

CHAPTER 29: THE SECRET ORIGIN OF C.O.P.P.E.R.

by Paul Watson

Several days pass.

Manny wakes up from a familiarly fitful sleep, filled with smoke and shadows, knives and blood and a hideous leering, murderous grin. He yawns, the bags under his eyes darker, his right arm still cold. He looks down at the tattoo and tries to coax his rat from her lair. She allows the petting, despite squeaking that he smells ‘wrong’. “Sorry, girl. Wasn’t my idea.” He mulls, for the umpteenth time, talking to Latitia about it, but, for the umpteenth time rejects the idea. He doesn’t need her. He doesn’t need anyone. “Shouldn’t have told him to kill my dad. Should have told him to get that bastard Fergusson who got me into this mess.” He doesn’t see the face of the man he killed, but shudders at the memory of the hot blood covering his hand. He pulls on a long-sleeved top that does nothing to warm him up.

In the infirmary, Griffin lies back in the white linen. His side throbs. At least the bleeding’s stopped. “Ah, good, still in place.” Adam thunders good-naturedly, “Apparently, you can be taught.”

“Didn’t feel like wearing a bell.” Griffin grunts in reply. “Don’t suppose I’m cleared for duty yet?”

Adam pulls off the white bandage around Griffin’s side and prods. The invisible man winces.

“Nope. Still tender. Seems to be mending. No sign of wider damage. You’re lucky.”

“Yeah. I feel lucky.”

“Oh, spare me. For a man who fought Jack the Ripper, you’re in remarkable shape. And it’s my job to make sure you stay healthy. So take your medicine and rest. And if you do, maybe I can smuggle in some of his lordship’s good scotch.”

Griffin grumbles as Adam puts fresh gauze around his wound, but does as he’s told. For now.

Outside, Latitia gasps for breath as she tries to keep up with Diana. The gorgon maintains what she laughably calls an easy pace, the grass flattening under her bare feet. “Come on, sslowcoach. I won’t wait for you forever.”

Latitia gasps and struggles onwards. Her skin is slicked with sweat, a reddish tinge covering her, her forearms wreathed from elbow to wrist in black ink flames.

“She’s humiliating you. Playing with you. You should teach her to show proper...”

“Shut up!” she gasps.

“Oh, of course, you won’t say anything to her. I have to do every...”

“Shut up. You...”

“Ah, ah. I didn’t do anything. I can’t without your permission. All of this is pure you, Princess.”

“I said, shut up!” she snaps, before she has to save her breath as Diana finds another gear.

Peaseblossom watches them, clinging to the ivy as she scales the wall of the house. She watches the hounds in the sprawling grassland, the two girls oblivious to the slaving jaws resting inches from their heels. The phantom dogs, their eyes as big as dinner plates, are having a grand old time running with the gorgon. “Would that we all as free.” she murmurs to herself, spotting a flash of gold in the hedge, “Buttercup! What did I tell you about getting too close to the edges on patrol?!” she shouts from her vantage point, “Next time I’ll demonstrate the danger with an arrow.”

“Yes, Sarge. Sorry, Sarge.” the fairy in the hedge replies as she pulls under the thicket of leaves.

In the corner of the lounge, C.O.P.P.E.R. sits silently, its knees folded to its chest and its arms limp, head tilted to the side, eyes blank, to all intents and purposes inert, exactly where and how he’s been since the confrontation in Whitechapel.

In his study, Stone’s desk is spread with technical reports, folders and legal opinions. “Mimic potions, too? My God, Westenra, how did *that* go missing?”

“It’s clearly an inside job. Another one.”

“So all that information on our traitor is useless.”

“It does look like that, yes.”

“Damn and blast it!”

“Quite. I’ve set Fergusson after this case.”

“You couldn’t find someone with the brains God gave the common squirrel?”

"He's competent enough and it keeps him from asking about our other investigations."

Stone sighs, "As you wish, Director." he places the phone back into its cradle.

A heavy thud sounds on the door to the study. He looks up. "Enter." C.O.P.P.E.R. walks hesitantly in. "Ah, up and about, I..."

"This unit...this unit is confused. About what it is."

"Oh?" he leans back as C.O.P.P.E.R. moves into the chair opposite, the old wood creaking under its weight.

"This unit believed it was a pure AI. And yet, it has a soul, a metaphysical quality it should not possess."

"Or it has enough of a conscious mind to be trapped in a mystical trap."

"That is...that does not feel correct."

Stone remains silent. His eyes flick to the a folder on the desk. C.O.P.P.E.R.'s cameras swivel to follow the tiny movement.

"Query: What..."

"Classified." Stone replies quickly.

"Project C.O.P.P.E.R., Cybernetic Officer for Policing Paranormality and Emergency Response.

Incident: Alpha Supplemental'" it reads. There is a flicker as it starts scanning. "This unit can find no trace of that document's existence."

"Oh?"

"Suspicious. What do you know, Stone?"

"Many things."

"Equivocation. What is in that report?"

"Classified." he replies.

"Unsatisfactory." C.O.P.P.E.R.'s hand moves with incredible speed, grasping the folder and flicking through the pages before Stone can make a move to stop him. C.O.P.P.E.R. closes the file, "Query: Who is Detective Constable Lewis Shaw? I am unable to find information. But his name is..."

"...all over the report, yes."

C.O.P.P.E.R.'s camera eyes iris into tiny pinholes, "You intended me to read that document."

"I don't know what you mean. Allowing such highly classified material to be read without clearance would be..."

"...exactly in keeping with you being a devious old bastard."

Stone raises an eyebrow, "I really don't know what you're talking about." he pulls out another file and leaves it on the desk. C.O.P.P.E.R. looks at it, then at Stone then back to the primary report on Incident Alpha. It tilts its head questioningly. Stone doesn't reply, but nor does he react as C.O.P.P.E.R.'s hand reaches for the file.

