

CHAPTER 14: TRIBULATIONS

by Paul Watson

In his crude cell, Manny peers into the shadows. "You're fucking kidding me. You're the missing researcher?!"

Alice retracts her hand. She straightens her glasses. "I am. Like I said, I'm Alice Jekyll. And you are?"

"Oh, right. I'm King Rat. Manny. You can call me Manny."

"King Rat?"

"It's a...look, that's not important right now.."

She shrugs, "I've got time. In fact, we've got nothing but time. Unless getting captured was part of some master plan of yours?"

Manny sighs, "Ok, ok. I get it. You go first."

"Sure. How far back do you want to go?"

"Well, we've got nothing but time apparently, so..."

"Yes?"

"Ladies first."

She purses her lips, "Ok, but if we get rescued before it's your turn I'm going to insist on hearing it. Maybe over a drink."

"Yeah, sure. Wait, what did you say?"

He sees her smile in the shadows, noticing a change in her scent. "Ok, the life story of Alice Jekyll, abridged. Starts ordinarily, suburban middle class upbringing. No trauma, usual amount of teenage drama. Especially as little Alice was not interested in girly things, no matter how much she was told she should be. More interested in test tubes than boob tubes, not that I had much to show there.

Glasses, braces, chubby, I couldn't be more stereotypical science nerd girl unless I was covered in spots."

"You seem to be pretty ok now."

"That's sweet, but I was not girly enough for anyone. No interest in clothes. No interest in boys. Or girls, for that matter. My parents would much rather I was a lesbian than whatever brand of socially isolated introvert I actually was. And that doesn't account for the fact that everyone knows the basics of the Jekyll and Hyde story and kids are exceptionally inventive if they can be cruel with it, so I had to live with that. No wonder I wasn't interested in people. So, being smarter than the average bear, or British teenager, neither of which is that difficult, I got fast tracked. GCSEs in one year, A-levels in another, blitzing through biochem degree before I'm 20 and a masters just after and then I get recruited by MI13. You probably know what that's like."

Manny grunts, trying futilely to pull his wrists out of the rough loops of rope.

"Another year working in their labs, doing things that have no right to actually work but do. Then the Doctor needed a lab assistant and they asked me if I wanted to go. Well, obviously I said yes. Not like I really cared about being alone. Figured it would be good for me, so I could focus on the work. Turns out I like people around, I just don't need to talk to them. Especially as the Doctor is...driven. I'm doing well, not doing anything too tricky lab-wise but I'm learning a lot..Apparently, he usually runs off a researcher after six months. Still, once he got his latest specimen..."

"The Martian?"

"Oh, you've seen it. And know what it is. Interesting. Anyway, yes, after he got hold of that, he lost interest in the humanimals and didn't want me working on it. Doesn't want anyone else working on it. Only trusts his own hands to not contaminate it. So I was rather at a loose end and I figured someone should survey them. I did not expect a fully functioning frontier farm and especially didn't expect to be locked up. They feed me. Treat me decently but I don't know what they're going to do with me. I don't think they know, either. I was beginning to lose hope that the Doctor had even noticed I'd been gone and if he had didn't care enough to find me. And then you show up. So, you've heard my story. Your turn, 'King Rat'."

"Yeah, uh, well..." a rat scurries up his leg, its black fur sleek, claws grasping at the threads of his

trousers, "well, sweetie, who are you, then?"

"Oh, you talk to animals as well. I thought it was just..."

The rat's eyes glow as it stands up on its hind paws, "The Rat King will tolerate no pretenders to our domain." it squeaks, its voice humming, "Leave this place, alive and of your own volition now, or when we've cracked your bones and shat your flesh out later."

Faerie, as a howl of pain rips its way from Diana's throat. The Lord's slim horse takes a step back, the extravagant feather in his black and blue chaperon bobbing. The black armoured guards with their curved spade-shaped helmets cluster around him. Their gauntlets tighten on their swords.

