

CHAPTER 10: PRELUDES

by Paul Watson

Stafford House, some weeks later, the door to Lord Stone's study opens and closes. He looks up from the desk. "Griffen."

"Sir." the empty air replies.

"What do you think of them?"

There's a pause, "Where would you like me to start, sir?"

"Whoever you wish."

"Yes, sir. Peaseblossom is a scary sergeant-major. She makes Old Iron Lungs seem like a pussycat. And she's much more hands on than he ever was. That sword of hers stings."

"Yes. How is she adjusting to the loss of her clan?"

"Seems to be channelling all her frustrations into teaching the new kids."

"I see. Too hard on them?"

"They haven't broken yet, so probably not."

"Quite."

"Moving on. Manny is a discipline problem that's gotten bored of waiting to happen. I'm not sure why he came back, but he's surly, disrespectful and uncooperative. He's not a bad scrapper when he's backed into a corner, but I wouldn't like to trust him under fire."

"The Morn girl is competent. She's a bit hesitant. Always seems to be holding back."

"Which is a good thing, trust me."

"If you say so, but she's wound tight keeping herself under control. Worried she might explode."

"Understood. And Miss Eurayle?"

"Definitely the most proficient fighter. She's been trained well. Possibly a bit too well. She's not as good as she thinks she is and a real opponent would make her pay for that."

"A real opponent like you?"

"Reckon I could take her, sir, but the snakes complicate matters. Wouldn't like to be an invisible statue. Besides, it's not exactly fair to spring an attack she can't see."

"The world is rarely fair, Griffen. Especially in our line of work."

"Yes, sir."

"Of course, if you're worried about fairness..." he passes a heavy ring across the table, "...this should help."

The ring rises into the air, "What does it do?"

"Put it on and see."

The ring moves and slowly a matt tan hand appears in the air, the flat colours sweeping over the black uniform and tanned skin, exposing Griffen's bald head, firm jawline and filling in his eyes with brown colour and black pupils. He blinks several times before looking down at his hand.

"Sorry it's not as good as one of Mary's deceits, but it will mean you can walk around visible. Just twist the setting when you want to..." the colour fades out, like its paint being washed away.

"Sorry, sir. Going to take some practice to be...see in technicolour again."

"Take your time. But it will help with unit cohesion if the rest of the unit know when you're about."

"Yes, sir. That an order, sir?"

"It will be eventually. If necessary."

"Understood, s..." a flash of light erupts from the garden.

"What was that?"

Outside on the lawn, a collection of brass tubes curves around a leather seat with a ship's-wheel in front of it and a collection of pistons and cogwheels filling the rear, steam emerging from the top, metal-rimmed wheels digging into the grass. In the seat is a man in an Edwardian frock coat, somewhat worn and repaired skilfully with a shimmering cloth. He sports a pair of driving goggles and cap. In the footwell of his extravagant device lie a crystal-tipped spear and turn of the century revolver. He looks around at the figures laying sprawled on the floor, picking themselves up from

his explosive arrival, and raises the goggles, "The Serpent. The Half-Chained. Excellent." he looks at Latitia's arms, "Oh, dear, you're almost fully chained. That's not what I wrote at all. Madam, does the Knight of the Rat King number among your coterie yet?"

"The knight? Who do you...?"

"Curses. Too early. You're not ready yet. Well, I suppose a slight overshoot is to be expected." he taps the dashboard, "Still got fuel for a couple of local jumps." he pulls a lever besides the wheel. The cogs spin, the pistons pump and he vanishes in the same burst of light that he arrived in.

"What the fuck was that?" Manny demands.

Some time later, Griffen shifts uncomfortably on the couch, feeling far too vulnerable sitting visibly in the open. Manny lounges across a nearby armchair, a rat nestled into the crook of his arm. Peaseblossom sits up on shelf, kicking her legs over the edge. Latitia tries to stand still, her fingers twitching, while Diana leans casually on the doorjam, hands in her pockets. Stone puts the phone down on the table, turning to face them all. "Well, that's my civic duty performed. Westenra has been warned."

