

CHAPTER 0

INTRODUCTIONS

Jacob Samuels pores over the list, a black waistcoat over his white shirt, heavy glasses over his thin face, black curls restrained in a ponytail, his long-fingered hands pushing his hair back as he leans his forehead on them. *A scanned manuscript from a raid by Cromwell's forces on a 'den of papist deviltry'. Notes from the founding of MI13. A treatise on the legendary Philosopher's Stone by John Dee, Royal Alchemist to Elizabeth I. Assorted scrolls from the Grimoires on overcoming protection spells, avoiding divinations, spells for hiding and escaping. What do they have in common? Why is one person interested in these topics. Who is dx023? That isn't a researcher ID. So who is it? Who has access?* He pulls his glasses off in frustration. He knows he should tell someone. But who? The Archive? Even if a lowly newly-minted Junior Researcher could get in touch with her, what would he say? What is he seeing? There's something there. Some pattern, but... He sighs. He can't prove anything. It's just his instinct. That little tingle in his brain that says these are connected. Same with his supervisor. He's already in Old Man Morrison's bad books for 'wild, unfounded theories without substance'. The fact he's been right is hardly a point in his favour. Outside the department? That's worse. Then he'll become known as a crank, and the first thing anyone with seniority will do is check back with Morrison and then he adds going behind his back to the list of disrespect and flights of fancy he's collecting. There has to be someone...

The Archive wakes with a start. Sweat runs freely down her paper-thin skin. Her heart hammers so hard it feels like a bird battering at the cage of her ribs. Her breath comes in shallow gasps that heave through her bony frame. It takes a moment for her eyes to focus from starlit sky to their rheumy blue and for the darkened room to come into reality. She looks down at the paper she's clutching in her hand. The writing is hers, but she doesn't remember writing it.

'Chains and Stone,

'Flowers and Bones,

'Ghosts and Rats and Serpents,

'All together for the last dance'

"Oh, dear. It's starting." she reaches gnarled hands for her bedside table, lifting a brush through her age-white hair, "I'd best get ready for them."

Griffin stares silently at the dark wood door, its brass accents shining in the pre-dawn gloom. *Cutting it late.* He thinks, his hand deep in his pocket, clutched around the feathers of the small dart, taking practised care not to touch the needle's point. The door opens. He tenses. A burly man steps out, then another, blocks of red heat against the darkness. The third figure out is a small patch of cold, sucking in the heat. Another two roadblocks of heat close the door and make their way to the car. Griffin makes his way across the road. A cat pauses to hiss as he moves past before scampering away from the greater predator it can smell but can't see. The bodyguard's look at the sound, but stare right through Griffin, just like everyone else. Even he hasn't seen his face in a year and a half. "Just a cat." one says, but he keeps his hand near to the holster under his jacket. Griffin smiles to himself. That one has potential. He hopes he doesn't have to kill him.

They keep scanning the street. Griffin moves closer, towards the cold of his target. They look through him. At least it isn't raining. Rain makes this harder.

The door to the car is opened. *Almost there. Almost out of time. Need a distraction.* He kicks a pebble, sending it clattering down the street. The guards freeze, on alert, but there's nothing to see. Griffin clears the last few yards.

"What are you waiting for?" the target's high voice demands, "It's almost dawn and..." the dart pushes into his neck. Griffin steps back and away, already moving on. "what? Which of you dares to..." the arrogant demand dissolves into pain-filled shrieks. Fingers claw open his throat to remove

the dart but the holy water is already inside, propelled around by his undead heart, burning his body like acid from the inside out.

“Diana!! Diana! Aren't you up yet? Do you exsspect me to do everything myself? You're not at universsity now!”

Diana mumbles into her pillow but pushes herself up. “Coming, Mum!”

“That'ss better!”

“Jusst let me get in the sshower!”

“If you musst.”

“Oh, I musst.” she stumbles in. The water takes its sweet time to warm up. Her hair recoils from the cold touch at first, adding its sibilant complaints to the sounds of her mother getting things ready downstairs. “Don't sstart.” she says to herself as she washes the night off her body, letting the finally warm water run over her.

