

## INVISIBLE FIENDS: THE RISE OF DOC MORTIS by Barry Hutchison

### Part 1: A DYING FRIENDSHIP

He stood by the wall, his gnarled hands clutching his leather case. In three minutes, the only friend he had ever known would be dead.

And he couldn't wait.

Doc Mortis paced slowly around the chair, examining both it and the man strapped to it. He had watched them drag the prisoner in, then looked on as they presented him to the witnesses on the other side of the scratched glass. The judge. The jailors. The oh-so-grieving parents. They had displayed Doc's friend, made him say his name, and then the curtains had slid slowly across the soundproofed window.

And then came the process of securing him to the chair. He hadn't struggled much. He'd shuffled awkwardly, manacled by the wrists and the ankles, trying to remember exactly what had brought him to this moment. But the images that flickered through his head were hazy at best. The man had little memory of the things he had done.

Doc, on the other hand, remembered it all. The dark forests, the blades, the blood... and the screaming, of course. A shudder of pleasure travelled the length of Doc's spine when he thought about the screaming. Oh, how he'd miss the screaming.

Doc had watched his friend be seated, the manacles replaced by straps across his wrists and ankles. Electrodes had been attached to the man, one on each freshly-shaved leg, the others concealed within a bowl-shaped helmet that was slipped over his head.

A man in a black suit with a white collar was muttering something, making the sign of the cross above the prisoner in the chair. Doc ignored him. He leaned in close, until his thick, rubbery lips were by his friend's ear.

'I think you are in trouble now, yes?' Doc whispered, and there was something like a giggle mixed in with his Eastern European accent. He pulled his half-moon glasses down and peered over

the rims. 'They are going to make you pay for what you did to all those poor little kiddiewinkles. They are going to make you burn.'

'M-make them s-stop,' the man mumbled. 'Please... make them stop.'

The priest raised his head. 'It's too late for that, my son.'

Doc Mortis stepped back, pulling his fish lips into a sneer. 'He was not talking to you,' he spat, and then he gave a low chuckle and turned back to his friend. 'Oh, I forgot. He cannot hear me. Nobody can hear me but you.'

'I don't want to die. Not like this. Not like this. I d-don't want to die.'

The priest spoke again, but Doc blocked it out. There was only the two of them, him and his friend. The way it had always been.

'And those kiddiewinkles, did *they* want to die? Do you think they wanted to be sliced up, *chop-chop*, all alone in those woods, with no-one to hear their little screams?'

'It... it wasn't my fault! It wasn't me!'

'Crying for their mummies. Begging for their lives.'

'But it wasn't me, it was *you*! You told me to. You made me do it. You *made me*.'

Doc wagged a finger, as if scolding a child. 'No, no, no. *You made me*, remember?'

He turned away and took in the room around them. There was the chair, obviously, made of sturdy oak. Wires ran from it, across the stone floor, before disappearing beneath the long, dark green curtains.

The walls had once been a clinical white. Now they were dirty and cracked, as if mirroring the souls of those who came to sit in this room. The only door in and out was closed, so that the priest may have privacy to do what little he could.

'I am liking this,' Doc said. 'I am getting a – how would you say? – a good feeling about this place. It is homely, I think, yes?'

In the chair, his friend didn't speak. His lips were moving silently and his eyes were flicking right to left, as if witnessing again the horrors of what he had done. What *they* had done. Together.

There was more murmuring from the priest, then the door opened, and he was gone. Doc Mortis tightened his grip on his bag. 'Not long now, I think,' he said. 'I wonder what will happen to me? Once they have fried you to death, I mean. Will I stay here? Vanish? Go *kaput*?'

'I hope you burn in Hell,' the prisoner managed to hiss, before a sob caught at the back of his throat.

Doc laughed – a low, snorting sound, like a wild animal. 'Then perhaps we will be roommates, yes? You would like this, I think. You would like this very much.'

'Stay away from me, you... you *freak*. You twisted *monster*!'

Doc's expression turned to one of mock hurt. 'Such cruel words. I thought we were friends, you and I. Remember, I was not the one who did all those things. It was not me, it was you.' He rested a hand on the condemned man's shoulder and leaned in close once more. 'Or maybe it *was* me, and you were but the weapon?'

