

CHAPTER 27: BACK TO REALITY

by Paul Watson

Whitechapel, around the time Stone and Morn stepped into Hell, "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?"

There's a pause, the sounds of heavy feet tramping up the wooden stairs echoing loudly, "Bar the door. Shove anything we can over it to keep them busy." his dart gun phuts and the hulk's arms quaver, dropping back to the floor. "And stay down this time, Sunshine. That much tranq would stop a rhino."

"How are we gonna do all that without looking up?"

"Well, as whining doesn't miraculously produce results, I suggest we put our fucking backs into it."

Griffin snaps as the door slams shut and a cabinet full of books starts to teeter.

Manny scrambles across the floor, staring down in the hellish flickering light, putting his shoulder against the bookcase until it topples.

"Don't suppose you've got a brilliant plan to get us the fuck out of here?"

"Not leaving people behind if I can help it. If we can't, well, you're quite capable of ratting out on us, aren't you?"

"I..."

"Less talk. More action."

Another piece of furniture topples over as a meaty thump slams into the door, the wood shaking in the frame.

"Fuck. They're faster than I thought. One more, then take cover."

"Cover? Where?"

"Under the table. We need cover from that thing as our priority. It's more dangerous than some thugs."

"Those are some very big, very tough thugs who shrug off your sleepy darts."

"As opposed to an actual portal into actual fucking Hell! I didn't say they weren't fucking dangerous, did I? But as long as that thing's open? It's definitely the bigger threat." a chair sails across the room from where his voice comes from, crashing onto the barricade, a side table scrapes across the floor to complete the makeshift barricade as the door rattles again. "Time's up. Under the..." the priest groans, "for fuck's sake, grab him. Boss'll want to 'talk' to him when he gets back."

"If he gets back."

"Just do it."

"Sir, yes, sir!" he replies with a sarcastic salute before he scurries over, dragging the priest back by the mantle of his robes. "There. What happens if he wakes up?"

There's a cough of the dart gun. "Hopefully, he doesn't."

"Hope that works better than it does on those guys."

"So do I. But what leader gives himself the same toxic cocktail to defend against these drugs as his minions?" there's a click, followed by the clack of a magazine sliding into place.

"What are you doing?"

"We'll see how their defences work on the lethal venom cocktail."

"Going to kill them all, Captain?"

"If I have to. Like Stone said, if it's them or us, we're authorised to ensure it's us. If we're lucky, they'll back off before too many..." an arm crashes through the door, leaving splinters stuck in the meaty fist. Griffin fires, the dart embedding itself in the forearm, the skin blackening like a bruise or burn around the dart. The arm withdraws, a barely human howl of pain coming from outside before the crashing of wood and sounds of fist on skin indicates trouble among the cultists. "Peaseblossom, take a look through that hole. Let us know what's going on."

"If you speak to me like that again, you arrogant..." she mutters as she flits to the door, wings buzzing as she peers through the jagged hole. The hallway beyond is crowded with swollen bodies, muscles

bulging out obscenely through their ripped clothes, pulsing veins on the edge of popping. The faces of the men are all twisted in fury, spittle flying as they turn on each other in paroxysms of rage and savage violence. The meaty hands pound and tear, the wooden bannister shattered, its broken remnants trod underfoot or used as a club on their fellows, the wood breaking against their skin.

"Well?"

"On the plus side, they seem far more intent on killing each other right now than us."

"That's good, at..."

"On the other side, I doubt your barricade will last more than a moment against them. They are busy wrecking the landing as we speak. I cannot say they are doing permanent damage to each other, either."

"Well, that's less good."

"Indeed."

"So, Captain, what's our plan?"

"I've no idea. We can't go out that way. Not without leaving our people behind, at any rate. I'm not sure we can even lift C.O.P.P.E.R. He must weight half a ton, easy."

"So we just sit here and wait for them to bust down that door and beat us into paste?"

"I'm open to suggestions. If you have something useful to contribute, spit it out."

Manny falls silent for a few moments, "Got one. Peaseblossom makes..."

"My name, King of Rats, is Lady Peaseblossom. Do make sure you both use it properly."

