

BEASTS AND MEN

By: Jason Hobbs

CLICK, CLICK, CLICK.

The sound of his heels striking the highly polished floor rang along the corridor. The décor was impeccable. No surprise, it was the Pentagon. How much were the conspiracy theorists saying they spent on toilet seats these days? He rotated his shoulder, wincing slightly. The sharply dressed officer lounging rigidly at a nearby closed door asked softly, "Trouble with the rotator cuff, Senator Kelley?"

Kelley merely nods distractedly and continues down the hall.

CLICK, CLICK, CLICK.

His tie sways gently, his face stoic as he thinks and rubs his shoulder, ****It's too bad Riptide was unavailable to take care of Tritan this time. His attacks outside of Hudson had been going on too long. I hope our meeting will be delayed for a long time to come.**** He shakes his head, auburn curls moving softly, ****Erylusians, they call them. I'm glad we didn't have much to do with them during the Squadron days. It's bad enough with the Defenders.****

CLICK, CLICK, CLICK.

"Senator Kelley, Good Morning." The General's voice is loud, but, not nearly as bad as Tritan's had been.

The thought brings a smile to Kelley's voice as he returns the greeting, "Good morning, General Wilcox. I trust all is well? Or, can I assume this meeting is something other than the possibility of a golf outing?"

The older man's face flickers amusement, "No, I'm afraid not. To get to the point, I was wondering what you knew about Valhalla or the status of Bill 78737."

****Blunt as always, aren't you Wilcox,**** he thinks. Kelley's eyes narrow and ridges appear across his brow. "Valhalla, General? Wasn't that the Viking's idea of Heaven... A lot of drinking and fighting if I remember correctly. About 78737, I can't possibly figure out the connection between the two."

The General nods, slipping the four-starred, olive drab hat from his head and resting it on his desk, "I see." He gestures to a black, leather upholstered chair across from his desk, "Have a seat Senator." The other man takes the seat as Wilcox runs a rugged hand through his silvered hair, sitting in his own chair. He continues, "Valhalla is the Meta-Morgue based in New York. It is highly classified and specialized in its function, if the 78737 antagonists got wind of it, they'd certainly object to the cold-sleep practiced there. Regardless, there seems to have been a leak and I need to put a plug in it."

Burt's mind races, ****I never realized how old the General was getting. When did all of his hair turn so white? Probably about the time Mahn got into office, or at the time of Patsen's death.**** He only voices the following, though, "Ah, within that context, I believe I –do- know what you're talking about."

In a small flash of a moment, Senator Burt Kelley, AKA Torpedo of the D.C. Defenders is reminded of a darker time. A time while he was with the Justice Squadron. A time when he first heard of Valhalla and who was laid to rest there.

BEASTS AND MEN

By: Jason Hobbs

Drizzle fell in sheets in Hell's Kitchen. Even at Torpedo's and Critical's speed it had taken a little longer than expected to get here, just due to the lack of visibility. It just didn't seem worth it.

Bodies were strewn everywhere and blood mingled with grime and water in brackish pools along with piles of rancid garbage. The smell of burnt ozone or perhaps flesh was enough to bypass the filters in Torpedo's mask. Velocity, if his expression was any clue, was no better off. It seemed the Ripper Man had been following his path along the coast and had finally reached New York.

"It looks like we might as well look for clues, Velocity. Too bad Lady America is off with the rest of the Squadron. We could use her experience."

Critical Velocity nodded mutely, he was bent over a mutilated, still steaming corpse, "We can't be far behind him Burt. It looks like we figured out his path only a few moments too late. He must be close... ARRGGHH!"

Even Benjamin Barry's reflexes weren't enough to dodge the attack. It had come from the shadows, leaving the hero stunned and lying in a heap below the indent in the brick wall on the opposite side of the alley, a few bits of masonry trickling about him. Torpedo leapt on the offensive, his form a blur as he sent a series of rapid punches towards the shadowy form enveloped by the darkness. All came up empty.

Eyes squinted and peering about the darkness, Torpedo thinks feverishly, **Where could he have gone so quickly? Smart, fast, and deadly. I sure hope Ben is okay... **

SSWWIIISH

A blood-dripping claw snakes from the shadows in a huge arc cutting closely to the blue and gray clad speedster. Silent on the outside, Burt's mind is racing, **That came from the darkness, luckily I could hear it cutting the air before it reached me giving me time to dodge. I've got to get Ben out of here. I can't let Ripper Man keep up this crusade of carnage, though.**

An overwhelming voice splits the night, echoing along the alley, seeming to come from everywhere at once, "YOU HAVE INVADDED MY HOME, BEAST. YOU HAVE KILLED IN MY SANCTUARY. YOU MUST DIE." The words bounced about the alley, its tone grating Torpedo to the bone. **Who could it be? ** A wave of vertigo swept past him in the darkness, something moving by but not quite touching him.