"So, what was that?"

"The Time Traveller."

"The who?"

"Have any of you read HG Wells' the Time Machine?"

"Yes, sir."

"Of course he has." Manny mutters.

"Though it was a while ago."

"Well, Mr Wells was a great writer, but he had a more significant talent: What he wrote was regarded as fiction, even if it happened."

"Hold on, hold on, sir, you're saying the Time Machine happened? The Morlocks and Eloi and all that?"

"Yes. That one barely needed his talents, though. It was very confined but genuine time travel is far too incendiary to be allowed to be known. The Martians were a much bigger problem."

"The...the War of the Worlds?! That really happened?!"

"Not as far as most people are concerned. But yes."

"What's all this got to do with that guy on the grass?" Diana asks.

"That was a time traveller. Before the First World War, he created a time travel device and went to the far, far future. After a major war, humanity split between the childlike Eloi living in the shadow of machines that looked after them, and the savage subterranean Morlocks. Long story short, Time Traveller falls in love there, has to travel back after a confrontation, tells his story and promptly hightails it back to the future."

"And that's the guy who appeared?"

"Him or a descendant. We don't know how long it's been for him, after all."

"So why'd he appear on our lawn?"

Stone sighs, "That's a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, indeed. I don't know. Yet. But it hardly augurs well that he's travelled back once more and seems to have sought us out."

"What did he mean about the knight?"

"Apparently our roster will grow, although I have no idea who he could be referring to."

"Pendragon?"

"I most sincerely hope not."

"I thought you were the great I am who knew everything."

"No, Mr King, I do not."

"Hey! How'd you know my name?!"

"I'm the great I am who knows everything, of course." he replies with a superior smirk, "Although, in this case, it's more that Westenra's people are very good at ferreting out information. He's given me dossiers on all of you."

"All of us, Lord of the Stones?"

"With the exception of yourself, Lady. Your people do not interact much with human bureaucracy, after all."

"So you know all our secrets?"

"Hardly. I know basic biographical details, such as your name, and assessments where the department has had a chance to conduct them, which on you, they have not. There's a note somewhere about having to rectify that with you."

"Hah!! Not likely."

"Anyway, the Time Traveller is a problem we'll resolve, ironically, in time. There's nothing we can do about it now. We know less about his purpose than we do about our conspiracy and we know precious little there."

"So what exactly are we doing? Just waiting around, letting your sadistic Tin...fairy sting us all day?"

"If you paid any attention at all, you wouldn't get stung quite so much."

Diana raises her hand, "I'm with Manny on this one."

Peaseblossom sighs very loudly for such a diminutive woman, "When you can complete the tasks without earning a sting, you won't get stung. It's very simple. Until then, you get encouragement."

"Encouragement she calls it." Manny mutters.

"You are all my clanmates now. Anything less than perfection could mean death or injury for any of us, not just the incompetent one. And I will not..."

The phone rings, interrupting her, "Stafford Ha..."

"Stone," the voice on the other end of the line is deep, sonorous as if emerging from a barrel-chest and yet it rasps out like a death-rattle, "I require your assistance. I am at a critical stage of my experiments and the assistant Westenra insisted I utilise has gone missing."

"I see. Gone missing where?"

"How should I know? I'm not allowed to put a tracking device on her. Probably still on the island. I need her found before something happens to her."

"I didn't know you cared for..."

"Don't be ridiculous. She's above averagely competent, true, but I don't care for her. I just don't want to have to train up Westenra's next spy when I could be doing proper work! When can you get here?"

"I'll bring my team down tomorrow."

"Team? They're letting you have underlings again?" there's a heavy snort, "That should make the search quicker, at least." the phone clicks silent.

"Goodbye to you, too, Doctor." he turns to the room, "Well, it seems we have an excursion to another of Mr Wells' not-quite-so-fanciful locations. Dr Moreau needs us to find a missing lab assistant."