Several years earlier, Detective Constable Lewis Shaw, fresh out of Hendon, young, go-getting, smart and ambitious sits in a form-fitting leather-backed chair, his blonde hair cut short back and sides, his muscular chest bare, padded straps around his arms and legs. "Are we all set, docs?" he asks as white-clad technicians attach the sensors around his scalp.

"Almost, Lewis, almost." the man in the control room replies into the microphone, his eyes hidden by a pair of darkened safety goggles, hair greying, the speaker system broadcasting his voice tinnily around the room. "Are you ready?"

"If I wasn't, we wouldn't be here, would we?" Lewis replies as the techs apply a cold gel over his skin.

"Good man." he turns to his assistant, "How are the readings?"

"Heart-rate is slightly elevated, probably excitement. BP is level, pulse regular. The encephalogram looks within acceptable parameters."

"Good." he turns back to the microphone, "Ok, Lewis. We're all set." A technician places an inflatable cuff around his upper arm. "Last chance to back out."

Lewis does not take that chance, instead saying, "To the future of policing."

"We'll have the champagne ready for you afterwards."

"You'd better." he feels the cuff pumping, cutting his arm off from the rest of his system. The technician feels in the crook of his elbow, finding a vein and holds up a syringe. The doctor gives the go-ahead. The thin needle punctures Lewis' skin, the anaesthetic flowing into his bloodstream. The cuff deflates, Lewis smiles and his eyes close, head lolling against the rests around him. Doctor Hamilton looks at the assistant.

"He's going under." he confirms.

Dr Hamilton nods, staring out the window with possibly a hint of envy as the young man in the chair sinks into temporary oblivion.

Minutes tick past, monitors are checked and rechecked and checked again, until... "He's fully under. Vitals are strong. We are good to go."

Dr Hamilton smiles to himself. "Then go."

The technicians scramble. The machines around Lewis kick up a gear, the hum of electronics rising. "We're stable."

Dr Hamilton eschews any pithy, historically significant saying. Those can be added later, for posterity. The technician enters the commands. Lewis jerks as electricity courses through his system. Hamilton glances at the screens. "All looks good. Begin the replication process."

"Yes, Doctor."

More keystrokes, representing the work of years, decades, striking a mark on the future.

"Heart rate is elevated."

Hamilton looks around, "Within what we expected. We are putting a lot of stress on his body, after all. It's not every day your entire personality is mapped electronically."

"No, Doctor Hamilton."

The lab below starts to smell of ozone and sweat as Lewis continues his convulsions.

"Personality capture at 10%."

"Good. That's more progress than we thought."

"11%..."

"Yes, yes. You don't need to call out every integer as we reach them."

"Yes, Doctor. I mean, no, Doctor. I mean..."

"20%..."

"Already?" his eyes dart around the screens for anomalies but every indicator seems to be within the expected range, except for the speed of progress. "Keep a close eye on that."

"Yes, Doctor." the assistant replies, eyes glued to the screen already.

"Everything satisfactory down there?" he asks into the microphone. The lead technician looks up and raises a gloved hand in a thumbs up.

Doctor Hamilton starts to pace. Everything's going to plan. If anything, it's going better than planned.

"30%...35...40...50..."

"No, that's too fast. Something's going wrong. Disengage the replication and ease the power down."

"But, Doctor..."

"Don't answer back! Just do it!"

"Yes, Doctor." more controls, "Replication is...accelerating."

"What?!"

"It's not slowing down, Doctor, it's..."

"Shut it down. Shut it down now!"

"We're trying, Doctor. But..." white lightning flashes inside the lab, arcing from computer banks and into the wires covering Lewis.

"What was that?"

"We don't know, sir. There's a short circuit somewhere and..." the windows of the observation deck shatter, exploding inwards as the lab vanishes in an explosion.

C.O.P.P.E.R. puts the report down onto the desk, seconds after picking it up. "Conclusion: The lab was demolished in an explosion. Bodies identified as DC Shaw, Doctor Hamilton and all

technicians. No signs of sabotage. Recommend distribution as tragic accident, which has the added value of appearing to be true.

““Chief Investigative Office, MI13, Lord Peter Stone.” It raises its head, “You do get around, don’t you?”

”A wealth of experience settles into many useful roles.”

”So, am I Lewis Shaw?”

”Ah, now that’s a philosophical matter. I assume you have heard of the Ship of Theseus?”

”This is not funny.”

”However, no, you are not. Lewis Shaw died in the explosion.”

”That sentence demands a ‘but’.”

”But...the brain patterns extracted from DC Shaw were used successfully to create the base programming and intelligence of C.O.P.P.E.R. So you are not him, but your personality is likely very similar, and there is sufficient humanity there to have a soul. And how that works is definitely a matter for priests and theologians more than old spies.”

”So, who am I?”

”That is more a question for you.”

”I am the personality of a dead man in a robotic body. I am an unauthorised replication of the ‘future of policing’. I am a literal ghost in the machine. I am...I am not C.O.P.P.E.R., not any more. C.O.P.P.E.R. is the police programme. This unit is...I am...I am this unit. Unit Zero. What that means, I have no idea.”

”Congratulations. That puts you in company with...” he waves his hand, “...ninety-something percent of humanity, and I don’t trust the remainder one jot. What will you do?”

”Do? What can I...you already know the only logical answer, don’t you? I have nowhere else I can go. Lewis Shaw is dead, C.O.P.P.E.R. is already filling the role I had...so the only place I have is... here.”

Stone smiles, “Well, with that ringing endorsement, you are of course welcome here. A pleasure to have you, Zero.” he extends his hand, and, gingerly, Unit Zero’s metal hand extends to take it.