"Keep that...thing quiet, or else!" the noble demands.

"I would hope the Lord does not intend something we all shall greatly regret." Peaseblossom replies, eyes flicking across the grim faces of the guards.

"I'm sorry. Did you just threaten me?"

"Of course not, Lord. That would be incredibly foolish with your yeoman standing right there."

Diana lets loose another howl as her brass claws tear through her skin, digging into the soil. Her fangs lengthen, jutting out of her lips. Her snakes hiss as they thrash, their scaly hide spreading across her skin, her jacket bulging and tearing as dark feathery wings tear free.

"What is that?! What foul thing have you brought into...?"

Diana raises her head, her eyes glowing darkly red and the entire entourage freezes in place, their bodies turning to grey stone.

"Oberon and Titania." Peaseblossom whispers.

Diana stares at the newly formed statues. "Oh my Godddddd, what iss happening to me?!" she turns towards Peaseblossom.

In the hut that serves as the office for Mayor Snowball, Griffin stiffens. "You can talk, I assume? Staying silent won't help you. In fact, it would make me more likely to conclude you mean us ill."

"If I meant you ill, you'd already be bleeding out."

"A very human response. Aggressive and posturing. But, I accept you do not mean us ill. Yet."

"How gracious."

"So, sit. I don't like cricking my neck trying to follow you."

"I'll stand, if you don't mind."

"As you wish. So, as you are the trespasser, why are you here? I presume you and the man who smells of rat are here together."

"We are. No matter how much either of us wishes we weren't."

"Such dissent. How did humans come to rule the planet when they can barely suppress their urges against each other? So, to business: Why are you both here?"

"We're here to find, and retrieve, a missing researcher. But you almost certainly suspected that. I assume she's being kept where you sent Manny?"

"You may assume that."

"I see you've mastered being a politician."

"Thank you."

"Not a compliment."

"No, I imagine not. But, more seriously, you should be aware of some things. The Doctor's process to create us is...unpleasant. Exceedingly so. He claims he's 'improved' us so that we're now able to breed, which...seems to be true, as far as it goes. However, those of us who he created directly had our skeletons reshaped and our minds expanded without the benefit of anaesthetics. You can probably relate that such procedures to reshape a body are not trivial for the body concerned."

Griffin stops his silent pacing.

"And your research assistant was involved in some of that process. Understandably, I hope, we feel we have a grievance against her."

"I see."

"I'm glad you do. You also understand that we do not trust human institutions to address them."

"And you don't think humans will trust your institutions?"

"Would you?"

"No."

"Refreshingly honest of you."

"It does mean we have a problem to solve, though. You don't trust us to be fair, we don't trust you."

"Correct."

"My skill set is not geared towards problems that can't be solved by a swift single application of death."

"You do not need an invisible man for negotiations."

"No."

"So your presence here creates additional tension. I've held my more impatient comrades off but more humans will make them anxious. An assassin even more so. And that might push them to do something...foolish."

"Mobs often do. Can I see her? And my...colleague?"

"I doubt I could stop you. Please wait while I do some necessary administration. The only thing that builds up faster than dung around here is paperwork."

"I can wait for a while. Do you mind if I take a look at your library?"

"By all means," he gestures expansively, pulling out a sheet of paper to perform his calculations.

Underground, the air in the chamber is close, the sickly sweet smell of death and disease filling the air. "What are we supposed to do?"

"Help. The Doctor is responsible for this, according to our hosts, and they expect us to do something about it."

"They're too far gone. Look at them. The best thing is a quick death before their contagion reaches us."

"How?"

He holds up his hand. "First we need to see what the problem is. You should probably stay back. I have no idea what is causing this yet. It might be infectious."

"What about you?"

"Pestilence and I have an understanding," he bends over the mole creature. It weakly tries to raise a hand halfway to a paw, its hot breath wheezing. "James, what am I looking at?"