After too few minutes, she gets out, wiping the steam off the mirror. One stray snake pokes out under her towel, hissing in the foggy, apple-scented air. She sighs and sets to drying her hair. Some people have unmanageable hair, Diana's is positively rebellious, twisting away as she tries to get them under some control. Eventually, she's dry enough to do the same to her body, her serpents eyeing lightly olive skin. She reaches for her contacts, replacing her golden, slitted eyes with something in green. She does the same for her teeth, hiding the pronounced fangs under braces. She's not sure if the braces are more of a turn-off than the fangs would be, but at least they're 'normal', and she needs 'normal'. She reaches for the hair scrunchie. Her hair protests in sibilant hisses but eventually obeys allowing themselves to be contained in a long 'braid'. She pulls another band over her forehead to hide the join where her skin transitions to scales and is soon downstairs.

“Do you have to wear all black, dear? It'ss not flattering to you.”

“Mum!”

“Oh, fine, fine, you know besst I'm sure. What do I know? I'm jusst your mother.”

Diana doesn't reply. It's not like it will make a difference what she says. Her breakfast crunches, a satisfyingly gritty taste, before she pulls on her apron and gets ready to help open the family cafe for the breakfast crowd.

Manny Weston wakes to a small wet nose pressing in his cheek. He reaches out, running his hand over the small furry body. “There you go, girl.” he murmurs, “There you go.” The rat squeaks. “I know, I know, it's morning, but...” it squeaks again, “Ok, ok, I'll get up.” The rat scampers off his shoulder. Manny sits up, scratching his wispy moustache and beard, giving his face even more of a rodent-like quality than normal. “Now, don't be seen, girl, this hostel doesn't like you and your family.” The rat squeaks indignantly, “I know, I know. Humans, what are you gonna do?”

He showers, enjoying having warm water and soap and a chance at clean clothes, well, cleanish. His skin stays weatherbeaten, his body thin with a wiry strength under the heavy puffer jacket he hides himself in. He gets all the breakfast he can, flirting with the kind but firm matron behind the counter to try and sneak an extra sausage onto the plate. He sits alone in the corner, back to the wall, eyes darting around the room for threats but there's just other street people here. No one causing trouble and getting kicked out of this shelter, but, well, outside... He notes the ones to avoid, sneaking food into his pockets for later.

Outside on the streets he finds a secluded doorway to share with his family, their little claws clambering over him, their chittering squeaks bemoaning how hard it is to find food. How the other clans are moving in, and especially those bloody pigeons, stealing everything they can, making the streets unsafe for honest, native rodents.

Manny fingers his thin makeshift shiv. “It's okay, guys, you just leave it to King Rat. I'll sort something out.” The rats chitter enthusiastically, whiskers twitching as they catch the scent of his bravado.

Lord Peter Stone, Duke of Stafford, opens his eyes. Light filters in through the heavy curtains of his room. "Morning already." he mutters, rubbing his dark eyes, his white hair a tangled mess on his head.

"It does tend to come after the night, dear." a lilting voice whispers inside his head.

"I know, but does it really have to come around so..frequently."

"Yes, sir. I'm afraid it does." He looks up at the man bearing his breakfast, paper and several letters, some looking like thick files. Hair cropped, bearing so straight you could use his spine as a ruler, clean shaven and already fully dressed with creases in the correct places.

"How do you do it, Adam?"

"Sir?"

"You're already up and ready and I'm..."

"That's what you pay me for, sir."

"I suppose. I am perfectly capable of getting breakfast for myself, you know."

"Yes, sir."

"He means you are technically correct, but you can burn cereal."

"I did that once!"

Adam doesn't comment, "Will there be anything else?"

"No, not right now."

"Thank you, sir." he turns to go.

"Right. Let's get the day started." he starts on the breakfast, brushing toast crumbs off the sheets and looking through the news. Not that there's any real news: Charisma vortexes known as politicians making speeches about everything and doing things about nothing; celebrities he tries not to have heard of showing off their lack of sense or decorum; capes being noble or depraved with an equal appalling lack of subtlety.

