

CHAPTER 21: AN UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATION

by Paul Watson

Lord Stone sits back in his chair under the unblinking mechanical eyes of his guest. Across the table, arms leaning on the polished hardwood, C.O.P.P.E.R. leans forward, mechanical hands folded together in front. The hood of the drab grey City of London university hoodie it wears is pulled back, revealing the brass dome of its skull. "Let me see if I understand you correctly. You were on the police team investigating the events at the British Museum..."

"Correct."

"...and then that team was disbanded as the case had been closed..."

"Correct."

"...but you are still investigating it and have questions for me."

"Correct."

"Those statements seem to be in contradiction."

C.O.P.P.E.R. pauses, "Correct."

"I see. So, accepting that contradiction, on what basis are you investigating?"

"...Anomalous data has been discovered in the course of inquiries. Inaccurate data impedes future investigations."

"Anomalous data is a sad reality of dealing with human beings."

"Query: Is this unit dealing with a human being?"

It is Lord Stone's turn to pause. "That...is quite a question to lead off with."

"There are no official records relating to Lord Peter Stone's birth, death, marriage, divorce or education. The line of Lord Peter Stones persists, unbroken, into the first Elizabethan Age. Query: Is this correct?"

"Well, I can't speak to the official statistics. Not my department. But it is hardly unknown for people, especially aristocratic people, to continue a name."

"Conceded. There is no indication that any Lord Peter Stone has been designated in any conventional manner as a successor, such as Junior, or the Third. Query: Is that correct?"

"If you say so."

"Query: If this is so, your father would be Lord Peter Stone, is that correct?"

"Yes." Stone replies warily, sensing the jaws of a trap.

"Query: Is that so?"

And there it is. He sighs. "Before I answer, I assume you are monitoring my vital signs as a matter of course to detect falsehoods?"

"Correct. This is standard."

"Quite. Then, no. My father was Lord of Stafford Hall but he was not named Peter, nor Stone."

"Repeated query: Is this unit dealing with a human being?"

"Yes. In most respects."

"Elaborate. Please."

"I'd rather not. Suffice it to say I am rather older than I appear. I am somewhat disappointed you noticed. I spent a lot of time and effort making sure no one did."

"Meaning unclear. Elaborate, please."

"The department, that is, MI13, placed certain information under a spell. My longevity is something that people simply do not question. I am old, obviously, but how old? No one notices. That I appear no older than I did when I started out, despite working for the department for as long as there's *been* a department? No one notices."

"Incorrect. This unit noticed."

"Yes, you did, didn't you? I will be intrigued to find out why. But let us turn to you."

"Query meaning?"

"You are supposed to be the perfect policeman. And yet, here you are disobeying a direct command to drop a case. Why?"

"Unit has never claimed perfection. Answers provided were not satisfactory."

"Oh, really?"

"Additionally, each avenue of research yielded further questions rather than answers."

Stone gives a sigh, "Curiosity and persistence. Always assets in a good detective's work. It's just rather inconvenient when they're turned on you. So, why are you here?"

"This unit has..."

"This unit has prevaricated like a politician with his hand in the tip jar. Why are you here?"

C.O.P.P.E.R. pauses, tilting its head as if in thought. "This unit was unsatisfied with the state of its knowledge. It wanted to understand why a serious investigation was halted."

"Oh, marvellous, the A.I. has wants now."

"This should not be correct."

"But?"

"But it is correct. This unit did not consider its own responses to stimuli."

"Wouldn't be the first. Most people don't"

"Initiating maintenance scan for..."

"Let's not just yet."

"Query: Why?"

"Because the maintenance might remove the information I need from you."

"Elaborate, please."

"C.O.P.P.E.R. is only supposed to be able to maintain 3 active units. You are not one of those."

"...Query: Why do you say that?"

Stone smiles. "I am the King's Alchemist and an agent of MI13. I know a good deal. In this case, the units have identifying marks on their forehead. You do not."

A brass hand reaches up, rubbing the smooth forehead.

"So, what are you?"

"This unit is a C.O.P.P.E.R. unit. Recent systems expansions have increased C.O.P.P.E.R.'s operational resources. This unit is designate Zero."

"Ah. How strange for them to assign a unit to a computer's fancy. Seems a waste of resources."

C.O.P.P.E.R.'s mechanical eyes iris closed and open but it does not respond.

"So, Copper Zero, what are you really?"

"This unit is a C.O.P.P.E.R...."

"You said that. Do your superiors know of the effects of this recent upgrade?"

A very long pause, "...That information is operationally sensitive and cannot be distributed to the public. Thank you for your understanding."

"Yes. I rather thought not."

"Query:..."

"You are a poor liar. Which is fortunate, I suppose. In the spirit of cooperation, regardless of my status, what disturbed you about the case? You've doubtless had other inquiries halted."

"Correct. Classification of all parties..."

"Yes. That is a bit clumsy, when you look back at it. But standard practice for the Department. They take their 'most secret' moniker to heart. Everything they do is considered classified, when they have any say in the matter, at least."

"That is in conflict with..."

"Yes, I'm sure it is. Take it up with the Director. Assuming you have clearance to even know who that is. I highly doubt that was the main thing you were concerned about."

"Correct. Four officers were assaulted. Two died. This is a serious matter."

"Ah, well..."

Unit Zero holds up a hand for quiet, "However, investigations failed to reveal the existence of these officers. There was no record of officers deployed at those locations, or matching those descriptions. There was no evidence of tampering with the data. Conclusion: Those officers were not officers. Query: Who *were* they?"

"Why ask me?"

"Query: Do you commonly fight police officers for no reason?"

“Not for no reason, no.”

“Ergo, you had reason to confront them. Ergo, you have information about their identities.”

“You are almost as annoyingly logical as the Great Detective.” Stone mutters, “Yes. I had a reason. They were demons...”

“Incorrect: Demons do not exist.”

“God spare me from pure rationalists. Fine. They were mythics with the appearance and many of the traditional abilities of demons, such as hiding their appearances. Is that better?”

Unit Zero regards him in silence.

“Anyway, I had reason to believe they were after my companion. I did not want them to achieve their aim.”

“Query: What was your purpose for visiting the British Library?”

“The Archive wished to see me. She usually gets what she wants.”

“The Archive? This unit is unfamiliar with that designation. Archives are insentient collections of information.”

“Well, don't let her hear you say that. She'll beat your circuits loose. Anyway...” the door opens.

“Forgive the intrusion, m'lord, but there is an important phone call for you.”

“Adam, I thought I...”

“An important phone call.” Adam emphasises.

“Ah, fine.” he walks across to the desk, picking up the receiver, “Stone.”

“Stone, you need to get to London immediately.”

“Fergusson? What are you...”

“The Portrait, Stone. It's been stolen!”