"Jesus, who pissed in your corn flakes? Fine, fine, her ladyship can make it look like we've scarpered. The steroid boys outside get bored and leave. Or go back to being just human, at least."

"Can you?"

Lady Peaseblossom flits around the room, "It's a large space. Unnatural. I am not certain how long I could hold a complicated seeming like that."

"And if it falls early, we're stuck in a worse position. Not an ideal exit strategy."

"Not ideal, no."

"So, for now, we wait. Pease...Lady Peaseblossom, can you monitor them? Let us know if they start to look like they're coming here."

She flits to the doorway.

"And, if you can, stir some trouble out there to keep them busy as long as possible."

"If I can? The impertinence." she flits through the jagged hole and howls of outrage echo from the brutes outside.

Several minutes tick by, then several more, the silence in the room punctuated with the thuds and howls from the landing, "How long do those darts last?"

"On a normal person? Half an hour, forty minutes. On those things? Who knows?"

"What do we do if they start to..."

"We deal with it. That's what we're here for."

"Can't we get backup?"

"Heh. Son, we *are* the backup."

"How long are we..."

"Until it's done. If you want to make yourself useful, think up a way of closing that portal. With it there, we're penned in."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

"That doesn't get any funnier with repetition."

More silent minutes pass, "I might have something. I'm going to go talk to the rats."

"What?"

"A way of maybe getting that thing out of the way."

"Which is?"

"The portal. It's held up there, right? By what?"

"I don't know. Didn't get a good look. Ropes, I'd guess. Why?"

"Reckon some rats could gnaw through those and drop it, Captain?"

Realisation dawns, "That might work. Go for it."

Manny scurries off, leaving his clothes in a heap as far away from the portal as he can, a large brown rat worming its way into the wall. Griffin resumes his vigil.

More minutes tick by, the light from the portal sways slightly. Griffin catches himself before he looks out from under the table. Above, a large brown rat scurries along the ropes holding the portal's frame up, biting into the rope until his teeth encounter the metal wire running through its centre. Manny scurries back along the rope, surprising even himself by heading back into the attic room. He slides back into his clothes and scurries back under the desk.

"Sorry, Captain. The rats refuse to come into this room. Point blank. And the ropes got a cable through the middle, so even if they would..." he shrugs. "no use on that front."

"Never mind, son. It was worth a shot. Peaseblossom's keeping them busy at least." The priest starts to stir. Griffin rolls his eyes. "It never rains..." he mutters.

The priest awakes to find a weight on his chest that he can't see. "Hello, old son. How do you feel about calling your lads off?"

"How dare..." A hard metal circle presses into his cheek.

"Do you feel better about that than having a dart full of deadly poison rip through both sides of your face?"

The priest pales.

"Knew you'd understand. I have a lot of questions for you. Chief among them being how do you shut that thing down?"

"I...I need my grimoire..."

"King, can you get this bloke his book?" The priest feels breath on his face. His collar tightens as an invisible hand clenches it. "If you even think of screwing us over, pal, you'll be lucky if all I do is dart you. You get me?"

The priest nods, face pale and sweating.

Manny grips the heavy leather tome, the leather feeling warm, almost like there's a heartbeat thrumming through it. Which he does not want to think about. The title swims before his eyes as he scurries back. A meaty hand closes around his ankle. "Fuck!" the hulk struggles to its feet, dangling Manny out.

"Bad." it growls. "Smash." Manny lashes out in blind panic, literally as his eyes stay screwed shut. His tiny shiv leaves a shallow mark across the hulk's skin, but little else. He tries to swing out of the way as the hulk rears back, but the fist drives the air out of his lungs.

"Get off! Get off! Get off!!" the knife flashes out, leaving thinly bleeding trails but doing no real damage. Until one wild stab finds the hulk's eye, the thick blood and aqueous humour dribbling over his fingers. The hulk roars in pain, rearing back and goes still with a convulsive shudder as its soul drains away. Manny doesn't notice, stabbing at the blank face again and again until another strike drives the shiv all the way into the hulk's brain. Above him, the portal swirls blood red and midnight black before it settles into the dark Victorian portrait. A figure made of sharp edges in a frock coat stands on the table under the portal.

"Well, well, well, who summons old Jack, then?"