

CHAPTER 16: PEACE TALKS

by Paul Watson

Hours pass. In the Stockade, Manny fidgets, eyes scanning the walls for any sign of a furry tide coming to kill him. Alice sits in the corner, observing without comment.

In the nearby office, Griffin sits on a chair hand carved of forest wood, a cushion stuffed with grass under him, flipping through the manuals as the Mayor goes about his business. The door opens. Griffin drops the book beside him, rising from the chair. There is a very soft sound as he draws his knife. A bull walks in, spear in one hand, horns almost scraping the ceiling, accompanied by the Grahame, taking three waddling steps for every one of the bull's, tracking dirt across the floor. His nose crinkles as he sniffs, staring through near-blind eyes. "Mayor." the bull salutes, "This one wishes to talk to you."

"Thank you, Ferdinand. You may go. The Grahame poses no threat to me."

"Today I do not."

The bull scowls, although that may be his natural expression. "Wait outside. Call if needed." he snorts as he turns, hooves thumping on the packed earth.

"Mayor Snowball, greetings I bring."

"And to you, Grahame. May I..."

"To your guest, also."

"Ah."

Griffin fades into visibility, slotting his knife away. "Invisibility isn't as big an advantage amongst so many sensitive noses." he mutters.

"We all have our crosses, haw." Mayor Snowball replies. "To what do I owe the honour?"

"Human come. Human help. Cure Doctorsick. Debt to be paid. Seeks the Doctor's helper, he does. Have the Doctor's helper, you do. Talk I am here to."

"You've seen Stone?" Griffin asks.

"Resting he is. He and girl who smells of sulphur. With my people, they are. On their behalf, here I am."

"You are here to intercede for the Doctor's helper on his behalf?"

"Said that, did I not?"

"Quite. So what do you propose?"

"Smart one you are. What propose do you?"

"Haw, negotiating such a thing is tricky enough without conducting it through an intermediary. Can you bring your humans to the meeting stone? I will bring the girl. And the man-rat, my sometimes-unseen friend. And then, we shall negotiate as we can."

The Grahame nods. "Return I will. Guards I will have. No trouble do we want."

"Of course not. I, too, will have protectors."

"Wise this is. At the Stone we shall meet. When?"

"The morning, I think. We could all do with some rest."

"There we shall be. Fetch the foresters, I shall. Ready to be gone, I am."

Mayor Snowball looks over at Griffin who is already fading from sight. "Ferdinand!" the door booms open against the wall, the doorway filled by the muscular bull's frame, "Please return our guest to his burrow." Ferdinand snorts, stomping out as the Grahame scuttles along.

"I do hope you can sleep in rough accommodations."

Griffin looks around. "Slept in worse. Slept in better, too."

The Sun sets, long shadows filtering through the woods. The Moon rises. There is a flash and sizzle from the mushroom ring in the centre of a clearing. Diana stumbles out, crashing to the ground, giving a grunt as she hits. Peaseblossom follows, fairy dust sparkling off her in the moonlight as she flits around. Diana's fingers curl into the damp grass, ribs running down her back almost the entire length of her jacket and shirt. Still blindfolded, she pushes herself up. "When did it get sso dark?"

"I told you. Faerie time passes differently than regular time."

"Wonderful."

"The Moon is still waxing gibbous, so hopefully our seconds haven't taken too much time."

"Let'ss hope. Can you ssee anything?"

"Moonlight is good in the clearing."

"I'm more concerned with the treess. Are ssquirrelss nocturnal?"

"Not usually, but they don't usually throw their nuts as weapons either. These are obviously most unusual squirrels."

"Let'ss get out of here before we find out how unussual." she trips almost immediately, "Fuck. I can't ssee like thiss."

"It should be safe. You're out of Faerie and looking your normal self. Don't bite me." she flits to Diana's back, tugging at the knots in the cloth until it flutters away. "You'd best pick that up. Just in case."

Diana blinks, feeling for the strip of white cloth before she stands. As the mismatched pair move towards the edge of the clearing, there is a distinct rustling in the undergrowth.

"Guesss ssquirrelss are nocturnal. Jusst our luck."

A furry figure pushes out, a crude spear in their paws. Long ears lie flattened against their brown-furred scalp as they lopes a step forward, cotton tail twitching, nibbling on the edge of their waistcoat of leaves.

"Well, I admit I wasn't expecting that."

"Look, Bugss, I've had a crappy day and I'd rather not have to deal with you, sso..."

