

CHAPTER 11: THE DOCTOR IS IN

by Paul Watson

The small launch pulls into a small wooden jetty, the dark sea water foaming to white as it slams against the rocky cliff above. "Friendly place, innit?" Manny quips, clinging tightly to the seat as the boat rocks, looking more than a little green but doing his best to front it out.

"The Doctor does not like visitors. Frankly, we don't want him to have many, either."

"Oh? Figure he'll use them in his experiments?"

Stone remains silent on the prow.

"Wait, you really do think he'd do that?! And we're walking in there?"

"I promise not to let him use any of you for his experiments. Most of you, at least."

"I heard that!"

"Fine. Even you're safe from him, Manny." The launch bumps up against the pillars. Stone casually leaps over the railing onto the the jetty. "Throw me the rope and I'll tie you off. No, that one." The rope lifts up, sea water dripping off Griffen's invisible skin, the coil flying through the air. Stone makes short work of things, knotting the rope around the mooring. "Thank you, Maggie. Much calmer than the weather should be." he murmurs before offering his hand to help Diana across.

"Be more careful, Lord of the Stones. I'm here for shelter, not to be bumped about like a common piece of luggage." a voice hisses directly into his ear.

"My apologies, Lady." he replies quietly.

Stone walks confidently across the damp planks, barnacles clinging to the pillars.

Manny comes last, staring from the pitching deck into the foaming water before making the leap.

The jetty creaks. He looks nervously around, calculating how long it will take to reach the stone plaza built into the cliff-edge. "Well, let's go after our dear leader."

On the plaza, a set of stone steps curves into a narrow crevasse. "No welcome? How rude." Diana replies, shaking off her bright yellow poncho.

"He'll be up in his laboratory. No sense waiting until we're all drenched through and shivering.

Watch your step, the steps are a bit slick."

"Great. Looking forward to this." Manny mutters as they wend their way up the switchbacks to the top of the cliff.

The area at the top is devoid of grass, gulls wheeling overhead, scrutinising these new intruders into their domain, cawing in challenge. Manny feels his hair standing on edge, fingers curling. A sprawling single-layer structure sits inside a ring of stone walls. Puddles form in the rutted dirt track leading to the thick gate that looms shut. Further across the plateau, copses of dark trees hunker against the wind and rain. "Who works here? King Kong? Don't tell me he's real, too!"

"No. At least, not to my knowledge." he presses the buzzer. And waits. And waits. He presses it again.

"What?!" the speaker rasps, "I am busy!"

"Doctor. We are here, as you requested. Would it be too much trouble to open the gates? It is a little inclement outside."

"Took your time, didn't you?" The gates very slowly move inwards, revealing the more modern lab building. The glass windows are small and deeply recessed, the walls once white, now stained by the wind, wave and wildlife. Most is in darkness, pools of light spilling from one set of windows at the back of the building.

The doors open more promptly than the gates, which have already shut behind them, lights flickering into ghostly life along the corridor. "Ah, it's good to be back in the dry." Griffen mutters, stepping in, his dripping invisible poncho floating over to the pegs by the door.

The others shuck off their ponchos, revealing their black suits and white shirts. Latitia wears her tie straight down her body. Manny's shirt hangs open, his collar undone, the knot hanging on his collarbone. Diana has ditched the tie entirely.

"It's not dusty, but it doesn't look like this place is exactly used a lot." Latitia says, nodding at the

cracks winding their way through the uniform grey paint.

"Lookss like ssomething out of a horror game." Diana agrees.

"Very scientific."

"It lookss like itss held together by ssheer willpower. That ssoundss sscientific to me."

"We shouldn't keep the Doctor waiting. He's abrasive enough."

"Sounds like a real sweetheart." Manny grouses.

"Oh, he is." Stone sets off down the corridor, the lights flickering on ahead of him.

"You know your way around this rat's nest, sir?"

"Hey! Rats wouldn't live in this shithole." Manny protests.

"Some years ago, but the layout doesn't change."

"Can anybody else smell that?" Latitia asks, wrinkling her nose, avoiding her taunting reflection in the glass panes.

"Antiseptic." Manny sniffs, "Blood. Formaldehyde? Some other chemicals I can't place. And something that just smells...weird."

"That's a lot from one sniff."

"The nose knows. Wish I could place that weird one. It'll be bugging me. It's like blood, but not as coppery. Sets my hair on end."

They turn the corner, a pool of light spilling through the doors ahead.

"Are you sure we're not in a horror movie?"

"We're not. But you might not think so once you meet the Doctor himself."

"You're really not selling this, you know." Latitia says, standing back a little.

"I know." he bangs on the door, "Doctor! We're here. Open up!" There's another wait, metallic scraping and clanging coming from inside the room. "He always does this. Proving he's in charge."

"Yeah, you musst hate it when ssomeone else doess that."

The door opens. The figure inside looms above them, casting them all in shadow. His skin is sallow, thin enough to not even conceal his corded muscles moving beneath it. His cracked, black lips are pressed together into a thin line. Watery eyes stare down at them, lustrous black hair tied into a tangled knot under his surgical cap. He wears a once-white smock stained with blood and other fluids. At the edge of the latex surgical gloves covering his large hands, faded surgical scars encircling his wrists show clearly, a surgical mask hanging around his neck.