He stepped back and laughed as the man in the chair began to pull against his straps. The leather cut grooves in his skin as he fought and struggled to be free. 'Let me out!' he screamed, the veins in his neck standing out in knots. 'I want out. *Let me out!*'

'Sssh, old friend, be calm. It will all be over soon,' Doc soothed. 'Remember how you used to sing to them? To the kiddiewinkles, as you dragged them along by their hair?' He cleared his throat, then began to sing in a low, scratchy whisper. 'If you go down to the woods today, you'd better not go alone...'

Almost immediately, the man in the electric chair stopped thrashing around. He sat still, his head hanging as low as the helmet and wires allowed.

There was a soft *clicking* as the curtains were slowly drawn back.

'...it's lovely down in the woods today, but safer to stay at home...'

The condemned man's eyes raised. Faces. He saw faces. Watching him. Hating him. So many faces, blaming him for those things he had done. Those terrible, terrible things.

'...for every bear that ever there was, is gathered there for certain because...'

Beyond the glass, two keys were turned, and two fingers hovered over two buttons. Doc ran a hand through his wispy white hair, then clutched his case to his chest. Its contents seemed to sing to him through the leather. He hoped, wherever he was going, that he was able to put them to good use.

In the chair, Doc's only friend began to cry – not for himself, but for *them*. For all the dead children.

Doc's purple lips parted into a grin, revealing teeth thick with yellow scum. He winked, as beyond the glass, two fingers pushed down on two buttons.

'...today's the day the teddy bears have their piiiic-niiic!'

There was a *buzz*. The man in the electric chair went rigid.

And Doc's whole world went dark.

## Part 2: FIRST CONTACT

In the dark, Doc traced his fingers along the high back of the oak chair. It was still there, but the man who had been sitting in it was gone.

He reached a hand into the pocket of his tweed coat, took out a metal-cased lighter and clip-clip-clipped the wheel until a flame spluttered to life. It cast a dancing glow across the execution room, sweeping the darkness into the corners.

The chair was definitely empty. The leather straps were still buckled in place, but the condemned himself was nowhere to be seen. Doc lifted the lighter higher and raised his eyes. The glass screen, which had just moments ago separated the good from the evil, lay broken on the floor. In the space where the witnesses had stood, there was only more darkness.

'Interesting,' Doc said. He turned slowly on the spot, letting the light lick across the walls. A haphazard pattern of bloody handprints was smeared across the ruined paintwork. High up, just a little below the ceiling, someone had scrawled "HELP ME" in crimson.

Doc raised onto his tiptoes, stretching up to his full height. He pressed his fingers against the second "E". The long-dried blood crumbled away at his touch. He sniffed the red dust on his fingertips, then touched it to his tongue.

'Very interesting,' he said, quietly.

The shadows grew longer as the flame flickered, then died. Doc cursed below his breath and gave the lighter a shake. The flint wheel *rasped* as his thumb flicked down, but only sparks emerged from the top of the lighter.

He shook it again, listening to the fuel slosh around inside the plastic casing. He was about to try lighting it again when he heard a noise in the darkness. A low breathing; deep, but unsteady, like a lion at the end of a long hunt.

Gripping his leather bag in one hand, Doc turned in the direction of the sound. He raised the other hand and gave the lighter one last go.

The flame's orange glow lit up the disfigured face of something monstrous that lurked at the edge of the room. Its teeth appeared to have been inserted at random into its wide mouth. They jutted in opposite directions, pressing against one another in places, growing right through the creature's lips in others. They were pointed, deadly sharp, stained with the blood of a thousand unwilling dinners.

A rusted strip of metal covered the area where its nose should have been. Four bolts attached the plate to the face – two above the mouth, two below the monster's dark, narrow eyes.

The thing was naked, aside from a ragged loincloth strapped around its waist. Coarse, black hair covered its torso, from its grotesquely bulging stomach, to the enormous knuckles which rested on the floor.

Doc looked the figure up and down. Even hunched, as it was, it stood almost a metre taller than he did. Muscles stood out like ropes across its half-naked body. The near-black eyes looked down at the little man, hungrily.

'Very interesting indeed,' Doc muttered. He took a step back as the monster's teeth gnashed and a sound like the last gasp of a drowning man emerged from its throat.

'You gonna have-ta forgive my friend, Bubba, there,' drawled a voice from the shadows. Doc turned to see a tall, spindly figure step into the circle of light. 'He ain't so good with the talkin'.'

