

CHAPTER 25: AGAINST THE CULT OF THE PORTRAIT

by Paul Watson

Stone sighs, standing in the alleyway across the street from the cult's headquarters. "Right. Now it is, then. Griffin, get over there. If you can stop them locking that damn door, do it. If not, ready to take down their guards the moment we arrive."

"Sir." and with that, his presence has gone.

"The rest of you, keep out of sight but let's get over there. Once the door's open, Griffin will scout. Mr King, if you can persuade your furry friends to lend a hand on that endeavour, it will save valuable time. Miss Morn, your job is to take down any stragglers that Griffin leaves. Try to keep them as quiet as possible when their souls are in agony, if you could. We're going to need to keep the element of surprise for as long as possible. Miss Eurayle, you are keeping watch for surprises, which I expect you to neutralise. Lady Peaseblossom, you will find that girl they're manhandling and keep her safe until we arrive."

"And what will you be doing while we're doing all the work?"

"Trying very hard not to kill every last one of these fools unnecessarily. I will be doing what I have always done, Mr King: whatever I need to. I have been doing this sort of thing your entire life, after all."

"What is this unit's role in the enterprise?"

"You? Right. You make sure we don't trample every last bit of evidence in our haste."

"This unit understands. Thank you for your cooperation."

"Actually, can you block reception around here? I don't want Westenra complaining."

"That is within this unit's capacities."

"Good. One more thing, all of you. As ranking agent on scene, I am authorising you to kill any of these fools who doesn't have the good sense to stay down. If any of them seem like they're still a threat after our first pass? Put them down. Hard."

"What?"

"Keep as many alive as possible, but our priorities are: first, the girl's life, and second, ours. If any of these demented cultists have to die to achieve either of those goals, so be it."

"This unit requests to know the legal author..."

"Statutory powers act, 1816. Section 13." he reels off crisply as the door across the road swallows the drunken woman and her two supporters. "Now, let's be off. I doubt they're going to offer her tea and sandwiches beforehand." he walks briskly across the road, striding out with his cane in his hand. The others follow, catching up as Stone reaches the door. He pushes against it. "Locked. Fine, if that's the way the universe wants it. Stand ready. When this goes, I want you moving immediately."

"What do you mean..."

Stone reaches out, touching the wooden door. Almost immediately, the door collapses in a cascade of white crystals. Stone strides through the now empty doorway into the surprised faces of three men.

"Hey! Who..." the man collapses, a feathered dart sprouting from his back.

"What's..." another cough of the dart gun and the second falls. The third starts towards the door as Peaseblossom flits past him and up the stairs. C.O.P.P.E.R. raises one arm. A pair of darts fly under its wrist, trailing wires. With a slight buzz and crackle, the final man in the hallway goes down twitching.

"Evidence has been preserved."

"Thank you, C.O.P.P.E.R. Griffin, King, scout the next floor. If there's an opportunity to reduce our opposition without revealing yourselves, take it. The rest of you, we're clearing house. That door first." he points at the nearest door. "Close it on my signal."

"Close it?" Diana asks, her hand on the handle.

Stone reaches into his jacket's inner pocket, producing a small glass vial, "Open it." he tosses the vial into the room, filled with surprised faces. It shatters at it hits the floor, thick, cloyingly sweet purple vapours pouring out. "Now." Diana slams the door shut.

"What was that?"

"Aerosol sedative." there's a thump of a body against the door. "Give it a few seconds to take effect." The door rattles as someone pulls it open. Diana's fist doubles him over as she shoves him back, sending him stumbling as she slams the door again, holding it firm until the noise inside fades.

"How many of those do you have?"

"Hopefully enough." he nods towards the next door. C.O.P.P.E.R. raises a hand.

"No heat signatures are present behind that door."

"Good. Check the others."

"Negative. Negative. This one, three signatures."

"Stand ready, then."

C.O.P.P.E.R. opens the door and another vial flies in. The door handle rattles as someone tries to escape the cloying, soporific fumes. There is a buzzing, electricity crackling around C.O.P.P.E.R.'s finger as it holds the door, shocking whoever was still active on the other side.

