

CHAPTER 13: THE CREATURES

by Paul Watson

Under the island, Stone and Latitia lie surrounded by mole men, their exit ten feet above them, the tunnel cramped with loose earth. Stone rises, the mole men chattering, waving their earth-boring claws. He dusts himself off. "So, who's in charge here?"

The mole men pause.

"Come on, the Doctor said you were intelligent. You don't have to speak English, but you understand it, don't you?"

"Chief." one croaks, voice unaccustomed to forming English words. It points down the tunnel.

"Excellent." he reaches down to help Latitia up, "Then, take us to your leader." He starts down the dark tunnel, stooping to fit, leaving the patch of pale light behind as the mole men snuffle and prowl around them.

Manny stumbles over the grasses, the ground wet and muddy, crude ropes digging into his arms.

"Bloody typical. I get kidnapped and, of course, he doesn't. Bloody ponce in a bloody suit. I knew it was a crap idea."

"Will you shut up?" Griffin hisses in his ear, "What's better? Both captured or one free to get you out?"

"If I thought you'd get me out, I wouldn't..." the blunt end of the wooden spear pokes into his back.

"No talk."

Manny stiffens, his muscles tensing. He stumbles forward in sullen silence, surrounded by the smell of the farmyard, a reminder of a school trip he hasn't thought about for years.

In the forest clearing, Diana turns her back on the trees, the nuts stinging against her back rather than her face, the jacket blunting the impact. Not enough but some. "I don't suppose you can get those branches to dump them on the floor?"

"Not from here. The trees couldn't hear me."

"Great. Well, you're the soldier. So, Sarge, what's the plan?" her snakes hiss as a nut bounces against her skull.

Peaseblossom looks around. "There's no cover. So we're sitting aphids out here. We need to get under cover."

"Fine." her hand flashes out, grabbing Peaseblossom from the air.

"Hey!"

"I'll make it up to you later, but ass you can't cheat..." she starts running and races across the mushroom edge of the fairy ring. The world swims around her. Sounds are too bright in her eyes. The light tastes differently. The feel of the grass under her feet pounds in her ears and she stumbles to the edge of the ring into bright sunlight in an azure sky. The grass under her feet is more vibrant, the trees taller, the air fresher and filled with music.

"Oberon and Titania!" Peaseblossom curses. "We're in Faerie!"

Diana turns, staring directly into green eyes a little too bright to be human. She stands nearly six feet tall, slender in her form-fitting black and gold beetle-leather armour. Her angular face looks out from her helm, her blonde hair sparkling at the edges of her helm. Her sliver of a sword now looks deadly, slim and sharp, just like its wielder. "We're what?"

"Shhhh, for Goddess' sake." she looks at the shimmer in the air, "And don't step out of the ring until I say so."

"Why?"

Peaseblossom rolls her eyes, far more noticeably than when she's her regular size, "Because we're not fully in Faerie so the time distortions won't apply. But we have to get out to use the gate back. Hopefully a few seconds won't matter but..." There's a rustle in the wood, the insects going quiet, hooves clapping onto a path that's barely perceptible even to Peaseblossom. "By the Horned God, what now?" she sheaths her sword, drawing and nocking her bow but keeping the arrow pointed at the ground.

"What? What's going on?"

"Hopefully a patrol. Unhopefully an entourage."

"A what?"

"Hopefully we don't find out. Keep low and keep quiet."

"Ssure thing, bosss, I'll unnggh!" she doubles over.

"Diana!"

"Well, well, what do we have here?" a mellifluous voice asks. Peaseblossom looks up at the fine horses, the owner clad in a rainbow of silk and satin, a sword that's never seen real use hanging from his hip. Grim guardsmen, whose swords have definitely seen extensive use, glower around him.

"Oberon and Titania." she mutters.

Back on the island, underground, the darkness pressing in with the weight of rock. *"I can't believe you're going along with this. We're sitting ducks. Surrounded by these savages. They're going to kill us and eat us! You need to strike them down and escape."*

Latitia tries to keep her calm as her demon nags her on and on to violence. Her fingers flex on their own accord, itching to let the dark claws out.

"Yes, yes. Show them what real claws are. Not for digging, claws and teeth for tearing flesh."

"Will you shut up?" she tries to still her heart, the darkness offering no impediment to her vision, so she can see the mole creatures clustering around, more and more joining them at the edges of the throng. Stone stoops in the tunnel, appearing utterly unbothered by being outnumbered dozens to one. The tunnel widens out, the walls becoming more clearly crafted. Smaller tunnels carve out into the walls, each disgorging more and more of the mole people. The smell of earth and fur becomes overwhelming. Stone stands straight, now that he can, still like a statue. Latitia tries to emulate him, but her demon keeps her wired with nervous energy.

The lead mole man scurries into one of the tunnels. The hall fills with the snuffle of the mole people taking their scent. From out of the tunnel hobbles a large mole-like creature, beady eyes focusing on them. His fur is grey, regular surgical scars around his skull, chest and arms. He takes in a deep breath. He says something in whatever language the mole men speak and the lead mole man relays it. The tension in the air relaxes somewhat as he hobbles towards them.

"You. Not Doctor's?"

"No, we are not the Doctor's creations. We..."