Doc studied the newcomer. He had a crooked, wide-brimmed hat pulled down low on his head, but Doc could make out that he was wearing a sackcloth mask, with a mouldy carrot attached for a nose.

Dirty strands of straw poked out from beneath the sack, and from the sleeves of the long, striped shirt the scarecrow wore beneath a tatty pair of dungarees.

'And what are you supposed to be?' Doc asked.

The scarecrow hissed out a laugh. *SS-SS-SS-SS*. 'Boy, I'm every bad dream what you ever had! I'm the monster what lurks under yo' bed. I'm the thing what goes bump in the night and makes you holla for yo' mamma.'

Doc smiled and gave a single shake of his head. 'No. I do not think that you are,' he said. Then he tossed the lighter and listened to the scarecrow's screams.

'Git him, Bubba! D-don't just stand there, git him!' the straw man howled, as his left arm burst into flame. He writhed and twisted, frantically, smashing the limb against the walls, trying to beat the fire out.

Bubba moved noisily. Even over the scarecrow's screams, Doc heard his lumbering footsteps. Mortis spun, flicking his wrist as he turned. A scalpel slid down from within his sleeve. His pudgy fingers tightened around the handle as Bubba's slab-like hands grabbed for him.

Doc ducked, turned, dropped to one knee as Bubba stumbled right past him. He slashed out with the scalpel and shivered with excitement as the blade sliced through the back of one of Bubba's bare feet, just above the heel.

The brute hit the ground with a *thud*, squealing and screeching. Blood pumped through his fingers as he rolled on the floor, clutching at his wound.

'Achilles tendon,' Doc explained. He slid the blood-spattered scalpel back up into his sleeve. 'It hurts, yes?'

He looked up as the room grew brighter. The scarecrow had managed to extinguish his burning arm, but the tattered green curtains were now ablaze, the flames already licking the tinder-dry ceiling.

'Kill you,' the straw man hissed. 'I'm gonna kill you, boy!'

'You can try,' Doc said, stepping over the fallen Bubba and making his way towards the door. 'But your friend here will not escape this place on his own. You can forget me and save him, or you can pursue me and let him die. The choice is yours.'

With a single nod of his head, Doc left the burning room, taking his briefcase with him. He kept walking, not looking back, making his way through the darkened corridors using memory alone.

At last, he came to the front door of the building. It hung from one hinge, half-blocking the exit. With a grunt of effort, Doc pushed it aside and stepped out onto a path overgrown with weeds.

The world was in near-darkness, with only the full moon casting any light. In the silvery shadows, Doc heard the velvet rustle of oily wings. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom he saw them – birds. Crows.

Hundreds of them.

They were perched on the roof of the building he'd emerged from. They stood on the wreckage of burned out cars. They hopped across the pock-marked tarmac, their beady eyes fixed on his.

'I see you found my babies, boy,' cackled a voice in the corridor behind Doc Mortis. He didn't bother to look at the scarecrow as he slithered up behind him.

'So, you chose coming after me over saving your friend?' Doc said. There was a note of approval in his voice.

'Fact is, I never really liked him anyhow,' the straw man said, and there was that laugh again. SS-SS-SS-SS.

Doc let the scalpel slip down into his hand once again. Only then did he turn to look at the figure beside him. 'I would like to know, what manner of creature are you?'

'Well now, that's right, I never did introduce myself. Where's my manners?' the straw man said. The slit in the mask where his mouth should've been spread into a grin, revealing rotten stumps of teeth, and Doc realised it wasn't a mask at all. 'They call me the Crowmaster. Take a good hard look, boy,' he spat. 'Because this here is the last face yo' ever gonna see!'

Screeching with laughter, the Crowmaster stepped back and raised his arms, and the night was filled by a tornado of feathery black.

### Part 3: A HELPING HAND

Doc slashed with the scalpel and swung with his briefcase, as the birds closed in around him. The air was filled with their screeches and caws and the *whumming* of their greasy black wings.

‘Get... away!’ Doc cried, as one of the birds dug its claws into his shoulder and lunged at his neck. Doc brought the scalpel up sharply, slitting the bird open from stomach to throat. It fell backwards, but half a dozen others rushed to take its place.

With the *snap* of a beak, a chunk of his ear was torn off. He twisted, knocking the crow away, but leaving himself open to an attack from behind. Three more of the birds flew at his back, digging their claws into his tweed coat, pecking hungrily at the base of his neck.