"Not another one... must get Ben to safety..." Torpedo mumbles as he stumbles over to the unmoving crimson and black form of Critical Velocity and scoops him up. He quickly regains his senses and speeds to a circle of light barely fending off the nigh-overwhelming darkness of the alley. The sounds of combat follow him, careening through the shadows that birthed them. The grating voice and blood curdling yowls interspersed with guttural growls and the monumental impact of Titans clashing.

Throughout the sounds of the battle, Torpedo stands in his small pool of safety, poised over the form of his fallen comrade, ready to sprint off at the first sign of attack. The fight seems short and brutal, ending with a sickening crunch. A gaunt shade, dressed in tattered patchwork of purple and black, steps into the edge of the light.

BEASTS AND MEN

By: Jason Hobbs

"I am Pariah. Your foe shall do no more harm here. Take your friend and leave." The voice and tone is completely neutral, devoid of emotion, but yet, still somehow conveying an underlying menace. His eyes shine in the night, seeming to drink deeply of the light. They resemble two twinkling onyx under a starlit sky. In one fist dangles the feral, Ripper Man, its clawed feet scritch along the concrete of the alley. Its head is bent at an unnatural angle and a purple aura seems to be fading from it.

Burt finds his voice and speaks, "I'm Torpedo. Is the Ripper Man dead?"

"Yes. Take the creature and leave."

Torpedo tenses, his thoughts teetering on the edge of violence, ****A killer vigilante. If he can take the Ripper Man, I'm not sure I'm a match for him here.**** He pauses and glances to the crumpled form of his teammate, ****Ben desperately needs medical care.**** He glances back up to the shade calling himself, Pariah, his voice hedge in a calm tone, "Very well, Pariah, this isn't the last time we'll meet."

The Squadroner leans over to gently lift up Critical Velocity. When he rises he notices the absence of Pariah. ****I guess I won't have to find out what might have happened. This time.****

Two men stand before a massive monitor in Squadronbase, home and headquarters of the Justice Squadron. The time is the late eighties, not long before the end of an era.

The screen was depicting a battle between a single man, clad in tattered shred of purple and black clothing and a handful of others, all dressed in red and orange. A few moments pass and the single man falls under seemingly unending blows and energy blasts from the others. Eventually, the victors fly off under whatever means capable of them leaving a smoldering, unmoving Pariah.

"It was the Sun Lords, Burt. What few witnesses we could find say he put up a valiant effort, but, he didn't stand a chance. They tag-teamed and killed him. It looked and sounded like their whole team was after him with a vengeance." It was Megaman speaking, his cowl-hood bunched on his shoulders. "Ben said you met him a few years back during the Ripper Man case and had a bi-polar relationship with him."

Burt nods, "Yeah. We worked together a few times and fought a few. He just had a different ethic than the rest of us. It doesn't mean he was wrong, though. Sometimes, the Man makes the Beast, Doyle. He didn't have the System behind him like we do." Megaman nods thoughtfully, before the two lapse into silence.

"Was there a funeral?" asks Torpedo.

"Yes, a close casket affair. No family and only a few denizens of Hell's Kitchen were there. If it wasn't for Blue Dot, I'm sure you could have helped him. You know, we can't be everywhere..." Megaman drops one hand on Torpedo's shoulder before continuing, "A few reports came in afterward, Burt. The body was missing."

"Missing?"

BEASTS AND MEN

By: Jason Hobbs

Senator Kelley nods again, his thoughts back on the here and now. As his eyes focus once more on the General seated across from him. He says, "Yes, I've heard of Valhalla, General. Not much, though." He sighs now, his features melancholy, "I'll see what I can do in the Senate to slow down the rush of 78737. The public is fickle, General Wilcox. The system seems to have a mind of its own these days." Senator Burt Kelley stands, smoothing his slacks. "If that's all ...?"

As the door closes behind and he walks along the hall he whispers a few words, "Sometimes the Beast makes the Man and the system forces its own path. Farewell, Pariah."