

CHAPTER 22: THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

by Paul Watson

"Why is everyone getting so het up over a fucking painting?" Manny asks, trying to match Stone's hurried stride.

"Because it's not a painting, it's the Portrait."

"Well, that clears it up, certainly."

"I will explain later. Griffin, can you use one of these?" he hands over a tranquilliser pistol.

"Sir."

"Good. Darts are in the cupboard. Bring more than you think you need."

Griffen nods and the cupboard door opens.

"Query: What is this unit to do while you are..."

"You're coming with us."

"It is?"

"We're going to a crime scene. That's exactly within it's expertise and not within ours."

"And how are we getting to..."

Stone opens the door to the rune portal. "We'll be getting to the Department. Fergusson will be waiting for us. I'm sure he'll explain exactly what we're to do." he traces a rune on the gate's lintel and steps through. The rest of the team follows, C.O.P.P.E.R. Sandwiched between Latitia and Manny, with varying degrees of trepidation.

At the other end, rather than agents by the dozen, there is just Fergusson. "Good. No time to lose. We have the scene cordoned off, but we can't go through the Met for this."

"Query: Why not?"

"You've got a Copper unit already? Excellent. Must pay to have connections."

"I've found it does. Do we know when it was stolen?"

"We can put that down precisely. They disabled the visible CCTV cameras but missed the concealed ones, including the infrared."

"We have camera footage? Well, that does put a positive spin on things."

"So glad you approve."

"So, what do we know?" Stone asks, ignoring the bitter tone in Fergusson's voice.

Fergusson swipes a finger across his tablet screen, "They arrived in a van. We're tracing that now. Four of them. No masks, so we're dealing with very cocky amateurs, which makes this more embarrassing. They went straight to the Portrait so it was to order. They also seemed to know the night guard's patrol times, and the alarms, so there's clearly a leak somewhere. We're running facial scans now to identify them. And when we do..."

"You want us to fall on them like the wrath of an angry god and return the Portrait before they offload it."

"Exactly that."

"Is there any sign the Portrait's...in use?"

"Not yet, but you'd best believe we've got the Met alerted in case."

"Good, good. We don't want another Ripper."

"No, we do not."

"Ripper? As in Jack the Ripper? What the fuck is this Portrait?"

Fergusson looks irritably at Manny.

"We should probably bring them up to speed, Deputy Director. It won't interfere if the perpetrators still haven't been identified."

"Fine. Follow me."

He leads them into a small meeting room, white walls, uncomfortable seats, a clinically clean works table. Behind him, a screen buried in the wall flickers into life at a touch of section of the tablet screen. "The Portrait." he begins, "First discovered in the 1880s but undoubtedly created earlier. It's existence was rumoured around London at the time, which is probably how it came to the attention of Oscar Wilde."

"The Portrait of Dorian Gray?"

He looks at the empty space the voice came from, "The very same. He took considerable liberties, thankfully. As far as we know, the Portrait doesn't just grant immortality to its owner for nothing. You have to feed it. So, it's a dark portrait, four feet by three, of a thin gentleman in Victorian dress. Pinched features, pointed nose, pale, lanky black hair. Not a prepossessing visage. It came into the possession of the department's predecessor in government in 1888. Since then, it has been securely under lock and key at a secure facility."

"Not that secure." Manny mutters.

"What does that have to do with Jack the Ripper?"

Fergusson takes a long breath, focussing himself. "The Portrait is a portal of some kind. If you know the right ritual, you can open the portal to a thoroughly unpleasant place, we assume. From there, a murderous, trickster spirit emerges."

"The Ripper." Latitia says into the silence.

"Exactly."

"Well, that explains why he was never caught."

"It does. We have to assume that whoever commissioned this theft knows, or believes they know, the ritual."

"So we're looking at a return of Jack the Ripper?"

"Potentially, Griffin. Hopefully only potentially."

"Query: May this unit have access to the analysis and files on the Portrait?"

"I suppose it can't hurt. So, to sum up, a dangerous artifact has gone missing. In the wrong hands, it will summon one of the most infamous murderers in this country's history, to say nothing of the requirements of the ritual."

"Requirementss?"

Fergusson looks sombre, "A blood sacrifice. When the Portrait is activated, any who look at it have their souls drawn into it. If their bodies are then sacrificed in the prescribed manner, the Ripper gets summoned and kills more. At least to our understanding. For what I would hope are obvious reasons, we have not been keen to test the ritual's efficacy."

"And now, the Portrait is loose."

"And now, the Portrait is loose." Fergusson agrees.

"Request: This unit would like to view the crime scene, if possible."

"It's been thoroughly investigated. There's no need."

"Explanation: This unit finds that its senses are more perceptive than humans'. Request repeated."

"Fine. But if we find them, you're to prioritise that over a stale scene of crime."

"Acceptance. Thank you for your cooperation."

The blacked out van Fergusson herds them into crawls through the streets of London towards the secure archive.

"Do you really not trust the Department's team?"

"This unit's senses are significantly enhanced, but their analysis is sound."

"So why...?"

"Response: Thieves are in possession of information that is extremely restricted. All known holders of that knowledge are in the Department. Conclusion One: At least one member of the Department is colluding with the thieves. Conclusion 2: Not knowing which members of the Department are colluding, the entire operation cannot be considered safe."

"I see. Well, that is logical, in its way."

"Query: Current supposition is that this theft was meticulously planned, using highly controlled data, correct?"

"Yes. No..."

"Extended: And that it was carried out by amateurs, correct?"

"Correct. What are you..."