"Anyone else down here?"

"Ere! What are you lot doing..." the man almost drops his mug as he opens the door to a kitchen that needs a cleaning, his gut overhanging his belt. Black flame licks over him and he drops to his knees, teeth gritted in pain. He shudders, clutching his chest.

"That's enough, Miss Morn. Miss Eurayle, bite him. We can't afford to dally saving his life."

"Why bother?" Latitia asks, her eyes glowing black, "If anything, letting him die is letting him off far too easy."

"Not our decision to make."

"You're the one who declared lethal force." the man's shuddered, ragged breathing ceases as his body turns to white stone sprawled over the floor, the spreading stain of black coffee seeping into his pristine body.

"Where necessary, I said."

"You didn't see what he's done!"

"I did not, no. We'll deal with whatever it is later. C.O.P.P.E.R., any others?"

"Negative."

"Then up we go."

The floor above opens into a narrow hallway, dominated by the stairs going up and down. Several faded doors run around the peeling walls. Two are open, with dart bedecked men slumped in each. Manny crouches by another door, whispering before a rat scurries away. He pushes the door open, there is a cough and a thump as whoever was inside collapses. "Hey!" unfortunately the second man barrels into the hallway, very nearly filling it. There's a groan as he slams Griffin into the wall.

"I don't have a clear..."

"Don't worry, Princesss, I've got this." Diana grabs the bannister, hauling herself up, vaulting over it. "My, you're a big one, aren't you? Let'ss dance." a meaty hand swings. She ducks, deflecting it with her forearm. Her snakes hiss. She steps back to avoid his second swing.

"Stop playing with him and just put him down!"

"Sspoilsport." she kicks into his knee, and, as he falls onto the grimy carpet, she grabs his outstretched arm, twisting it back. Her mouth opens, her fangs flip down and she drives them into the flesh of his arm, just by the Chelsea FC tattoo. "Ugh." she spits as the stone overtakes him, "Someone needss to watch hiss diet. Hiss arteriess are practically ssolid already." she ignores the white stone figure with its awkward posing.

"We are not here to enjoy ourselves, Miss Eurayle."

"Sorry, sir. That one got away from me." Griffin apologises.

"No one's perfect. Mr King, what news?"

"They don't like the next level any more. Something's up there that scares them. They can't describe the scent properly, though. It's just 'fear' turned up to 11."

"Let me guess, arrived last night?"

"You got it."

"Well, at least we know where they are. Let's go and back up Peaseblossom. Unless she's finished them all off by now."

A level above, the hallway opens into a single spreading attic chamber. A table has been repurposed, the captive spread over it, hands and feet chained in place. There are four men present, all wearing peaked visors to shield themselves from the portrait looming above the table. Peaseblossom flits between the three around the table, their muscles swollen, faces red with rage, as they try to capture her, each squawking when they get too close and her fairy steel bites into their grasping hand. The fourth, his face hidden deep in the hood of his purple cloak, stands behind the melee. He holds a black athame in one hand as he tries to read from a leather-bound book balanced on the other.

"Please do join in the festivities, Lord Stone. These persons are proving remarkably unwilling to lay down and be beaten." there is the cough of the dart gun and one sprouts a feather in his arm. He yanks it out, and continues only slightly more sluggishly.

"Bugger."

"Permission to enjoy myself, ssir?"

"If you must. Just put them down."

Diana flashes a fanged grin and runs into the room, ducking under the wild swing of the first hulk as she drives a fist into his stomach. He grunts but doesn't otherwise indicate he noticed the attack.

"Can someone deal with that priest? I don't want him finishing..."

The 'priest' raises his voice to a climax, bringing the chant in something that sounds like ancient Sumerian to a close. The portrait starts to swirl, as if the ink was part of a whirling vortex.

"Damn. Literally. Eurayle, stone the woman and pull back."

"Sstone the...?"

"Just do it."