"Finally." he rasps, his voice deep and booming, revealing perfect gleaming white teeth. Manny gags as the smell gets stronger. "You need people with stronger constitutions, Stone." the watery eyes focus, "Interesting." he reaches for calipers. "Some animal features. Wiry frame. Bulge for a tail, possibly. I'll need a blood sample. I haven't had a chance to examine a rodenthrope before."

Manny backs up. "You ain't getting one now, neither. I'm not your lab experiment." he reaches into his jacket, bony fingers closing around the handle of his shiv.

The face scowls, features that could be perfect in isolation combining into something fearsome. "It is vitally important for science. I could improve so much if..."

"Doctor..."

"Fine. I'll sacrifice the benefits to the work for now." the watery eyes sweep over the others.

"Devil-chained. Worthless. Everything done by magic. Fairy, even worse. At least the devil has the good grace to pretend to biology. Gorgon. The most interesting after the rodenthrope, but too contaminated by myth and magic to help much. Reptile DNA just does not mix well enough with mammals. And...another one? The cameras didn't show, oh, of course, a Griffen. Is there any sign of psychopathy yet? No issues with bodily degradation?"

"Doctor Moreau!"

The Doctor looks at Stone.

"We are here on business. Your lab assistant?"

"Oh, yes, well. She's not in the building. Believe me I've checked. Her quarters haven't been slept in."

"For how long?"

The Doctor shrugs, "A day? Two? Under a week."

"And is that how long she's been missing?"

"Probably. Don't give me that look. I've been busy. You cradlesnatched miscegenations wouldn't understand."

"So she's outside."

"That's what I said, isn't it? She's probably dead. She didn't evidence much in ways of survival skills."

"Do you think your creatures..."

"No, no. I don't work with carnivores. I won't repeat the mistake of my predecessor. Predators have too many instincts and features that cause problems. I am not a fool."

"What are you doing here?" Diana asks, trying to get a look around his immense lean frame.

"Science. The original Moreau's surgeries were inspired, pioneering, genius even. But they are sadly inadequate. Even where he was successful, to maintain any kind of population, he had to perform them every generation. Hideously inefficient. Genetics is where the future is. Proteomics."

"You're making...creatures?" Latitia asks.

"No! Never creatures. Soldiers. Workers. Combining the best features of humanity and the entire animal kingdom, designing life for the task at hand. Mole rat genes to survive cancer. Mole hybrids for mining. Rats to resist diseases. The possibilities are truly wondrous to improve on the flawed design of creation!"

"Very interesting, I'm sure, Doctor. But we are here to find your missing assistant."

The Doctor deflates. "Or what's left of her. Even if they're not carnivorous, very few animals would turn up free energy if they stumbled upon her once she's got her fool self killed."

"I don't suppose you have a photo somewhere of...what is her name, exactly?"

"Hmmm? Oh, I've no idea. I don't concern myself with trivialities like that. Her photo will be in her file."

"Could you get it, do you think? So we can get out of your way?"

He huffs, the door swinging closed behind him. "I suppose I must, if it will prevent further interruptions." He moves smoothly down the corridor, making a fast pace, every part of his body moving in unnervingly perfect coordination. "Do not enter my laboratory." he calls back, "I will not have you contaminating the specimen. It took forever to convince those blind fools to let me have it."

"I'm ssure a peek wouldn't..."

Stone puts his hand on Diana's shoulder. "No. We do not want the Doctor angry."

"Because we wouldn't like him when he'ss angry?" Diana smiles, deflating slightly when no-one gets the joke.

"He's not exactly likeable when he's not angry." Manny mutters.

"Ok, ok. I won't enter the lab. I promise. Guidess' honour." she holds up two fingers pressed together.

"You were a Guide?"

"They taught better bushcraft than my dad could. He'ss always hated getting out of the scity."

"Were you a Brownie, too?"

"Of coursse."

"A brownie? You're a might tall for that by my measure. Not to mention the utter lack of even a smidgen trace of fey..."

"The Brownies are an organisation, Lady Peaseblossom."

"They couldn't name them after some decent class of fey?"

"Apparently...get away from that door!"

"I'm not going insside!" Diana protests, standing right up against the door on tiptoe, stretching her snakes up to peer through the porthole window. She gasps and peddles back.

"What was in there? Is he working on a body?"

"I don't know. It was tentacless, all tentacless and a giant blob in the middle."

"Let me take a look." Griffen startles her from right beside her elbow. "That is a lot of tentacles. It's big, too. Probably weighs a few hundred pounds. Big hole, size of a plate, it looks like, and

something that's been dissected, probably an eye. V-shaped beak of a mouth. It almost looks like... no, it can't be..."

"Can't be what?"

"It's a Martian. He's dissecting a Martian."

Stone's eyes widen a little, "Well, that explains the smell, I suppose."

"But...it's a Martian!"

"Or some other cephalopodal creature. Strange sights are going to be a feature of our work, I'm afraid. Now get away before he comes back."

The Doctor's return finds them clustered innocently away from the door. He grunts and slaps a folder into Stone's hand. "There." On the cover is a chubby face behind owlish glasses and dark straight hair, not quite suppressing a smile for her official picture, the name tag indicating it belongs to one Dr Alice Jekyll.