

CHAPTER 17: VERDICT

by Paul Watson

The Sun passes across the sky as the talks continue. Like all intense negotiations, those left outside the metaphorical doors to guard those dealing with high business tend to grow bored.

Which is probably why Ferdinand and Diana are standing in a circle of the others. Ferdinand grips his tree-trunk of a club tight, his body glistening with sweat, while Diana balances on the balls of her feet bare feet, her snakes swaying in time to her movements, a much thinner staff in her hands.

"Your grip's too far back. You're only going for power on the swings. If you hit, great, they're knocked into the next life, but if you miss, you're wide open."

"Don't miss."

"Everyone misses once. And once is all it takes."

"Don't miss."

"Talk is cheap. Show me."

Ferdinand bellows, lifting the club up and Diana unceremoniously jabs the staff into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

Ferdinand pants as he collects the club from the floor. Diana makes a beckoning motion. Ferdinand swings, fast and low in a blow that would snap her in two. If it lands. Instead, Diana flattens, the club swinging above her back. She rolls over as Ferdinand brings a hoof down close to where her head was moments earlier, her snakes hissing in alarm.

"That's it," she twists away from the next hoof, "Fighting smart, not just strong." Ferdinand raises his hoof for another strike. His supporting knee buckles as the staff presses into the nerve cluster there. He topples forward, collapsing on top of Diana. "Ooooooooo. Let's call that one a draw." her muffled voice comes from underneath his bulk.

Ferdinand clambers off her, his huge beefy hand dragging Diana up. "Snake-girl fight good."

She clasps his forearm as best she can, "My dad taught me a lot about fighting really strong guys. Above all else, don't get hit."

"Good thought. Smart dad."

"Yess." she steps back, "Round three?"

The large horned head shakes, "Ferdinand not need get beat. Again."

"You'll get me next time, big guy," she walks back to the others, sitting on her torn jacket. Nearby, Griffin's artificial appearance squats in the grass, teaching rabbits how to poison their weapons without injuring themselves, their excited chittering running as background noise.

"Are you all right?" Latitia asks, kneeling beside her.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Not the first time I've had a big lug fall for me."

"You're sure?"

"Well, I wouldn't say no to a sports massage. My back's been stiff since the wings came out."

"Uhhhhhh..." Latitia freezes.

"You are pathetic! Just tell her you want to do unclean things to her! What will it take to get you over this anguished, silent yearning, Pride and Prejudice bullshit?!"

Diana turns her head, "Tish?"

Latitia blinks her goat-slitted eyes, "What? Oh, right, massage, uhm, right, uhm, sure, get right on it."

"No claws," she mumbles as she looks at the next bout.

"No claws. Got it." Latitia gingerly puts her hands on her muscular back.

"You have warm hands."

Latitia's face flushes as she pauses.

"That's it? One semi-compliment? That's all it takes? If she kisses you, you'll melt like fucking butter. I need to stop her from fucking you just for your own fucking safety."

"Shut up."

"Wha?"

"Not you. My demon's getting bitchy."

“Oh. Right. Kick its arse for me. Oh, yess, right there, that'ss the sspot.”

Nearby, Manny sits nervily, nose twitching, eyes restlessly scanning the area. Alice edges her hand closer to his. As they touch, he jerks away. “Sorry. Edgy.”

“Really? I thought your Lord Stone was...”

“He ain't my anything. And he's not dealing with my problem is he. There's a whole island of rats that want me dead and he's having tea and cucumber sandwiches with everyone else. Meanwhile, I'm out here listening to the little fuckers crawling through the tunnels, just getting closer and closer and...there!” he jabs his finger into the distance, “Did you see that? One of them just popped his head up out of the ground. Fuck.”

“Your being a bit dramatic. Not a sexy look.”

“Well, I'm sorry if I'm...wait, what was that last...”

She leans in, kissing his lips. For a moment, Manny has no clue how to react, but eventually he kisses her back. “See? You just need a distraction from your worries.” she looks over her shoulder at the gathering. “And if we weren't certain to be seen, or heard, or smelt by someone back there, I know the perfect distraction for you.”

“Oh, yeah?” he licks his lips.

“Oh, yes. But I guess we'll just have to wait.” she pulls her top out of her jeans, “Unless you wanna take the...”

“Ms Jekyll!” Stone's voice calls from the huddle, “Can you come over? We have need of your input.”

“Guess we'll have to wait after all.” she stands up, tucking her clothes back in.

“Fucking hell.” Manny mutters.

It's mid-afternoon before the talks are settled. Everybody is more or less satisfied, no one is entirely happy, so a triumph of diplomacy has been accomplished. Handshakes all round. Everyone going back to their respective corners. “Now, I'll just escort Ms Jekyll...”

“Alice is fine.”

“...back safe and sound to the Doctor and we can conclude our business here for the nonce.”

“I'm...I'm coming with you.” Latitia stammers.

“Really, Miss Morn?”

“I have business to conclude with him”

“Do you really?”

She stands up as straight as she can, “I have business with him.” she repeats.

“Cool, cool, everyone's got business to do. Can we get off this rock now? Before I'm fucking rat food?!”

“Peaseblossom, could you and Griffin make sure our king rat gets to the boat safety? Ms Morn and I will be along shortly.”

Diana claps him on the shoulder, her jacket flung over the other, “Let'ss go, Manny. I'll keep you ssafe. Been a while ssince I had ssome tasty sstalagrats.”

“Stalag what...”

Their voices fade as they walk down the pathless route to the docks, Peaseblossom buzzing around them, Griffen's silent presence only betrayed by the occasional flattened grass.

“Well, ladies? Shall we be about our business?”