"Query: Why would anyone plan so carefully and yet trust amateurs to carry it out? Illogical on its

face.”

“What are you on about?” Manny asks.

“Explanation: Either the planner has no choice and must use amateurs, indicating there is time pressure on them, or they intend for the amateurs to be caught. Further information is needed to determine.”

“Does that help us?”

“Not at this time. But, if the second supposition is correct, finding the thieves may be a trap. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Marvellous. So not just a crime but probably a trap, too.”

”Statement: It is a possibility to prepare for. Additional: This unit has reviewed the camera footage. There is an anomaly. Accessing projector.” A flickering light projects from its chest on the wall of the van, “Observation: The thieves take the Portrait at this point. Then, they stop, holding it up for no apparent reason. Then, they back up and move around what appears to be an empty point in space. A direct route would be easier and more sensible. Conclusion: A fifth individual is present but not recorded.”

”The planner?”

”Response: That is the most likely outcome.”

”So their planner was there. They show her the portrait. To confirm they’ve got the right one? Then they leave but she’s in the way.”

”That is the scenario this unit has constructed.”

”How’s he invisible then? One of your mates?”

”It’s...”

”Statement: Possible, but unlikely. There are thermal cameras that also did not detect the presence.”

”Vampire?” Griffin suggests.

”Maybe. Westenra is obsessive about putting the Count’s people to the sword. But we should be prepared.”

They hear Griffin patting his pockets, “Got the holy water darts, sir.”

”Good.”

”Most likely outcome is the camera footage was later doctored.”

”Well, ain’t that swell. The Department’s got a crook in it.”

”This unit detected no degradation in the picture. This renders the possibility unlikely. Also no sign of distortion from a device is detected. This is an anomaly.”

”As if we didn’t have enough ahead...”

”You all strapped in back there?” their driver shouts from the front seat.

”Why?”

”HQ called. They’ve tracked the van. The Met is waiting on site to effect entry.”

”So?”

”So you’d better be strapped in.” a siren wails high to low and back again, blue lights flash, and the rules of the road vanish in the van’s dust as the close traffic pulls aside.

An aggressively driven short time later, the van screeches outside a 60s tower block. “Hey. What’s all...” an approaching policeman shouts.

The back door opens. “This unit is here to render assistance. Thank you for your cooperation.”

”Oh, right.” he looks at the motley crew somewhat suspiciously.

”Good work, Officer.” Stone says confidently, ”Where’s the scene commander?”

”Floor seven, sir. 718.”

Stone follows the pointing finger up to where there’s a clear knot of police officers, ”Good, good. You keep everyone else away. We’ll head there immediately.”

”I should...”

”Radio ahead. Let him know we’re coming.”

”Yes, sir.” he turns to the radio on his shoulder as they walk to the steps.

”Griffin, scout as best you can with the bobbies swarming all over. The rest of you, look

professional.”

They climb the concrete steps, graffiti scrawled over the walls, the plastic coating of the metal bannister rent.

”Couldn’t we take the lift?”

”Bit of exercise never hurt anyone.” Stone replies.

”Says you.”

They exit the stairwell, onto a balcony running along the outside of the building. “No sign of movement inside, sir. Scene commander is getting antsy.”

”Well, let’s deal with that, at least. Copper, you’re with me.” he strides forward.

”Hey! Stop! Who are...” the animated lead officer snaps, his face ruddy.

”Lord Stone. I’m the expert you were told to wait for.”

”Right. Sure you are.”

Stone reaches into his jacket for his card, the silver on black affair from the Department that asserts his authority in this situation, whatever 'this situation' happens to be.

”This unit confirms the identity.” and an electronic voice pre-empts him.

”Well, I guess you’re in charge then. Sir.”

”We’re expecting four, maybe five, individuals. Any sign of them?”

”None. Place is quiet. No response.”

”Annoying. I’d rather we didn’t have to use violence. However, are you prepped for forced entry?”

”Of course.”

”Excellent. The C.O.P.P.E.R. unit will take the lead in case there’s anything nasty there, then your people to affect the arrests. If there’s trouble, my mob will deal with it.”

”If you say so.”

”I do. Now, if you wouldn’t mind getting that door open?”

”Whatever you say. Sir. Jenkins! Get the big red fucking key up and open that door!”

The policeman, hidden behind his riot helmet and body armour, hefts up the red metal ram, swings it back and slams into the door. The lock rips free as the door slams backwards onto the thin walls.

C.O.P.P.E.R steps into the space and walks forward, its eyes glowing as it sweeps the property.

”Commander, Lord Stone. This unit has found the targets. They are not conscious. Situation is controlled. Please enter to assess.”

”What does that mean?”

”It means that I’m going to have to ask your men to hold back for a few more minutes. With me.”

Stone walks forward into the property. The walls are clean, but the paint peels in the corners where the spiders dwell. The thin open doors show most rooms are bedrooms, a central room opening up, the walls stinking of cigarettes, the kitchen with its once white tiles beside the cooker, the bin just on the edge of overflowing, greasy pizza boxes and beer cans it’s most prevalent contents. Sprawled over the central room are four men, dressed in similar jeans and black t-shirts. There is a strong family resemblance, the same nose, black hair in short styles, one starting to go grey. Not one moves. Their breathing is shallow, shuddering, one step up from a rattling final breath; their eyes rolled so far back only the whites are showing, staring out; their mouths open in a silent scream; no sign of wound or violence on their supine bodies, arrayed as if they were puppets with cut strings.

”What’s wrong with them?”

Stone looks around darkly, “Our planner knows the ritual.” he mutters.