

## CHAPTER 15: TRIALS

by Paul Watson

Under the earth, the pestilent sweet smell of disease receding, replaced by the coppery scent of blood. "Are we going to talk about it?" Latitia asks as the second set of bandages wraps around her arm, rubbing at the blood on her fingers.

"About what?"

"About..." she waves, the bandage spooling out around her arm's, "...all of this! How did you do that? What happened to you? Why..."

"That's a lot of questions." he replies, retying her bandage.

"*And that's not an answer to any of them.*"

"What I did was..." he sighs heavily, "I have acquired an affinity with disease. I cannot get sick, or, at least, it is unnaturally difficult to manage. I can also drain disease into my body. But, as you saw, using that ability costs me."

"Which is why you looked so old and weak?"

"Exactly."

"*Hardly exactly.*" the reedy voice wheezes in his mind.

"So, what was wrong with them?"

"A novel pathogen. Something specifically engineered to work on the mutated genetics of these creatures."

"Engineered?"

"We will clearly need to talk to the Doctor about it."

"You think he did it deliberately?"

"That is one of the things we will need to talk to him about."

"*Going to be tough to talk to him when we're trapped in here until those little freaks let us out. Assuming they don't eat us.*"

"And I assume you have a plan which can get us out of here to do that?"

"Of course, Ms Morn. I always have a plan." he smiles confidently, moving to the doorway.

The stockade, "What do you mean we have to get out of here?"

"What do you think I mean?"

"But why?"

"You heard the rat..."

"Which is not a sentence I expected to hear. Ever."

"You heard it, anyway. If I'm not gone, and soon, the rat king here will send them all after me."

"The rat king?"

"There's a rat king here. And he's powerful."

"What's a rat king?"

"A bunch of rats with their tails knotted together. Don't ask me how it works, but they get smarter and control other rats, hence, rat king."

"Psychic master rats?"

"Exactly."

"That's a bit..."

"You heard it, right? Got a better explanation?"

"The Doctor did some work on the humanimal treatment on smaller animals. He claimed it wasn't successful, but it might be it was more successful than he thought."

"Maybe. Anyway, there's something here, and it thinks I'm an interloper and possibly a usurper. And I need to get out of here before it decides it's better off with me dead."

"And how do you plan on that?" she gestures at the wooden bars.

He walks up to them. "I reckon a rat could squeeze through those."

"Great for you. Not so much for me."

"I'll be back."

"Will you? When you're under a death sentence if you come back?"

"I'll be back." he repeats as his body collapses. "I'll need my clothes back, if nothing else."

The mayor's office, Animal Farm floats out of the bookcase, "Looks well used."

Mayor Snowball grunts, "Indeed. It is a good book to read and digest if you want to manage this place."

"All animals are equal, eh?"

"As much as all men in the United States of America were created equal by their Creator. Our Creator is less egalitarian, but all here are of equal worth. I am not rising to that bait. It is a warning, not an instruction manual. Not that it matters."

"What do you mean?"

"Orwell was lamentably ignorant of the realities of husbandry. A single farm cannot last without fresh breeding stock."

"I thought you said you could breed."

"We can. Within our own kind. A pig with a pig can produce offspring, but not a cow. But there aren't enough. Inbreeding will set in within a couple of generations, however long that is for a creature like us. Not even the Doctor knows that."

"I don't follow..."

"Look in the agriculture books. A minimum population of five hundred individuals is the bare minimum for a long-term viable population. Here we do not have that number in total, never mind per species. The farm is doomed to degradation and decay. The rabbits will probably survive, they breed like, well, rabbits, haw. But we lack the means to make the island productive enough to support a community of that size. And when that becomes apparent, there will be war. I hope not to see it, but I suspect any gods watching will laugh at that request. "

"War?"

"Assuming you discount the Doctor, there are four factions on the island. The rabbits and squirrels hold the woods, the squirrels in the trees and the rabbits among the roots. The moles burrow happily under everyone else's territory and the rats go where they please. I don't know which faction will start the war, but I doubt any of us will end it. Sooner or later, we will touch on the Doctor's latest research and he will have few qualms about clearing up his old experiments. He may even do so for his own purposes, having learned all he wishes from us."

"You're awfully pessimistic."

"The burden of good leadership is a clear sight of your problems. The ones I can solve, I work to solve, like the windmill to improve our productivity. Matters of war and peace, I prepare as best I can. And the Doctor is a variable no one can control."

"Do you mind a personal question?"

"Yes. I dislike talking to ghosts."

Griffin twists his ring, his shape filling in. "And now?"

"Trust deserves trust. Ask. I may not answer."

"You're smarter than the others outside."