"Their bodies rebel against themselves. I cannot see much more from here. I would need a physical body."

"Then," he replies through gritted teeth, "you shall have one." he takes a breath and holds in the pain as his body jerks, bones grinding as they shift, muscles tightening. His hair spills out chaotically down his back.

"What is going on? His whole aura is changing!"

"Stone, I mean, Lord Stone, I mean, what is..."

He blinks pale grey eyes, his shoulder hunched. "I am, if not well, functional." he replies in a reedy voice, "But now I need quiet." he reaches out a bony finger, the thin skin splotched with liver spots. He holds the creature's hand, pressing against one of the pustulent nodules. The creature whines in pain. "I know, I know, it hurts so, but I need to know what this is." He presses harder until the pustule bursts, spreading its contents over his long, thin fingers.

"He's crazy!"

He sniffs the pus, rubbing his fingers together, and then licks it.

"Lord Stone..."

He holds up one hand, "I am quite safe, I assure you, madam." he rolls his tongue around his mouth as if tasting an exotic wine. "Artificial retrovirus. Keyed to a, oh, very clever, Doctor, keyed to a DNA sequence you've inserted into your creations just for this purpose. Infectious, yes, but not terribly so, a fatal rebuke not a plague." he tilts his head, listening.

"Very interesting, James, but a more immediate question. Can you cure it?" Stones voice asks in his head.

"The patient is weak. The virus is pervasive. He can be cured, but the result may still be fatal."

"And will the result if he is not cured be less fatal?"

"No need to be snippy, Father." he places his hand on the mole-creatures weakly rising chest. A faint nimbus surrounds his thin fingers.

"What is he up to? Get closer."

Latitia takes a pace forward, hugging her arms, as the mole creature shrieks, back arching and slumps to the bench.

He closes his hand, the stretched skin stained black, "Oh, no, little virus. No escape for you. My body is a cage you cannot escape." slowly the stain on his hand retreats. He breathes a little heavier, pressing his hand against the mole creature's neck. "Lord be praised, a pulse. Weak, but there. He may yet live."

"And the others?"

"As demanding as ever, aren't you?" he shuffles to the next, shoulders hunched. He coughs wipes his mouth on the back of his hand and repeats the process on every one of the creatures.

Before he turns back to Latitia his body shudders, standing straighter, hair shortening before her eyes, "Well, that never gets more pleasant with age."

"And now his aura's back."

"Ms Morn, are you well?"

"And so's his attitude."

"What? Why do you...?"

"You're bleeding."

"What?" she looks down her fingernails black, stained with blood, trickles running down her arms."How? When did?"

"Don't look at me. You must have summoned them yourself. Too damn nervous for our safety, little mouse."

He reaches into his jacket, pulling out a roll of gauze bandage. "And this is why you need training."

The fairy realm, under the silent gaze of guardian statues, Peaseblossom steps back, screwing her eyes shut. She feels a chill settle over her, the glow of Diana's eyes flickering red through her eyelids. But she can still move. "What iss going on? What'ss happening? Thosse...I killed them! I didn't mean to. But they're sstone and..."

"Close your eyes."

"What?"

"Close your damn eyes, girl! I can't see a thing when looking at you might turn me as stiff as the Lordship!!"

"But..."

"Close them! Now!" she barks in her drill sergeant voice that demands to be obeyed. The light fades. Peaseblossom doesn't open her eyes, whistling a warbling tune. "Come to me, come to me." a bird perches on her finger, warbling it's tune back. "Forgive me, little one. But I need to be sure." she cups her hand around the bird, closing her fingers in a loop around its feathery neck. She feels its heart quaver before she renews her calling song, feeling it calm before it hurts itself in her hand. She holds it out. Nothing happens. "Can you open your snakes' eyes without yours?"

"Yess, but..."

"I promise I'll explain, but please could you do so and tell me what you see."