‘Filthy creatures! Get... get away from me!’

He stumbled forwards, contorting his body as the birds tore at his flesh. The scalpel hand shot out and a wing landed on the ground at his feet. He swung with the leather case and another bird went down with a satisfying *thunk*.

But it wasn’t enough. They were all over him now, all claws and beaks and wings, burying him beneath a squawking mound of black.

‘You see what happens, boy?’ cackled the scarecrow, watching on. ‘You see what happens when you go messing with the Crowmaster?’ He laughed again, that sickening *ss-ss-ss-ss*, like air escaping from a tyre. ‘Bet yo’ sorry now, ain’t ya, boy?’

Doc tried to run, to get away, but the hurricane around him made it impossible. He staggered, tripped, then fell face-first onto the ruined tarmac. As the crows moved in for the kill, he clutched his case tighter, screwed his eyes shut, and steeled himself for the pain.

A second later, the darkness evaporated. He could see, even through his closed eyelids - the brilliant glow of a blinding light.

It lasted for less than a second, but a second was all it took. The birds stopped attacking at once. They flew off in panic, dazzled and dazed by the sudden light.

‘What did you do? What did you do to my babies?’ the Crowmaster screeched. He stumbled forwards, arms raised in front of him, then slumped sideways into a tangle of weeds as if no longer able to maintain his balance.

Cautiously, Doc raised his head. Even though his eyes had been shut, white spots swam before them. By the time they cleared, a man in sunglasses and a long leather coat crouched before him, a hand reaching down.

‘Come on,’ the man said. ‘The light won’t stop them for long. We have to get out of here.’

Doc slid the scalpel back up into his sleeve, before allowing the man to help him up. He turned and looked at the Crowmaster, still lying in the grass. The tools in his bag cried out to be put to use.

But the birds were already settling, their beady black eyes beginning to recover. There was no time for revenge. One day, perhaps, but not right now.

Doc turned to the man in the sunglasses. ‘Thank you, my friend,’ he said. ‘Please, lead the way.’

#

For several minutes they skulked along deserted streets, through grubby alleyways, across overgrown parks. Around them, the night was filled with screams and howls, and other noises unlike any Doc had ever heard before. His heart raced through the sheer hellishness of it all.

‘What is this place?’ he asked, as the man in the black coat led them through the burned-out remains of a restaurant. ‘What happened here?’

‘A new arrival, huh?’ the man said, curtly. ‘You’re in the Darkest Corners. It’s where we go when they don’t need us any more.’

‘Where we go...?’

‘Imaginary friends,’ the man said. He scanned the street beyond the restaurant’s doorway before venturing outside. ‘Where the forgotten imaginary friends go.’

‘Ah,’ said Doc, nodding. ‘I see. I am understanding, I think.’

‘You’re lucky I found you when I did. Most people don’t survive more than a few minutes. Those crows would’ve torn you to pieces.’

‘Yes,’ Doc admitted, touching the scratches on his neck. ‘Yes, I think they would.’

The man stopped. ‘What’s your name, by the way?’

‘Mortis. My name is Doctor Mortis.’

‘Adam,’ the man said. ‘Nothing else, just Adam.’

‘A pleasure to meet you,’ Doc said, flashing a yellow-toothed smile. In truth, he was rapidly becoming bored with the man’s company. He shifted his hand and the handle of the scalpel slid into his palm.

‘Likewise,’ Adam said. ‘So, what... you’re a doctor?’

‘I am... a surgeon,’ Doc said, nodding. His index finger pressed against the back of the blade, ready to strike.

Adam pulled off his sunglasses as a smile lit up his face. ‘Really? Wow. That’s... that’s fantastic! You’re just what we need!’

‘We?’ Doc asked. His eyes fixed on a spot just to the right of Adam’s windpipe. His muscles tensed.

‘Yeah. Me and the kids,’ Adam said, nodding enthusiastically. ‘I run this shelter for kids who’re lost and alone here. It’s not much, but it’s safer than them being out on the streets.’

Doc felt the fine hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. ‘You have... a children’s home?’ he asked, his voice a low whisper.

‘Yeah,’ Adam nodded. ‘Yeah, something like that. And, well, I’ll be honest with you, we could really use a doctor. Maybe, if you don’t mind, maybe you could come with me? See what you can do for the sick ones?’

