

CHAPTER 26: THE HELL THAT JACK BUILT

by Paul Watson

"Hell?" Stone replies. "It looks much more like Victorian London than..."

"And yet, it is still a hell." the demon smiles, "Now, if you can somehow manage not to get in my way, let's go find my girl and get..."

A shape bursts from one of the claustrophobically narrow side streets, slipping in the grime on the cobbles. His body is vaguely translucent, in the sulphurous miasma swirling around them. He sees them, stumbling towards them at speed, "Oh, God, you've got to help me! He's coming! He's..."

As he gets close enough for Stone to recognise the terror stricken face, but, annoyingly, not immediately recall from where, he sees the demon standing there and his eyes go wider.

"Nononononono..." he flees back into the smog, vanishing from sight long before his footsteps fade.

A new shape slinks into view from the same alley, its edges blurred and softened by the smog.

"What's this? Jack didn't know he had visitors. And smells like flesh, not souls. Jack will have to strip that from them. Can't have the living in here bringing down Jack's neighbourhood." Jack steps out of the smog, his twin blades drinking in the gas lamp light like midnight shadows. "Yes, Jack's going to have to..." he cocks his head to the side, the manic grin never wavering, "Wait! You! Oh, this is delicious." a long tongue licks along his thin lips, "Jack's been waiting for you for a long time. You're the one who caged Jack up and prevented him from having his little fun with all the dollymops. And here you are. Jack's going to..."

"Stop referring to himself in the third person?" the demon drawls. She stares down at her claws like she's inspecting her nail varnish, thoroughly bored by the approaching sharp-edged menace.

Jack turns to take her in properly, "Oh, a real treat. Her ladyship's brought Jack such a lovely, thoughtful present. Just what Jack's always wanted. Jack apologies for his lack of hospitality but he wasn't expecting such important..."

"Quiet, little murder spirit. I am here for the gorgon's soul."

Jack stiffens, standing a little more straightbacked, "And Jack is just supposed to give it up, I suppose? No, no, no. That precious, hissing, shining little soul is Jack's, by right and title. If you want it, what are you offering Jack in return?"

The demon looks down at him. She smiles dangerously. "I offer something far more valuable to Jack than any one soul."

"Your favour? Your patronage? Don't sell Jack a pile of pyrite and tell him it's gold."

"You misunderstand me, Jack." her eyes blaze. She raises a clawed hand. Black flames crackles around the nearest leaning tenement. It flickers in the fire, fading in and out to reveal a dusty red plain where it stands instead, "I offer you your existence."

"Dear, dear me. Threats to poor Jack already, my lady? And such empty ones, too. You want the soul. Kill Jack and this twisty turny place he's built will collapse faster than you can find her and she'll be lost to you even if you escape. Burn a path through this place to find her and she'll burn in your wake like anything else. No, no, threats to old Jack won't work."

"What do you want, then?"

"That's better. A little respect for Jack in his own home. Jack won't just give her up. Not even to you. Sets a bad precedent does that. But if you want to find her, Jack won't get in your way. He won't even hunt her first."

"Very generous." Stone mutters.

"Quiet, you. Jack hasn't forgotten you denied him his fun."

"He does raise a point, though. That is generous for one such as you. So, I ask again, what do you want? Do not make me have to ask a third time."

"Jack wants two things. But he's not greedy. He'll let you pick. For one, Jack wants the homoculus." he points a knife at Stone, "Jack has a lot to pay back that unnatural nearly-man."

"That's one. What's the other choice?"

"Jack wants his freedom. No more waiting to be called. He wants to play in the streets with the

humans. He wants his knives to drink their fill, not be restrained by the sacrifices made to him.”

”You want me to carve a portal out of here for you.”

”He does, he does. So, for the gorgon’s pretty soul, does Jack get your help? Or your companion?”

”As much as the thought might amuse me, little Latitia would undoubtedly object if I were to give this old fossil up. I can already hear her protesting at giving the idea even a moment’s consideration. So, Jack, murderer, Ripper, if you do not interfere with my search, and if I find her soul more or less intact, and if that soul leaves with me when I’ve found it, I will grant you your freedom. But, be warned, it’s a harsh world out there, even for the likes of you.”

”Jack is suitably warned. Adieu, my lady. Jack shall find you when you wish to leave.” he tips his hat, and saunters back into the smoke and fog.

”Miss Morn...”

”Just Morn.” she replies, holding up one clawed finger for silence, “I am not your Miss anything.”

”Very well, then. Morn, you cannot mean to just...”

”Why not? He’ll kill, what, one lowly idiot a day until he’s stopped? Two? Five? Hardly worth worrying about. Your world could do with fewer ignorant plebs in it. Besides, I’m sure you’ll track him down quickly enough.” she pats his cheek like a child, “That’s what you’re good at, isn’t it, ‘King’s Alchemist’? Hunting other monsters? Now, let’s get this over with. Before our mutual fiend has the chance to renegotiate his options.”

”I cannot allow...”

”Allow? My dear ‘Lord’ Stone, you are not in a position to ‘allow’ anything. And if you persist in annoying me, I might just leave you behind to sample Jack’s tender mercies, after all.”