"Not Doctor's." he repeats sagely. "Why?"

"Why aren't we..."

"Why here? Why in our tunnels?"

"Well..."

Manny approaches the stockade, still bound, increasingly annoyed. The wooden gate opens and he stumbles into the clearing inside. The ground is packed flat and solid. To one side a windmill sits half-constructed. A variety of animal-human hybrids cluster around the returning patrol. Some are covered in coarse hair, horns rising from their foreheads, others have curling horns and thick coats of wool. A couple have tusks and snuffling noses. The others match their patrol. In short, a farmyard of hybrids, lacking chickens, cats and dogs. The patrol lead whinnies.

"Fetch Mayor Snowball. We have second man-scent."

"Second." Griffin says in his ear, "You stall them. I'll find out if it's our missing researcher."

"No talk." another jab with the spear butt into Manny's back.

"Right. No talk. I wasn't the one fucking..." the jab is harder this time, knocking him a step forward.

Out of one of the wooden halls comes a porcine figure, surrounded by burly guardsmen of a variety of former species. He looks down his snout, his curly tail bobbing as his trotters land on the hard ground. He snuffles the air. "Boxer, what is this?"

"Found man-scent. Rat-scent."

"Both you say? I wonder if he's a spy for the rats on the Doctor or the Doctor on the rats?" he shrugs, "Either way, having him running loose here is a risk I'm not inclined to take."

“Hey, now, wait a...”

“No talk!” the spear knocks him to the floor.

“Calm yourself, Bessy.” he squats down, “Don't worry, we're not animals here, haw. You'll be treated humanely, haw, until we know what threat you pose. Only then will we decide what to do with you. I assure you it will be much less barbaric than how you treat our forebears. Now, take him to the cells.”

“Moove.”

Under the ground, the scent of damp earth all around them, “Not Doctor's. But help Doctor?” he shakes his head.

“The Doctor is missing a research assistant. We are here to find her.”

“Know her. Not here. Not as bad-hurt as Doctor. But help Doctor, so not good. You help Doctor, not good.” his yellow incisors suddenly seem very prominent in his mouth. “Doctor hurt. Create us, but hurt us. Create me, but create hurt. All hurt. Doctor hurt.”

“We are not here to hurt anyone.”

“Doctor hurt. Help Doctor. Say no hurt? How? Help Doctor is hurt!”

An ugly ripple passes through the mole-men.

“Told you. Surrounded, outnumbered, and I don't like the thought of these things tearing us limb from limb!”

“We have no intention of hurting you. But we are quite prepared to...”

“Talk, talk, talk. Say help not hurt.” he beckons with a claw, “Come. Prove help.”

They follow in a little circle of cleared space as the mole-men part before them and reform after, blocking the exits. They come to a circular stone in the wall, flanked by two-mole men in masks.

“Open.” The guards pull the stone aside, revealing a small entrance. “Enter. Help.”

Stone stoops down, entering a room that smells more of death and sickness than the outside. Latitia follows, casting wary glances at the mole men outside, her inner demon screaming at her to not be so stupid.

Inside, several mole men, some merely tiny pups, lie listlessly about, breathing weakly, bodies covered in pustules.”You say help. Doctor hurt, You help.”

Latitia turns as the stone rolls back into place. Darkness falls, deep and pure, her goat-pupil eyes catching details in black and white. *“I fucking told you!”*

Griffin follows the Mayor back into the lodge. *Stupid fucking kid can't keep his stupid fucking mouth shut. I should...* He shakes his head to focus on the mission. The room looks comfortable. Bare earth, a rumpled nest of straw in the corner, a crude desk and chair at the back of the room besides a rickety bookcase. Griffin sidles over, finding a variety of books there, agriculture, engineering, science, medicine and one well-thumbed copy of Animal Farm.

The Mayor settles into the wooden chair with a creak. He spreads a map out on the table. Griffin can't help but look over his shoulder. The map shows the island. The forest is marked in overlapping blobs of green and blue, labelled squirrels and rabbits. The centre of the island is marked in one colour, homeland, with the stockade oversized and smaller forts highlighted. A small area around the laboratory is marked in white. Red lines carve winding paths through the whole island, marked as domain of the moles. And by the side, noted in the margins, in black to indicate the dots everywhere is just the word 'Rats'.

“Interesting, isn't it?” the Mayor says.

Griffin freezes.

“Yes, I know you're there, Man-Spy. Too many scents outside but in here? You stand out. I give you that you're quiet and my eyes can't see you at all. Among humans you must be considered very stealthy. So, what are you here for, haw?”

Manny slumps his way to a small wooden building with tiny little windows carved in the walls. The relentless prod of the spear butt drives him onward.. The floors are hard-packed earth, a dusting of

straw. They shove him in, hearing a door lock behind him. “Fucking wonderful. Even the pigs uncuff you first.”

“I wouldn't make any animal-based insults.” a quiet voice says from a shadowed corner, “They don't like it. Pretty understandable, really, I suppose.”

“And who're you?”

“Well, I did rather assume you're here looking for me. The Doctor doesn't like visitors at the best of times.” she extends a hand from the shadows, “Alice Jekyll. Pleased to meet you. Although it could be under better circumstances.”