“So, what 'business' do you have with the Doctor?” Alice whispers conspiratorially, “He doesn't really like mythics.”

“Who does he like?”

“Ah, you picked up on that, huh? So, the business...”

“The business is about nunya.”

“Well, that's me told. So, Manny, what's he really like?”

“Oh, this one stinks of lust and pride and desire. She's all set to reach out and pluck her pleasure from the world. You should take lessons.”

“He's...moody. Difficult to get close to. Rude. Abrasive.”

"He must have some good points, though."

"I guess he must have. Somewhere. I don't know him that well."

Alice nods, "Yeah. I've seen your attention's focused elsewhere."

"And you thought you were being so subtle in your lust." the inner demon taunts, *"Even a stranger can see it. Do you think she can't?"*

"Shut up."

"Right. Got it. Good luck. Bitch." she quickens her pace to catch up with Stone.

"Wait! I didn't... Now look what you've done." she snarls at herself, but her inner voice is too busy laughing to respond.

They reach the gateway to the lab complex in good, if sullenly quiet, time. Stone presses on the intercom and holds it until the Doctor's voice snaps out of it. "What is it now?!"

"Good afternoon, Doctor. We return with your lost little lamb, all hale and hearty."

The Doctor snorts dismissively. "And I suppose you want me to interrupt my important work to congratulate you?"

"Well, we could do with a few moments of your valuable time..."

"Of course you could. Constant interruptions. Never a moment's peace to work." The door inches open.

"Thank you, Doctor."

They make their way inside, to find the Doctor looming in the corridor waiting. "Now that you've deigned to return, there are agar gels to prepare." there's an almost imperceptible pause, "Are you still here? Get on with it."

Alice bobs her head. "Yes, Doctor." and scampers off down the corridor.

"And get a fresh lab coat. That one is hopelessly contaminated by now!" he turns his perfect, hideous face back to Stone and Morn, "Now, what do you want, Stone? And you only brought the Devil-Chained. Worried I'll make better use of your rodentrope?"

"Mr King had other matters to attend to. I am here to appraise you of some new conditions to your work."

"Conditions? What are you..."

"1) Alice Jekyll will be permitted four days out of her work per calendar month exclusively to attend to the issues and needs of your hybrids.

"2) You will destroy all your targetted pathogens designed to infect and destroy your creations."

"Will I? How do you even? Oh, the moles found them, didn't they? Nosy little bastards. How long did it take to spread? It was supposed to be a short incubation time but it's so hard to calibrate without live samples."

"It allowed the unfortunate time to return to their fortress."

"How far did it spread?" he rasps, an eager gleam in his eye, "How lethal was it?"

"Fortunately, we were able to effect a cure before it took too many..."

"Bah. I set up that sample near their wretched little hole to get that information, Stone. And you've ruined the experiment."

"You monster! You don't care at all about the hurt you've..."

"Stone, are you going to allow your pet devil to lecture me on morality? Are your hands stained less red than mine? Are your sins somehow more noble?"

"Well..." he pauses, "Can anyone else smell burning?"

There's a faint sound of metal cracking, a sizzling of flame as the bandages around Latitia's arms flare out in black flames and drift away to ash. Her eyes burn black, horns pushing through her forehead.

"Impressive. But you're not going to intimidate me. I don't even believe in Hell."

"Oh, my dear, dear, Doctor. It doesn't matter if you believe in Hell or not." she taunts, her forked tongue flickering as she stretches out her blackened talons, "What matters is if Hell believes in you. You've been a very, very bad boy, you see. And Hell wants to give you a taste of what torments await you in the Pit."

"Balderdash and piffle. I do not need pointless superstition to cloud my..."

The fire in her eyes glows darker, limning along the Doctor's many scars. The rasp rises in pain. "You're a patchwork man, Doctor. All those warring pieces of flesh stitched together. What if they didn't cooperate so well? Do you think you'll enjoy it when you're vivisected like you've treated so many of your fellow creatures?" The Doctor sinks to his knees, body outlined in black pain, "Every stitch unpicked. Every organ prodded and probed to find out how you work. Every piece catalogued and numbered. Then stitched back together with burning barbed wire so that every motion is agony and not moving is merely pain. Your body used for the brute labour its designed for, the brain you're so proud of left in a jar as the pollution it is. You'll find my fellows every bit as dedicated to cruelty expressed as gathering knowledge as you are." She puts a claw on his wrist. "Perhaps we should get a head start? No rest for the wicked, after all. And you are so very wicked." The claw draws thick, slowly seeping blood as it presses down.

"Ms Morn! That will be quite enough!"

She stops but doesn't turn her soul burning gaze away from its target. "Don't start, old man. He deserves this and more."

"Perhaps. But do you deserve to be his tormentor?"

The claws moves away. Latitia licks the dark blood off it, "You have a point." she turns and walks away. "Don't make me see you again, Doctor. I may be less inclined to listen to pleas for my mercy."

"Get...out." The Doctor croaks. "Both of you. Get out of my sight."

As Latitia walks down the corridor, her horns retreat back into her head. Her heart hammers in her chest. Her stomach turns on itself, twisting into knots. Her mouth is dry as dessert sand, the bitter taste of preserving fluid mixing with the coppery tang of blood. Another link along each arm is replaced with the dark flames.

"Well, clearly I've been mistaken." her demon sounds impressed which makes it worse, "The road to your Hell isn't paved with your lust for the gorgon, after all. It's lined in righteous fury at the world's cruelties. That's delightfully ironic, to be damned by a sense of justice. The universe made a fine old joke when you were conceived."

"Shut up. Shut up. Shut up! I'm not like that! I'm not. I'm not!!"

"Don't fight it, Latitia. This could be the beginning of a bea-u-ti-ful friendship."