"Ssure." she steps inside the latest swing from a bulky arm, "Ssorry, ssweetheart. I usually don't do this on a first date." She ducks her head. There's a loud thump as one of the hulks finally succumbs to the five darts buried in his body. White stone spreads across the woman's skin as her already feeble struggles still further. As Diana rises, a beefy arm, more like a thigh, wraps around her neck.

"Do not look at the portrait!!" Stone shouts as her head is yanked back. She screws her eyes shut as the colours above spin and spin down into a dark tunnel.

"Lookss like it'ss you or me." her back bends, "And I really do prefer me." She throws her weight forward, catapulting the man over her shoulder. His grip flies away as he sails through the air. He lands on the edge of the table, a meaty crack echoing around as his back arches unnaturally. He howls in pain, his eyes snapping open. Sparkling black and grey smoke rises up from his mouth, nose and eyes, streaming up into the portrait. His empty body crashes to the floor not making even an attempt to catch his fall.

"What wass tha..." she opens her eyes for a moment, drawn up to the vortex above and she collapses, her white soul streaming up into the portrait.

"No!!" Latitia screams, her voice even rising over the exultant laughter of the hooded figure. Her black fire eyes focus on him and the laughter turns to screams as the black fire rages over his body. All his lusts; his hatreds for the pretty women who control his arousal but always choose the handsome ones over him, never knowing how much better he'd be for them; his envy and jealousy; all his sins burn deep into his soul, kindling to the rage she feels. The air around her grows heavy with the smell of hot metal and sulphur.

"Do it. He's worthless. Barely fit for your anger. And yet, he's taken something precious from you."

"This unit shall effect rescue." Mechanical limbs whirr into motion.

"No! Don't..."

"Your fear is illogical. This unit has no soul to..." sparkling white smoke swirls out of his body and into the portal as his metal frame collapses.

"What just happened?" Manny asks, shiv in hand trying to see without looking into the hypnotically

swirling portal above.

"The portal opened." Stone replies grimly, "And devoured the souls of Ms Eurayle and C.O.P.P.E.R.. This...complicates matters."

Latitia barely hears them as she cries tears of black flame, her rage and grief blazing against the priest.

"Such a shame. I mean, she seemed such a nice thing. Pretty, too. Don't worry, I'm sure her pure soul will be fine in Hell. She can probably endure a few centuries of torment before she's finally used up."

"Shut up!"

"Of course, I might be able to save her...and that mechanical man, too."

"What are you...?"

"I just need to access a little power."

"Do you think I'm stupid?"

"You're here, watching the woman you want to be your lover's soul be spun out into eternal torment. And you could do something about it if you bent a little. But, as you won't, I guess you are a little stupid. Or not as in love as you thought."

"Do it."

"Miss Morn, what...?"

Metal cracks, black flames lick up her arm. She stands more confidently, her black iron claws flexing. She rolls her shoulders, goat horns twisting through her forehead as her skin takes on a crimson tint.

"Latitia's not home at this moment. Leave a message and I'll make sure she gets riiiiight back to you." she starts to slink forward, her eyes on the portal.

"Stop!"

"Wait your turn, old man. I have other things to do rather than teach you to speak with proper respect."

"I said stop!" his hand closes around her wrist in a grip like iron. She looks down.

"Well, if you insist on joining me..." her other hand reaches out, slicing out through the air. There's gust of grimy smoke from the rent in the air, smelling harshly of brimstone. The demon who was Latitia Morn steps through, pulling Stone with her. The rent in the air slams shut.

"What the fuck just..." the hulk on the floor stirs, the sound of movement below.

Griffin looks down the stairwell, "Hostiles. Lots of them."

"Well, that's just great. Just fucking great. So, Captain, what do we do now?"

Elsewhere, Stone tries to adjust to the sudden appearance of cobbles under his feet. The air is thick with a sulphurous smog worse than any he remembers. Blackened brick buildings crowd together, leaning above them to blot out whatever passes for the Sun in this place. "What? Where have you taken me?"

The demon turns, her hooves sparking on the cobbles. She smiles her fanged smile, and replies in a purr with just one word, "Hell."