to her happiest. However, the Kate she saw before her now gave her body a chill. Kate’s steely gray eyes set into a face of granite. She no longer looked like a battered twenty-year-old woman with a broken rib, but a force of immovable nature.

“Suzanne, I have little time to spare so I need you to listen and keep quiet, please.”

As if overcome by the word of god, Suzanne silently sat in the foyer chair across from her friend. Kate finished the last of the wine and prepared to release herself.

“Look, I lied to you, ok. I’m not a duchess. My parents aren’t away in the Pendlefields, they’ve been dead for years. I’m not here on a diplomatic leave, I’m a thief. I steal jewels, I forge passports, documents. I have-had a crew of fifty people that have followed me with complete loyalty. But...”

Kate sighed, unable to articulate her shortcomings. She recollected her thoughts and forced the truth out.



“This is a joke, no?” Suzanne asked.

“Suzie, it’s not a joke. I messed up. Something happened, I don’t know how, but I took this job to nab a locket from a museum and things went great. This other buyer wanted the piece, though. I thought he was just a professor, looking for some memorabilia that you can’t get legally. He wasn’t. Bloke turns out to be in charge of the biggest crime syndicate in the whole bloody city. Some bastard named Moriarty. I don’t know how, but he found our safe houses and just wiped us out. I’ve been doing this for decades and seen nothing so efficiently brutal. It took them about five minutes to get me out of our warehouse and into a van straight to the professor himself. Suzie, this man. He was unbelievably. I’ve never seen someone act so efficiently vile.”

“Did he do that to you?”

“No, one of his goons did. I’m lucky I escaped. He would have killed me. I barely made it here alive. He had people waiting for me at my home and my safe houses. I’ve been up all night.”

Suzanne stood up, motioning for the phone again.

“Kate, I’m calling the police.”

“No.”

“You’re not safe!”

“Suzie, I’m a thief. They’ll throw me in jail too. And Moriarty owns half of the men in this city.”

“Well then, what is there to do? Are you going to lay here until you die?”

“I need to get out of Brottberg.”

“How? You have no money and if this man is as influential as you say, he’ll have people watching the exits for you.”

Kate’s head dropped in shame as she forced herself to say what she was about to say.

“I need you to contact The Scarlet Pimpernel.”

Suzanne whipped her head around at the mention. A look of panicked fury only deepened Kate’s shame.

“Who told you that?”

“I... have connections,” Kate said, averting her gaze. “Word gets around here, especially among criminals.”

Suzanne sat down, overwhelmed by this development. After a moment, she spoke.

“Was all of this a lie?”

“What!?” Kate exclaimed. “No!”

“Just like your past and your job. Was everything we shared just part of your back-up plan?”

“That’s ridiculous. You know that’s not true.”

“Kate! I don’t know you anymore! I can’t trust you!”

“I’m sorry! I know. Suzanne, please. I need you. You’re the only friend I have left.”

Suzanne appraised Kate for a long time before getting up and walking to the phone.

“I’ll make a call,” she said. “Go rest. You need it.”

Suzanne began dialing, not looking at Kate. Sensing something broken, Kate made no further attempt to bridge the gap between them and limped over to Suzanne’s bedroom. She collapsed among the perfumed pillows, falling into a deep sleep.

