

CHAPTER 28: DEALING WITH THE DEVIL

by Paul Watson

"Fuck me." Griffin mutters as the table creaks above him.

"Kill th..." Griffin slams the pistol butt into the priest's face.

"What did I say?"

"Oh, no, my erstwhile master, not you." Jack hops off the table, his shoes scuffing the floor as he lazily strolls towards Manny, still tangled in the brute's cooling corpse. "So, Master, who do you want Jack to kill?"

"What?" Manny stammers out, eyes still screwed tightly shut, ears twitching as he tries to pinpoint the voice.

"You spilled the blood and life of the soulless under my light. A death for old Jack calls for a death from him. That's the deal. And old Jack, he stick to his deals." Manny flinches as thin, bony fingers lift his chin up, "Let's get a good look at you, old son." Jack's flickering eyes dart to Manny's bloody hand. "And this is what you used? Oh, Jack could get to like you. None of this tied up and helpless nonsense. Got yourself bloody for old Jack, didn't you? That's what Jack likes to see. Someone with a bit of bottle, a bit of gusty." his long tongue licks along the blood, as Manny shivers, "Someone who'll feel the blood gushing over him as his target bleeds out. Who'll look them in the eye and watch as the light dies. Feels good, doesn't it? To have that power over another. The only power that really matters."

There's a cough from under the table. A dart filled with deadly poison sprouts from Jack's thin shoulder.

"Excuse me. Jack needs to teach someone that it's rude to interrupt." a second dart hits his chest.

"Nice try, old son. Jack appreciates the effort, but, really, poison? On me? What are you thinking? That's no way to kill the Ripper." knives appear in his hands as he undulates towards the table.

"What's this? Oh, this is what the man who thinks himself Jack's master meant to sacrifice." he strokes his hand along the white marble woman on the table, leaving streaks of bright red blood in the wake of his caress, . "Nice. Just Jack's type. But seems she's had a nasty run-in with the snakesoul and her pretty, pretty soul's still there under all that marble. F minus, Jack's afraid. And, as for you, Jack can't see you, nasty trick that is, but Jack's nose is never wrong. And it smells death on you. So Jack's going to give a fellow murderer a break. Just don't..." a gash appears in his trousers, black blood trickling from the rubbery ivory limb beneath.

"I am nothing like you." Griffin shouts, the edge of his knife appearing in the blood staining the blade.

"Oh? Did Jack strike a nerve? A bit sensitive about the blood staining your soul, hmmm? Still at least you're using a real weapon rather than those silly darts. Come out from your cowering and let's dance, hmmm?"

Griffin slashes out again, another cut scored.

"Some people just do not appreciate when Jack is being nice." his narrow patent leather shoes sprout a blade from the toe and he kicks under the table. "You can come out, but you won't be safer under there."

"Stop!"

Jack pauses, turning his head too far to look over his shoulder, "Sorry, Master, that's not the deal. Give Jack a death to fulfil and Jack will fulfil it. But, until then, Jack's going to have himself a little fun."

"So if I give you..."

"Don't you dare! We are not letting this...thing loose on..."

"You heard the phantom killer, Master. Let Jack deal with him and then we can discuss who you want to die."

"I..."

Lacking a target from his summoner, Jack turns towards the table and catches sight of the portrait,

"Oh, clever, clever. Jack might have to upgrade you. Especially after all the tasty souls you sent

Jack. Alright, Jack gives you a D.” he takes an involuntary step forward as a hole appears in him front and back, “Oh, you're a crafty one. Waiting until Jack's distracted to make your move. Jack tips his hat. Now die.” he whirls. Griffin grunts as he blocks, the knife sliding in under his ribs as the arm bends in ways it shouldn't to evade his guard. “Nice. You know how to fight. Jack will enjoy...”

“Stop! I've got a name for you.”

“No!” Griffin shouts as he clutches at his side.

Jack sidles up to him. “Have you now? That's good. Jack likes his fun, to be sure, but a good target always gets him pumped. So who is Jack killing?”

Manny swallows, Jack's predatory killing smile in his face, “My...my...” the door splinters open.

“What is with the endless interruptions?! Does the universe not want Jack to pay his debts?” he casually tosses one of his knives over his shoulder, burying into the chest of one of the hulks, sinking through the layers of muscle like they were wet paper, to bury itself in its pumping heart.

“Don't worry, that one's on me. No charge to you.” the hulk's eyes rolls back and it topples forward as the door crowds with its fellow. He looks down at the knife in Manny's trembling hand. “Oh, dear, me, no, that won't do. Jack can't let his new master suffer with such a weak little weapon.” he pulls a long pointed poniard from nowhere, the pommel shaped like his near crescent head, “That's a weapon for Jack's master, a real knife. Something...suitable.” Another appears in his hand, as he turns towards the door, “Now, let us deal with this impudent rubbish and we can get back to your debt.” he walks towards the hulks, grin broad, daggers spinning shadows around them. “But that doesn't mean Jack can't have a little fun along the way. Shall we make it a contest?”

“A con...”

“Most deaths wins.” one black knife plunges through the throat of the nearest brute, spraying his life out in an arc of crimson.