Doc bit down on his lip as a shudder of excitement rippled along his spine. ‘Mind?’ he said, hoarsely. ‘Oh, I do not mind. I do not mind at all.’

His grip relaxed on the scalpel. ‘Take me there,’ he urged. ‘Take me to the children.’

'Really?' asked Adam. 'You'll really come and help them?'

'Oh my, yes. I'll make them better. I'll make them *all* better.' Doc felt the leather case quiver softly in his hand. 'Children are my speciality.'

#### Part 4: Suffer the Little Children

The basement was long and narrow, with dirty mattresses lining the walls. Doc entered to a chorus of hacking coughs and raw, raspy breathing.

‘There’s eleven of us,’ Adam explained, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb the few children lucky enough to be asleep. ‘Nine kids, me and Lori, my... well, I suppose you could call her my wife. She’s out looking for food, like I was.’

‘Nine little children,’ sang Doc, quietly, ‘lying in a row. What shall become of them? I don’t know.’

He turned and Adam a nod. ‘I will do what I can, but I must ask you to leave.’

‘Leave, but—?’

‘No “buts”, no “whys”. If I am to make these children better, you must leave me to work.’

Adam’s gaze went past Doc, to the children on the mattresses. He and Lori had saved them all from fates worse than death. They weren’t just kids, they were *his* kids. His and Lori’s.

‘I’ll just stand over in the corner and keep my mouth shut. You won’t know I’m here.’

Doc adjusted his glasses. ‘I have told you my terms,’ he said, moving to step past Adam.

‘Perhaps, once you are able to agree to them, I shall come back, yes?’

Down on the closest mattress, a child – boy, girl, it was impossible to say – coughed. It was a sound like the barking of a seal. Doc looked down at the frail body, then back to Adam. ‘I just pray it is not too late.’

‘OK, OK, whatever you want,’ Adam said quickly. He held up his hands and began walking backwards towards the door. ‘I’ll wait right outside. Just... just shout me if you need me. And please... do what you can for them.’

Doc gave his case a pat. ‘Oh, do not worry,’ he said, his fish-lips pulling into a smile. ‘Trust me. By the time I’m done, you won’t even recognise them.’

He walked forwards, ushering Adam the final few steps to the door.

‘I’ll, uh, I’ll be waiting right here,’ he said, before the door was closed in his face.

There was an old dining-room chair by the door. Doc lifted it quietly, and wedged the back against the door handle. Only then did he turn and give his full attention to the figures on the beds.

There were nine of them, as Adam had said. Three girls, four boys, two which could have been either. They looked *normal*, if such a word applied here. Not twisted and freakish like Bubba or the scarecrow. At least, not yet.

Doc's shoes *clacked* softly on the bare concrete floor as he slowly paced between the cots.

'If you go down to the woods today, you'd better not go alone,' he mumbled. 'It's lovely down in the woods today, but safer to stay at home.'

His gaze went from child to child. A few of them looked back up at him, their eyes blinking sleepily. Only one spoke as he passed by.

'Who are you?'

Doc looked over his glasses at a boy of around eight or nine years old, dressed in grey rags. He was sitting up on his mattress, his knees pulled to his chest. His matted fringe hung down over his eyes, giving him the appearance of an animal peering out from behind long grass.

'Who do you think I am?'

The boy shrugged his narrow shoulders. 'A dentist or something?'

'Close,' Doc said. 'Very close.' He crouched down next to the boy and sat his case on the floor. 'I am not a dentist, no. But I *do* have a drill. It is a very fine drill. I have used it many times.' His voice became a whisper of excitement. 'Would you like to see it?'

Without a word, the boy shook his head.

Doc's smile broadened into a toothy grin. 'I think, perhaps, I will show it to you anyway. I think, perhaps, I will show you *all* of the wonderful things in my little brown bag.'

The metal clasp unclipped with a faint *click*. The leather *creaked* softly as Doc eased the bag open. 'Tell me, what is your name, my child?' Doc asked.

The boy didn't reply.

'It's OK. You can trust me. I'm a doctor.'

'D-Dan Dan,' said the boy.

'Dan Dan, I'm going to tell you a little secret,' said Doc. His hand reached inside the bag. 'You are very sick, Dan Dan. Without help, you will almost certainly die.'