”I see.” he scowls, his brows knotting darkly together, ”Well, then, let us be on our way. The city was smelly and dirty enough in the real world and this place has not improved it’s charming aroma.“

And so they walk into the thick, sulphurous smog, Stone walking cautiously, eyes flicking from shadow to shadow for the hidden knife, while Morn strides quickly along, daring anything dangerous to take its best shot.

They walk through the endlessly winding alleyways between looming tenements just holding on from falling into the street. Broken doors hang like jagged teeth in the door frames, lintels furrowed in anger, the narrow windows on the first floor glaring down at the hustling shades rolling along like a tide. Stone’s hand flashes out, gripping a wrist as its scrawny, dirty owner dips his bone thin fingers into his pocket. “Not today. Be off with you.” The urchin vanishes into the river of cast off humanity, his rags composed more of patches than actual clothing. “I despise this place.”

”I’d have thought you’d be even more at home here than me, old man. It’s very Dickensian.”

”That’s the trouble.”

”Non sequiturs bore me. And don’t help find Diana’s soul.”

”Dickens was not the chocolate box of sweetness people today, and apparently demons, think of. He was a polemicist. He was trying to open eyes that did not want to see to the cost of Victorian prosperity. Urchins forced into pickpocketing; the harshness of debtors prison; the little match girls freezing and beaten, their jaws falling off because of phosphorous poisoning; lives cut short because the very air was a death sentence. I have good memories of the time, to be sure, but Hell does not have to look hard to find its depressing tortures.”

”Well, don’t you contain multitudes? This maudlin sentimentality does not suit you.”

”And I do not suit it. If this place wasn’t some endless slum, perhaps I could see that there was some good we did, after all. But, like this, it just reminds me of the darkness rotting at the heart of the Empire on which the sun shall never set, and I wonder if it was worth a candle.”

”Well, get over it. You’re no use to me like this.”

”And you’re proving precious little use to me, madam, for all your bluster. Where is our lost lamb to be found?”

Morn’s ears prick up as rotten wood splinters, clamour rising before it’s swallowed by the smothering fog. She gives him a cocky grin full of fangs, “If in doubt, where that one’s concerned,

head for the trouble.”

They approach the the drinking den, the ever-present industrial funk of oil, sweat and blood on hot metal temporarily overwhelmed by stale gin. Morn looks through the window, ducking as a shade crashes through the glass, glinting briefly like floating suns before they clatter to the cobbles. She looks through again. Diana stands over a foetally curled up soul that shivers between her feet, pieces of brass sticking through the soul's bright skin. Her snakes hiss furiously at the ring of shades around her, none daring to step into her reach. Diana bounces on the balls of her feet, her fists raised, small cuts and bruises decorating her body, marring its gleaming scales. “Who else wantss to try ssomething on my friend, huh? Sserioussly, what part of sstep back or sstay down did you all miss?” she whips her body around as one shade, more foolhardy than the rest, tries to sneak up on her. Her raised leg sweeps into his side. Ribs snap as he flies back into the faceless throng. “Iss that it? Iss that all you've got? Come on, guyss, I'm jusst getting sstarted here.”

“Yeah, there's my girl.” she strides through the broken doorway, a looming shadow across the unsteady tables, her hooves sizzling in spilled beer. For a moment there is utter silence. Morn smiles with her fangs to fill it. “Everyone out. Anyone still here when I count five learns what fate worse than death involves in this place. One...” she raises her index finger, drawing attention to the sharpened black point of her claw. The throng shifts uncertain. “Two...” an Agincourt salute follows. The edges of the circle around Diana start to fray as Morn stalks forward. “Three...” The Dutch courage finally breaks, vomiting out everyone with an ounce of self-preservation left, or those with a friend who has.

“Latitia? That'ss a new look for you.” she stays wary, muscles coiled tight.

“Just call me Morn, sweetie. I'm here to get you home.”

“Ssure you are. No one more trusstworthy than a real life devil. Whoever'ss running thiss plasse needss to do hiss homework better. Latitia would never...”

“Oh, she would. For you, she would do anything. Absolutely anything.”

“I...”

“Now, let's get us all out of here.” she slashes through the air and the smog parts, but not to reveal a rip in the fabric of space.

“Not so fast there, my lady. You can't leave just like that. You and Jack still have business.”

“We have a deal.”

“Oh, we do, we do. The gorgon's soul for my freedom. But you're trying to trick ol' Jack twice over. Taking that feeble Peeler's soul, well, it's not a great loss. Jack might have let that one go. It's already so broken there's barely anything for Jack to do to it that's worse than what the humans did. Jack must admit, he's impressed by that. But Jack will not let you leave him stranded, no, no, no. How dumb do you think Jack is?!” he drives the point home with a knife into the door jamb where it quivers with his rage.

“Well, you caught me.” she gestures apologetically, “After you?”

“So you can literally stab Jack in the back? Jack doesn't think so.”

“Then let us open the portal and...”

”So you can leave Jack behind? Oh, no, Jack's wise to your...” he shimmers, “And it seems we'll continue this later. Blood has been let. Jack is summoned.” and he is gone, leaving them alone.