

CHAPTER 12: THE ISLAND

by Paul Watson

The island of Doctor Moreau, one of the disused areas of the laboratory complex, currently in use. The lights are pure white, illuminating the lab bench below where a faded map of the island is spread out. "In order to make most progress, we'll split into three teams of two. Each of us will take one quadrant of the island."

"Three teams for four quadrants? Did they cover maths at Eton?"

Stone fixes Manny with a narrow glare. "I did not go to Eton." he replies frostily, "We do not need to cover the area near the laboratory. For one, it's exposed so we'll see her on the way out. For two, the Doctor will have..."

"Are you ssure about that? I don't think he'ss all that bothered by her ssafety."

"Possibly not. But we'll search that quadrant if it becomes necessary." He points at the map, "One team will take the forested area, one the hills and one the cliffs."

"Forest will take the most searching. Low line of sight. Lots of ambush points." Griffin notes, standing at the back, visible in the flat way the ring manages for him.

"I thought the Doctor said he only used herbivores?"

"Ever seen a stampede? Hippos kill more people a year than lions. And if they're protecting their territory or young, pretty much anything can be aggressive."

"Noted. We'll probably have more than one day to search, so we can address that tonight."

"We're spending the night here?"

"It would take too long to take the launch back and then return."

"So we're spending the night in the horror set with a doctor who wants to dissect me?" Manny protests.

"Don't worry, Manny. We'll be ssure to protect you."

"Real reassuring." he mutters, shaking her arm off his shoulder. One snake turns to stare directly at him, it's forked tongue flicking in and out.

"So, one senior member of the team and one junior per sector. Ms Morn and I will takes the cliffs. Manny and Griffin will take the hills, leaving the forests for Lady Peaseblossom and Diana."

In the forest, the rain dripping from leaves even after it's left the air. Diana hunches her shoulders, the droplets spattering over her poncho, her hair hissing sullenly at ever drop that rolls down their scales. Peaseblossom sits on her shoulder under the limited shelter there, eyeing the snakes suspiciously. "Don't worry. They won't eat you."

"I'd like to see them try." Peaseblossom replies haughtily, but she holds her glowing blade a little tighter as she says it.

"I doubt it. No one likess sseeing...sstop that!" the reared snake slinks back, closing its mouth.

"Don't you control those..."

"Kiiinda." Diana replies, pushing a wet branch out of the way, one snake keeping a slitted eye on Peaseblossom, "Gorgon biology iss weird. They're not really ssentient, but I have to think to conssciously control them. Like how your fingerss will drum if you're not thinking about anything. My ssubconsscious rules the sshow."

"Very reassuring."

"I'm ssure a warrior of your calibre can handle them."

"Of course. I just don't want to injure you."

"Of course." she looks deeper into the woods, "There'ss a clearing up ahead. Rasce you."

"We do not have time for that. We have been charged to look for..."

"Well, if you're sscares of lossing..."

"To you?" she looks at the small patch of weak sunlight up ahead, "I suppose I can spare a few minutes to put you in your place."

"Oh, I'm ssure. Ready?"

Peaseblossom shakes her wings out, hovering amongst the drips. "Always."

“Markss. Sset. Go!” she bursts forward.

Peaseblossom darts through the still air, wings buzzing, weaving through the water dripping through the spring green leaves.

Diana smiles, putting her hand on a fallen tree to vault over it, only to find it's hiding a dip, slipping in the mud and falling onto her hands.

Peaseblossom surges ahead with a mocking salute.

Diana pushes herself up and runs to catch up.

Peaseblossom nears the edge of the glade, still ahead, although a quick glance reveals Diana far closer to her heels than she'd like. A close race would hardly teach her a lesson. She slows, her hands weaving through a complicated gesture. The branches respond, bending down to impede Diana's path, the roots rising to trip her. “That'll teach you.”

Diana has to slow down, and when she finally makes it to the clearing her hair is hissing in agitation. “Did you have anything to do with that?”

“With what?” Peaseblossom replies innocently.

“You know with what! Ssomething made the trees attack me.”

“Oh, pssh. That wasn't an attack.”

“I knew it! You cheated!”

She shrugs, “I'd have won anyway.”

“That'ss worsse! You get how that'ss worsse, right?!”

“I really don't see what the fuss is about. The better person...” she stops, staring at the floor of the clearing.

“The 'better persson' iss going to get hersself sstoned if sshe doess that again.” Diana grouses as she gets closer.

“Stop!”

“Now what?”

“You almost went into the fairy ring.”

“The what?”

Peaseblossom points at the ring of pale mushrooms, circling her finger around. “Fairy ring. I don't want to lo...have to explain how I got you lost in the Fair Realms to Lord Stone.”

Diana snorts, “That'ss jusst new age bollockss.”

“Excuuuse me. Which of us is an actual...” she stops as something whistles through the air.

“What wass...ow!” something stings against her back.

“We're being attacked!”

Diana turns to the woods. High in the trees, a grey furred arm whirls a sling around, an acorn nestled in the bucket. Black eyes stare out under rounded, tufted ears, a bushy tail curling up like a question mark. Around that side of the clearing, dozens more rest in the branches, loading new ammunition into their weapons.