Panic flared in the boy's eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but Doc raised a finger to his lips.

'Do not worry,' Mortis said, softly. 'I can fix you. I can make you better than you have ever been. I can save your life, Dan Dan.' The hand came out of the bag. A hacksaw came with it, the blade rusted and blunt. 'All I ask is that you scream.'

But Dan Dan couldn't scream. Not when the hand caught him by the hair. Not when he was thrown face-first to the filthy floor. And not when the saw blade pressed against the back of his neck and a giggle burst like spit on Doc's lips.

There were others in the room, though, wide awake now. Scared, but not frozen like Dan Dan. They screamed. All of them. A caterwauled chorus of terror and despair.

'Do not worry, my little ones,' Doc told them. 'You will all get your turn.'

As the screams grew louder, the door gave a sudden jerk. The chair wedging it close held fast and Adam cried out in panic.

'What's happening?' he demanded, hammering against the wood. 'What are you doing to them?'

'I am making them better,' Doc called. 'Like I promised.'

He leaned down so his face was close to Dan Dan's. 'Don't worry. It might not hurt for long.'

'Open this door! Open the damn door!'

'P-please,' croaked Dan Dan. 'D-don't.'

Doc cleared his throat with a cough, forced Dan Dan's head harder against the floor, and positioned his grip on the saw. 'For every bear that ever there was, is gathered there for certain because...' He took a deep breath, savouring the screams of the children around him. '...today's the day the teddy bears have their—'

*KER-ACK!*

The door was pulled outwards, the old wood splintering as it was torn from the hinges. Something female-looking, but only vaguely, ducked through the doorway. She was bald, with skin the colour of raw meat. Tattoos snaked over her broad frame, up her muscular arms and over her enlarged skull.

‘Lori!’ yelled one of the other kids. Doc didn’t move as the giantess thundered towards him, Adam trailing behind her, a baseball bat in his hands.

‘Not another step,’ Doc warned. ‘Unless you want little Dan Dan here to go to pieces.’

Lori stopped. Her lips moved, but the sounds that emerged weren’t words. Not ones Doc could understand, at least.

‘Let him go,’ Adam said. ‘Let him go, we can talk about this.’

‘I will talk,’ Doc said. ‘You will listen.’

He stood up, pulling Dan Dan with him, and placed the saw against the boy’s throat. ‘I am leaving now. And I am taking the child with me.’

‘Like Hell you are,’ Adam snapped.

‘Very well, then I shall cut his throat right now, and we shall watch him bleed.’

‘No, wait, don’t!’ cried Adam. He let the baseball bat fall to the floor with a *thunk*. ‘Just don’t hurt him. It’s going to be OK, Dan Dan. Everything’s going to be OK.’

Doc smirked as he leaned in and whispered into Dan Dan’s ear. ‘Don’t listen to him child,’ he said. ‘Everything is very much *not* going to be OK.’

## Part 5: Prepped for Surgery

Doc backed out of the room, Dan Dan held in front of him, the ragged blade of the saw still pressed to the boy's throat. Adam and Lori stood back, watching helplessly. The other children – bless them – screamed and screamed and screamed.

'Do not be attempting to follow me,' Doc warned. 'Or the boy loses his head. Slowly. Do you understand?'

'You're not going to get away with this,' Adam hissed through gritted teeth. 'I won't let you hurt him.'

'I will be walking backwards up the stairs and all the way outside. If I see anyone else emerge... Well, I had best not see anyone else emerge.'

Doc's arm was across the boy's throat. He could feel him trembling; feel every sob that wracked his frail body.

'Tell him again that everything's going to be OK. Tell him not to worry,' Doc said. '*Lie* to him.'

Lori moved to lunge, but Adam put an arm in front of her, holding her back. She gave a growl of frustration, but didn't make another move forward.

'You're a monster,' Adam said, quietly, his eyes locked on Doc's. 'I'm going to kill you, first chance I get.'

Doc dragged Dan Dan backwards, out through the wreckage of the door. 'Yes, I am sure you will try,' he said, as he led the boy up the narrow steps, through the crumbling shell of the building above, and out into the darkened streets beyond. Nobody moved to follow.

'Alone at last,' said Doc, his voice a scratchy giggle. 'You know what we must find now, of course?' He licked his blubbery lips and leaned closer to the boy's ear. 'Somewhere to operate.'