Bugs thumps his feet on the ground in a staccato rhythm and the bushes around the glade come alive with other rabbits in subdued fur and utilitarian camouflage outfits. All of them are armed with wooden weapons.

"Well, at least we know the gorgon gazze iss gone. Right when it would be usseful."

Peaseblossom drifts towards the grass, her voice squeaking out. The lead rabbit cocks his head and responds in kind, punctuating his squeaks with jabs and shakes of the spear.

"You sspeak bunny?"

"I can speak with all kinds of creatures. But they have to listen. Now shush." she replies. Turning back to the rabbits, she sounds mollifying in her squeaks and slowly the spear shakes get less and the aggression lowers.

"Well, good and bad news. Apparently, we've only missed the day and not a full night."

"And the bad newss?"

"They're most insistent that we need to meet their chief before they'll let us go."

"Of coursse they are. Well, let's go meet him, then. Yub nub, you long-eared motherfuckers."

In the morning, the sun's rising marked only by a lightening through the grey clouds. From the farm, a small group comes, the guards imposing in their hulking size. Ferdinand and Boxer walk on either side of Manny and Alice, thick wooden clubs in one hand, the rough rope binding their captive's at the wrists and throat, jerked when they speak or walk too slowly. Mayor Snowball walks in the middle of the square of guards, grass bending just outside the guards as Griffin shadows them, barely a whisper. From the tunnels, the Grahame and his suite of guardians make slow progress, the dim light already uncomfortable in their squinting eyes. Stone and Latitia stand as tall again as them, walking inside the guards, flanking the Grahame himself. From the woods, a gaggle of rabbits bound eagerly around the grass, stopping to chew a strand as often as the leap forward. Diana rises from the furry tide around her knees, her snakes writhing as they look every which way for danger, a sparkle of light hanging by the lead rabbit with his crown of twigs and leaves squeaking in high-pitched conversation.

All slow as they approach the outcrop. The farm guards stand more alert at the sight of the other humans. Griffin glides around the toppled, flat-topped dark grey stone. Stone bends down, whispering to the Grahame and the mole guards reluctantly part to let the invisible man through. Diana keeps walking, the rabbits scattering out of her path. "Well, thiss iss a coinscidensce. Guesss we all found trouble here, huh?"

Ferdinand snorts, raising his club. The moles grip their sharpened tools more tightly. She stops.

"Got it. Sstay back." She takes a step back.

"Welcome." Mayor Snowball sweeps his arms out expansively, "The Grahame has requested this meeting to resolve what we should do with the prisoners the Farm is currently keeping."

"This is so." the Grahame agrees, waddling forward, "Affect the Farm, the Forest and the Tunnels this does. A chance to speak on it, all should have. Even the humans."

Boxer whinnies at that, shaking his head.

"May I speak, Mr Mayor?"

"In time. Now, we have another human in our care, but that one is not associated with the Doctor so he should be fairly easy to..."

"The ambassador at the court of the Rat-King would speak." All turn towards the rat with glowing eyes on the fourth side of the boulder. "The Rat-King will not allow you to crown this pretender." a paw gestures at Manny, "We demand it be turned over to us."

"That will not be happening."

Mayor Snowball coughs, "The human has not been given permission to speak."

"My apologies." Stone replies, keeping his eyes on the rat.

"However, that can be swiftly rectified. Grahame, would you introduce your guest?"

"Lord Stone, this is. My people he has cured of Doctorsick. Ally of the Tunnels he has been deemed. Part of his tribe the man-rat is. Speak to this situation, he should."

"As the Grahame has said, Manny is one of mine. He has caused no harm to any on the island. Unless there is an injury from the Farm that I'm unaware of?"

"No such injury. He is held as a precaution alone."

"Then, I should request that after the business here is concluded, he be allowed to leave with the rest of us. We have no intention of disrupting the peace and order of this place."

"The Rat-King objects to this!" the ambassador shrieks, "This is a pretender king and..."

"Manny? Do you claim this island or any part of it as your domain?"

"Like I'd want this..."

"And we shall soon be away from this place, in any event, unable to mount any sort of claim."

"He exists. That is enough to threaten the Rat-King."

"The Rat-King's position on this is noted. As the holding party, however, we have no interest in holding him. The Farm agrees to the Grahame's ally's request on this matter."

The rat turns sharply away and slinks off into the hidden hole he had emerged from with jerky movements.

"Thank you, Mr Mayor." Stone inclines his head.