In the hills, Manny stomps through the wet ground. “How come I get stuck with you?”

“You'd prefer Peaseblossom?” the air replies.

“At least I could see her!”

“Sometimes.”

“Sometimes is better than no times. Which is what I'm dealing with here. Why don't you put Stone's ring on so I can see you?!”

“How do you know about that?”

“I notice things. It's a bit chunky for a career soldier. Awkward. Flashy. You're not the flashy type. Very by the book. Probably make sure you've got full-on hospital corners on the bed. All ship-shape and Bristol fashion.”

“As opposed to the nest you've made?”

“Nest?!”

“That tangle of blankets and rubbish you call a bed.”

“Been spying on my room? Been doing that to the girls too, I bet, you dirty...” he stops, up on his tiptoes, his jacket bunching as invisible hands pull him up. Breath pushes into his face.

"Say that again, sonny," he growls, "and I'll make you regret you didn't keep flouncing off the first time. You get me?"

"I get you." the hands lower him back to the ground. He straightens up his jacket. "You touch me like that again, soldier boy, and I'll..." he runs his finger across his throat.

"Better than you have tried."

"We'll see about that, won't we?"

"Not if you're smart. And I know you think you're smart."

Manny smiles thinly. "Smart enough." he replies walking back and forth, waving his arms, "Better than a mug who lets himself get blackmailed into being a government stooge. Yeah, there's a report on you, too, in Stone's collection."

"Which you've read."

"Told you. I notice things."

"And get into things you have no right to be."

"Look who's talking. The Invisible Man himself. Did they tell you what happened to the others, Griffin 7, or do you prefer Captain Adye?"

"What did you say?"

"Well, it seems that..." he stops staring through Griffin.

"What are you..."

There's a snort behind him. Griffin turns as hooves clomp in the mud. A man stands there, but taller than almost any man Griffin's seen, socks of thick fur around flat hooves instead of feet, his skin mottled, patches of dark and pale skin spreading in swirling patterns across his body. His face is long, equine, ears folded forward, blunt teeth bared, a strip of stiff hair running down his neck. A hand-carved wooden spear rests in his thick hands. Behind him are two more burly figures of a different breedstock, just as tall but broader, heavier, a pair of short curved horns pushing out from their bovine foreheads, clubs slung over their shoulders. "What here?" he whinnies, raising his spear, his nostrils flaring. "Man scent. Rat scent!" Manny raises his hands.

The cliffs, the waves crashing below, the spray carrying up across the rocky face. Stone peers over the edge, Latitia standing several feet back. "No sign of her. Of course, if she fell, the sea would have taken her."

"Why are you looking there if she'd..."

"Ledges. If there are any, she might have landed down there, or there might be caves. But all we've got are bloody gulls." he pushes himself up. "Matthew, are there any caves in the area?"

"I...shall...see...Grandfather." the ponderous voice rumbles in his mind.

"What was that?"

"Talking to myself."

*"He's lying. What is he hiding from you? What **else** is he hiding from you?"* her demonic voice whispers.

"Are you alright?"

She blinks, "What?"

"You were a little spaced out. Your other causing trouble?"

"You know about?"

"You're not my first chained soul, Ms Morn."

"Supercilious git. Talking down to you like that. You should make him pay for that. A taste of iron claws would..."

"Stop it!" Stone looks at her quizzically, "Not you, her!"

"I see."

"It's ok. I'm fine. I'm good."

"Oh, sweetie, you are anything but good."

"I'm good." she repeats to internal demonic laughter.

"Good. Let's get back from the edge. We wouldn't want you to fall."

"Right, right. Definitely not."

"Weakling."

"Are you afraid of your other?"

"Afraid? I'm not afraid of her."

"I agree. You're not afraid. You're terrified of me. Especially of becoming me, like you know you will."

"I'm not afraid of her." she repeats, although the quickening of her heartbeat and the itch along her brands indicates otherwise.

"The amount you're holding back indicates otherwise."

"Of course I'm holding back! You saw what happens when I don't hold back!"

"Mmmmm. That was fun. Imagine what I'll do when you break the next chain."

"And if you're holding back all the time, you'll overcorrect when we get into a real combat. Which is the worst time for a demon to get loose."

"That's not exactly comforting."

"I'm not very good at comforting. You've got abilities from breaking that link. You need to know what and how to use it."

"But..."

"That way you won't need to dip further into the Pit."

"Hey! Don't listen to him. He just wants to keep you weak and useless like now. If you become more powerful, he won't be able to control you. I just want you to be free."

"I...see. I..."

"There...are...no...natural...caverns...but...tunnels...have...been...carved."

"Interesting."

"What?"

"There are apparently tunnels. Not natural, either. So someone's carved them."

"How do you..."

"I have my ways."

"Yes, oh mysterious elder."

"Diana is rubbing off on you."

Latita's cheeks flush. *"I mean, you so want her to. I've told you I can help with that."*

"I wonder who could have..." The ground collapses beneath their feet, plunging them down into a tunnel, a circle of light around them, dirt drifting down around them. Beady eyes glint in the darkness, velvety black fur merging with the shadows. Pink snouts snuffle the air, whiskers twitching. Large spade-like hands raise defensively, each thick finger capped by solid claws. "Well, I guess that answers that question."