A cough puts a deadly dart into the next.

“Oh, ho ho, the phantom killer wants to play, too? The more the merrier. But you can't keep up with old Jack.” he walks among the brutes, a sinuous, delicate ballet of knives and blood and death, never where their fists are, his knives always where their most vulnerable spots are.

It takes him the work of mere minutes to empty the landing of living beings, leaving only cooling corpses, each with a single dagger wound leaking their life's blood over the faded carpet. Jack saunters back into the room, licking blood from his sleeve. “Ahhhhhh, Jack does so love a bit of exercise to ease the knots out.” he ignores Griffin, kneeling on the floor, pressing a pad of transparent gauze to stem his bleeding, and Lady Peaseblossom flitting around him as he tries to wave her ministrations off. “So, Master, now that the preliminaries are over...who does Jack get to kill?”

“My...” Manny's throat goes hoarse in the face of the eager spirit of killers, “my...” he coughs, “my father.” he coughs again, “Mark King.”

“A patricide? How utterly wonderful. Jack sees soooooo much potential in you, Master.”

“Thanks? He's...he's in prison.”

“Oh, really? A challenge for dear old Jack? You're too kind.” he tips his hat, “Well, time's a-wasting. Jack will depart to...” he stops as five black claws erupt out of his chest, “...well, that's not good, not good at all.”

Behind Morn stands a slowly closing rent to the dark, narrow, grimy streets of the ersatz Victorian London. Stone steps through, glowing lights floating around him to sink into the empty vessels of Diana and C.O.P.P.E.R. Unit Zero. She pulls her claws free.

“Ah, my lady, a blow in the back? Jack will be seeing you. All of you. Jack owes every...single...one of you...and Jack always pays his debts.” he fades into foul-smelling smoke, pouring back through the rift. Manny gasps, the knife Jack gave him dissolving into mist with it's owner, searing cold along his arm as it burrows freezing ink under his skin, leaving him with a smiling dagger tattoo inside his forearm, the point at his wrist, the smile of the pommel in the crook of his elbow.

Morn looks around. Her nose wrinkles at the smell of spilled blood. “What on Earth have you been

doing while we've been away?" her face grimaces, "It's not..." her body shudders, "I need more..." she shrinks. Her wings fold into her shoulders, her horns shrink to pointed stubs, her skin darkens towards a more human colour from its vibrant red, her hooves flowing smoothly into boots once more. "Ungrateful..."

"Bitch." Latitia finishes as she reclaims her body, panting, glistening with exertion. "Diana?" she looks around, "Diana!!" she rushes to the gorgon's side as the latter slowly blinks, her snakes lazily swirling as if from hibernation.

"What a sight to wake up to." she gives a half smile and promptly collapses.

"Diana!!"

"Got you a couple of presents, sir." Griffin grunts, dragging the priest from under the table, the grimoire floating under his arm as he tries to staunch the bleeding.

"Splendid, Griffin. I do look forward to hearing the explanation for..." he sweeps his hand around the room, "...all of this."

Later, a darkened room in the bowels of MI13 headquarters, "That was reckless. You are allowing Fergusson to influence you too much." a voice grates from the empty air.

"Reckless?" the man behind the desk replies incredulously.

"You underestimated Stone."

"Who is only involved because you got sloppy with the savant and left them a warning sign that something was not..."

"Sloppy? Have a care. I am not to be mocked."

"His body was found." he ticks off a finger, "Somewhere it should not have been possible to kill him." another finger, "Marked by necromancies." a third. "That drew a lot of attention."

"Which is why you were supposed to have Fergusson kill the investigation. But you failed. And then this convoluted scheme to acquire a minor demonic assassin..."

"Oh, is that what you thought it was about? Good. If I can fool you, I can fool Stone. Anyway, that particular murderous portal is safely back in MI13 custody, along with the book of its creation, which should prove interesting reading."

"You used the Doctor's improvements to the Hyde formula for those cultists. Possibly wasting multiple assets."

"Yes, yes, a tragic loss. But nothing significant. That formula was stolen several days ago, before the portrait even."

"And you met with the cult leader, now in custody, and able to identify you."

"And along with the Hyde formula, some samples of the mimicry formula were also stolen, so whoever he thinks he saw, it wasn't me."

"Reckless. And for what?"

"Ah, I'm glad you asked." he opens the desk, and places a dark gemstone of swirling sea-green and midnight blue, wrapped in filigree tentacles.

"The Eye of Dagon?" the invisible figure gasps. "How? That's been lost for..."

"Found by a Victorian scholar on one of his jaunts and never properly identified. I recognised it in the catalogue. I doubt they even know its stolen yet."

"I thought nothing else was disturbed in the robbery?"

"It was not. In the clean-up, however, my...our people replaced it with an replica of glass, enchanted with the same ominous aura to keep detection at bay. By the time it's discovered, if it is, it will be far too late."

"You'd better hope so. Or I am going to take a great deal of pleasure drinking your boiled fluids."

"Good night, Griffin." he waves his hand dismissively, returning the Eye to his desk as the door opens and the invisible man is gone.