Snowball waves it off. "However, there is a more serious matter. The resolution of the Doctor's accomplice. All here are aware that we owe the Doctor our existence. And all are also aware of the pain that accompanied that wondrous gift. The Grahame requested this meet to determine her fate. Let the Grahame speak."

"Let Lord Stone speak for us, I shall."

Ferdinand snorts. The rabbits chitter.

"Tired I am. Long days these are. My right to decide who speaks, it is. Speak for me, he shall."

Mayor Snowball puts his hand on Ferdinand to calm the bull as Stone rises.

"My thanks for this opportunity, Grahame of the Tunnels. I have been charged with the safe return of the Doctor's assistant, Alice Jekyll. You all feel you have cause for injury against her. This presents a problem. May I inquire what offences she has committed against the peoples of this island?"

"Trust human not." Ferdinand snorts softly, "Works for Doctor."

"Ferdinand..."

"No, Mr Mayor, that is a valid concern. In point of fact, I do not work for the Doctor, but that is a somewhat pedantic distinction. Especially to those who have been harmed by the Doctor. However, I am a stranger and wish to know the lay of the land, so to speak. If this place is to be the court of her sins, they will need to be enumerated."

"Do I get a say in this?" Alice asks.

"I'm sure the good Mayor will allow you to speak in your defence. Won't you?"

"It appears I have little choice. So, her crimes are...the pain and suffering of our creation; the..."

"That was conducted by the Doctor before Ms Jekyll arrived, wasn't it?"

"If it was?"

"Well, you can't try a person for things others did without their presence. You might as well try her for all of humanity's centuries of cruelty to the beasts of the field."

"Oh, really? She willingly works for the Doctor and thus supports his crimes against us."

"Which is different from being their cause. By the time she arrived here, those actions had already happened."

"Is this our court? Or yours?"

"Yours. But I'd hope you'd at least be as just as humanity. It is such a low bar to meet, after all."

"Her crimes are supporting our oppression by the Doctor; aiding and abetting his continued cruelty; ..."

Ferdinand stomps in support of this statement.

"...spying upon us for the Doctor's sinister ends;..."

"What?! I was checking up on your conditions not..."

Stone waves her to silence as Ferdinand looms above her, "It's hardly spying if she approaches in full view and professes her investigations honestly, now, is it?"

"If she did."

"Do you have any evidence that she did not?"

Mayor Snowball stares silently but does not respond.

"I'll take that as a no. Can we strike the spying charges?"

"Very well. Aiding and abetting is sufficient."

"Excellent."

"Excellent?" Alice protests.

"We have a starting point of disagreement. The Grahame, the, forgive me, I do not know the proper..."

"The Peterrabbit." Peaseblossom supplies.

"The Peterrabbit, does the Mayor's case suit you both?"

"Correct, it is," the Grahame replies. The Peterrabbit chitters in response.

"Well, then, aiding and abetting. What crimes has the Doctor perpetuated on you since Ms Jekyll arrived on the island?"

Mayor Snowball opens his mouth and closes it again.

"Is that a concession that the Doctor's crimes predate Ms Jekyll? And that holding her responsible for actions she could not hope to know about never mind influence is beneath the dignity of your position?"

Snowball snorts, "Griffin said you were clever, Lord Stone. I can see why he does not consider 'politician' to be praiseworthy."

Stone turns towards the empty space containing Griffin. The invisible man makes no response.

"You make valid points. And now, I suppose, you will leave with your success held high at outwitting us."

"Quite the contrary, Mayor Snowball. In fact, I think we have a great deal to discuss. Past abuses do need to be addressed, even if Ms Jekyll is not held liable for them. Perhaps you, the Grahame, the Peterrabbit and myself could begin proper discussions? With the Lady Peaseblossom to assist in translation, of course."

Snowball's eyes narrow. "Perhaps we do," he sighs, looking at the other leaders. "Shall we adjourn to discuss? Before we agree to talk to Lord Stone," he turns away.

"Hey, what about us?!" Manny protests, squirming in the ropes.

Snowball doesn't turn. "Ferdinand, Boxer, release them. And watch them. They have not been permitted to leave yet."

Ferdinand snorts in displeasure. Boxer whinnies. But they undo the ropes, glowering as Stone's team rejoins to become a fourth entourage arrayed around the stone.

"What happened to your back?!"

“I don't want to talk about it.” Diana sulks as she fingers the rents in her jacket.