"Yes. The Doctor needed someone to manage things. He certainly couldn't be bothered. I was the aide to the first mayor, Cheetah..."

"A chimpanzee, I'm guessing."

"Quite. The Doctor does like his little jokes with our names. And so, I had my intellect raised, knowledge crammed in here." he taps his forehead, "And when Cheetah died, I was 'promoted' again. The moles are the same, and the squirrels and rabbits."

"And the rats?"

"You noticed I left them off, haw? The rats...are an enigma. They do not behave as the rest of us do. Sometimes more intelligent, sometimes more feral."

"Which is what you meant by Manny being a spy for the rats?"

"It was. Or the Doctor investigating an anomaly in his usual way. Of course, that doesn't help us with what to do with him, or the one you came here to rescue."

Underground, *"I always have a plan, eh? So this is part of some plan. Bullshit."*

"Will you shut up?"

*"No! I need you alive. And he's making shit up as he goes along. Which is how we're trapped in an underground plague dungeon!"*

Lord Stone raises his hand, his ring glowing darkly. He grits his teeth. "Open Sesame!" and the stone rolls away.

"How?"

"I told you. I have a plan." he look at the guards levelling their spears at him. "You. Get your leader. We have completed his task." The guards look warily at each other. "Go on. Now!" one guard scampers away, leaving the other nonplussed and uncertain. Stone folds his arms and waits.

*"How is he so infernally calm?"*

Latitia walks behind him, trying to portray the same calm certainty, but the fingers drumming on her folded arms betray her.

The leader shuffles over. He sniffs the air. His beady black eyes widen. "Not hurt. They not hurt. Come." He turns, the guards gesturing with their spears to follow.

The dry chamber they are led to is cramped, packed earth forming benches. "Sit." the mole man settles slowly down. "The Grahame am I. My people these are. You aid. We aid. The Doctor's female. At the farm she is. To Mayor Snowball we will talk. Listen he may. Or may not."

"Thank you." he inclines his head, "How did your people get sick?"

"Doctor hurt. They burrow. They find. They sick."

"They found something in the Doctor's buildings that made them sick?"

"They did. One dead. Family near. You save. We help. You rest."

"Very generous of you."

*"He is not serious! Rest? Here? In the dark? Surrounded? With only this thing's word they won't..."*

"Shut. Up." she growls through gritted teeth.

Manny scampers across the dirt floor of the stockade, *"She'll be fine. The rats don't want her. I'll find Captain Invisible. Let him get her out. She'll be fine."* he reaches the door, staring up at a barrier that even a rat of his size can't overcome. He squeaks in frustration. His bones melt and crack as he grows back into himself, only to find the door barred from the outside. "Fucking paranoid fuckers!" his eyes dart around, but the stockade itself is bare of anything useful. Nothing that could break down the door, no weapons, nothing. "Stingy paranoid fuckers!" he shrinks back, grimacing as his fur pushes its way through the skin and scurries back to the cell.

"Manny?"

He squeaks as he pushes his way back in.

"You came back?"

He doesn't answer, putting his paws flat on the ground as his back arches. The fur thickens, paws stretching into fingers as he hunches over.

"Couldn't get out." he explains.

"Well, I had hoped you couldn't bear to leave me behind but..."

"You can joke. I doubt the rats will leave you alone."

"Humour's my coping mechanism, 'King Rat'. Without that, I'm just a screaming mess and that's no good to anyone."

Manny nods, concentrating on pulling on his clothes, his back to her. He grimaces, as they bunch in every uncomfortable place imaginable, sized for his human self and not this hybrid form. He grits his teeth and stands straighter, the fur receding as he becomes human again.

"So, what's the new plan?"

He sighs, slumping against the wall. "Wait. Hope my mob actually give a shit. If you think anyone'll listen, you can pray, I guess. Me and God are on the outs."

"That's pretty bleak."

"Well, sorry, but reality is pretty fucking bleak at the moment."

The mayor's office, "Can I call my superior? Appraise him of a partial success?"

"In that you know where the woman is, but can't get her out?"

"Exactly. And if we arrange a meeting between us, there's less risk of our respective forces clashing."

"Jaw jaw is always better than war war, haw. I assume you have a radio."

Griffin nods. He pulls a radio from his jacket, slim, short range but it will cover the island. "Griffin to Stone. Acknowledge." he waits. Silence echoes from the device. He tries again. "Griffin to Stone. Acknowledge." He tries again. And then again.

"Well, this presents a difficulty, doesn't it?"

"You could say that."

"Perhaps later."

Griffin looks down at the floor. "Perhaps. Let me try the other team. Griffin to Eurayle.

Acknowledge. Griffin to Eurayle. Acknowledge."

But the number of reasons he can conjure for why there's no response are small and none of them are positive.