#

Doc looked down at the tray in front of him and gave a sigh. He'd been forced to leave his medical bag back in the basement, with all his precious tools inside. Now all he had was the hacksaw and the

scalpel. No drill. No hammer. No little barbed hook he'd never discovered the name of. A saw and a scalpel, and that was that.

Still, it was a poor artist who blamed his tools. Drill or no drill, he'd come up with something spectacular.

Padding across the charred floor, he approached what was left of the electric chair. He carried the tray before him, the tools laid out on it as best he could. It was important to make the right impression.

The execution chamber hadn't been completely destroyed in the fire. It had held up quite well, considering. The stone walls were blackened, but solid. Much of the ceiling was gone, allowing moonlight to pick away at the room's shadowy corners.

They had passed the body of Bubba on the way in. The brute hadn't died in the flames, and much of the smoke would've escaped through the hole in the roof, meaning he hadn't died from smoke inhalation either.

His death was no mystery, though. Most of his insides were outside, and a carpet of black feathers lay all around him on the corridor floor. Another friendship turned sour, it seemed.

Dan Dan was strapped to the chair, his arms and legs fixed tightly in place. Much of the wood now resembled charcoal, and some of it was uncomfortably hot to the touch, but it was solid enough that the boy couldn't break free.

A ragged piece of cloth was tied across Dan Dan's mouth, gagging him. Yes, Doc wanted him to scream, but not now, not yet, not until the time was right. The boy's wide eyes followed the tray as Doc carried it over.

'You will have to forgive me,' Doc said. 'I am usually much better prepared. This is a poor offering, I'm afraid, but we make do with what we have, yes?'

He reached into the pockets of his tweed coat and produced a thin rubber glove from within each one. He pulled them on with a *snap*.

'Now,' he breathed, 'what to do? What to do?'

He paced around the chair, pausing to examine the back of Dan Dan's head, or look inside his ears. He placed his thumbs on the boy's cheeks and pulled his eyes wider. As he studied the bloodshot whites, a thought occurred to him.

Doc turned and looked at Bubba's body, slumped just beyond the doorway. He looked back at the boy in the chair. 'Hmm,' he said, quietly. 'I wonder...'

#

Doc Mortis sat on a folding chair outside the prison entrance, listening to the chaos of the world around him. This new place, this *Darkest Corners*, was what he always imagined Hell to be like. And a person like him, he knew, could do well in a place like this.

He pulled off the blood-stained gloves and slipped them back into his pockets. No reason to be wasteful. There was no saying when he'd find another pair.

A figure was skulking across the street towards him, trying to stay out of sight. Doc knew he was there. He had known for the past three minutes.

He looked up as Adam emerged from the darkness. Then he smiled. 'There you are,' he said, jovially. 'I wondered when you would find me.'

'Where is he? Where's Dan Dan? If you've hurt him, I'll—'

'Hurt him? Come come now, I'm a doctor. I don't *hurt* people, I make them better.'

Adam caught Mortis by the jacket and hoisted him into the air. 'Where is he?' he seethed, pushing bubbles of spit through his teeth. '*Where's Dan Dan?*'

'I would not do that if I were you,' Doc said, quietly. 'He will not like to see me manhandled.'

In the shadows just inside the prison doorway, something moved. Adam peered into the gloom, and to the monstrous figure that lurked there.

'What... what is that?'

A leer spread across Doc's face. 'Guess.'

Adam released his grip, letting Doc drop back down into his seat. Cautiously, he took a step towards the door. He shook his head, trying not to believe what he knew, deep down, to be true. He swallowed, his mouth suddenly sandpaper-dry.

'D-Dan Dan?'

'He does not go by that name any more,' Doc said. 'Now he is simply, *Patient Zero*.'

Something that was not quite Bubba and not quite Dan Dan pounced. Thick, scarred arms wrapped around Adam. There was a scream and a *snap*, and both figures returned to the darkness inside the prison walls.

Doc reclined in the chair, his hands behind his head, as the sounds of tearing flesh and splintering bone filled the chill night air. He sang below his breath, savouring the moment, and dreaming of all the moments like it to come.

'If you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise...'

He would travel. That's what he would do. See the world, and the monsters that inhabited it. One day, he would settle down, find a hospital of his own and continue his life's work.

Yes, a person like him could do very well in a place like this.

Very well indeed.