"I ssee you. You're...you're tall. Why aren't you...no, no, quesstionss later. You're holding ssomething in your handss. Oh, it'ss a bird. Brightly coloured, red and gold. Much brighter than anything I've sseen before. But why...you're checking it doessn't turn to sstone before you open your eyess, aren't you?"

"Yes And it hasn't so that's a relief." she releases the bird that flutters away into the tree, staring down at them with its jet black eyes framed in gold, "Now, hold very still. If you open your eyes, it won't go well for anyone, but especially me. I'm going to cut your shirt to make a blindfold. Please stay as still as possible."

Diana tenses, reaching for her shirt.

“No!”

“What?! Why?”

“You have claws. You're not... “

“I have what?”

“Claws. They look sharp and you're not used to them so all you'll do is shred the fabric.” she kneels down, looking at Diana's lap rather than her face. “Wait, your tie, it could...”

“I ditched it before the boat. They don't feel right. Jusst ssomething elsse for ssomeone to grab in a fight.”

“Shirt it is, then.” she sheaths her sword, pulling out a needle thin dagger. She tugs out Diana's shirt as the gorgon whimpers a little. The fabric slices easily, as it should against fairy steel, no matter how enchanted it might be. Carefully Peaseblossom tears the fabric free, folding it over and placing the cloth against Diana's eyes, leaving her scaled belly bare. “Now, don't bite me as I tie this off. That would be an embarrassing way to go after all this effort.” Very carefully, the snakes watching her warily, she pulls the cloth tight without trapping any, tying it double-knotted and tight. “There.” she stands up, drawing her sword again. She puts a hand down. “Take my hand.”

Diana reaches out, her snakes staring where her face is looking. “Thiss iss very weird.” she stops staring when she sees her brass-fingers, capped with razors. Peaseblossom takes one of the coldly metal fingers a good way back from the edge.

“This is Faerie. Weird is de rigueur. Can you stand?”

“I'm not a baby.” she pushes herself up, swaying as she adjusts to the weight of her wings. “What'ss going on with my...” her snakes swivel, “I've got fucking wingss?! How?!”

“We'll let Stone deal with that. My priority is getting us out of here before someone else comes along and sees your handiwork.” she takes a breath, “On my cue, we're going to cross the ring.”

“But you ssaid...”

“It needs to be done. Step over, turn, step back. Do not let go. If the Green Lady favours us, we'll be back in the mortal world without too many shenanigans.”

“And if it doesn't?”

“Let's not think about that. Live in the moment. On my cue. Three...two..one...step.” they walk through a faint shimmer in the air, the full sound and smell and taste of Faerie assaulting all Diana's senses at once, “Turn.” Peaseblossom instructs, cutting through the synaesthetic chaos, “And step through.” the ring flashes and once more the clearing stands empty, save for its new silent stone sentinels.

The stockade, the rat, having delivered it's ultimatum, scuttles back into the walls, “Fucking marvellous!”

“That rat was talking! How?”

“You heard it, too?”

“Of course I...wait, you normally hear rats talking?”

He sighs heavily, “Yeah. There's a reason for that. You want to know my story? Then don't scream.”

“Why would I...” she stops, staring as Manny grits his teeth and changes. Fur sprouts across his body as his face elongates, his moustache lengthening into long whiskers on his snout, his incisors growing as his other teeth shrink into his long mouth. His ears grow up and widen as his body shrinks into the suit. The hemp rope around his wrists falls away as his bones shift and reshape themselves, his clothes falling in a heap. From inside his collar comes a frustrated squeak before his pink nose pushes out followed by his snout and black eyes. Eventually a giant rat, about two feet long with the same length in a tail that's knotted around six other pink tails, emerges, sniffing at the air. The rat looks at her, meeting her eyes with a knowing gleam and it grows again, the clawed limbs lengthening as it pushes up to be faintly bipedal, crouched over on digitigrade feet. It chitters nervously. “So, now you know why they call me King Rat. And we really have to get out of here. Now.”