"I don't know why I read this any more. There's nothing interesting, it's all just tittle-tattle."

"Oh, dear, you're kvetching. Are you bored already?"

"Bored? My dear lady, I am retired."

"Yes, but usually it takes you a good decade to get to the complaining about the world old man stage."

"Well, apparently, this hasn't been a good decade."

"Apparently not."

"Are you mocking me?"

"Of course. You're so lovably easy to mock when you get like this. Don't worry I'm sure MI13 will do something that needs your unique expertise soon."

"Oh, please, they've got Westenra in charge. He doesn't like me."

"You don't like him, either."

"Of course I don't. He's got no imagination. Just a leech."

"Really, Peter. I thought better of you."

"I'm calling him that because he has the mind and soul of a very dull accountant, 'Lizbet'. Not because he drinks blood. That's probably the best thing about him. The man collects stamps, for God's sake."

"And you're not just sour that he's the Director and you're not?"

"Not at all." he harrumphs, taking an especially loud bite of toast, "Not. At. All."

Princess Hermia Peaseblossom, not her actual name, just the name she tells humans, this week, throws off the leaf blanket and dons her armour. She sharpens her sword, a sliver of fairy steel thinner than a needle, tightens her bowstring before swinging it onto her shoulder, and pulls her helm over her golden hair. Her wings buzz as she flexes them. Then she looks around at her patrol, smiling at how few of them she can see. This season's crop listens. Most of them. "I see you, Tarry.

I don't care if you think you're the season's gift to fairydom, that face had better be hidden properly by the time I'm ready. And don't you snigger up there, Buttercup, it gives away your position to anyone with ears." she pulls out a blunt arrow, casually nocking it and pointing it at nothing. She whirls and fires, the arrow sinking into the leaves with a yelp from its intended recipient, "And if you give away your position, you're a target."

"Yes, oww, Sergeant."

"Not bad, the rest of you. You can do better, obviously, and, by the Horned God, you will. But, good, for snot-nosed goblins. Maybe we'll make proper pixies out of some of you yet. We fall out in ten. There's a thrush next up ahead that needs dealing with. Hopefully most of you will survive."

"Yes, Sergeant!"

She turns to pack up her kit. Yes, this patrol is coming along nicely.

Latitia Morn isn't waking up. She's still staring at the documents spread over the desk, the spotlight providing light but little illumination. *This is too big. What am I supposed to do? I'm barely in my probationary period. Why couldn't you have gone to someone, anyone, else with this, Jacob?* Her arms itch with that familiar feeling. She scratches the pale ovals in her dark skin. They wrap around her wrists, coiling around her arms and across her shoulders. She can even feel them running around her shoulder blades and down her spine. Those birthmark 'chains' mark what she is clearly to anyone who knows what to look for. They fucking itch when she's agitated, too, and, right now, she is very agitated. She spreads the documents again, not that they'll tell her anything new. They don't say anything outright, but Jacob's right: There's a plan here. A plan to raid a secure storage facility under some stately home. A plan to steal the Philosopher's Stone, whatever that is, but it sounds bad. *Still, why come to me? I've got to send this higher. And then they'll ask how I know. And what I'm doing with severely classified documents just sitting in my flat? Thanks bunches, Jacob. I know we're friends, and all but, what were you, oh, is this him flirting with me? Giving me secrets to push my career higher? Panic attacks are not my love language, guy.* She takes a deep breath as the dawn chorus starts.

An office deep in the heart of the establishment, "Sir?"

"Come in." the man behind the desk says. He rests his pale fingers on the reports, the light from the doorway spilling into the darkened office, revealing his tailored black suit, jet black hair and piercing, hypnotic eyes.

"Griffin Seven reports the target is neutralised."

"Good. Make sure to give my 'Uncle' a strong message in the repatriation flight. We will not tolerate him operating on our soil, even via proxies."

"Yes, sir." he turns.

"Oh, before you go, two things. One, Stone is getting antsy according to our man. See if you can slip something into the files we send that will keep him busy but not make it too obvious that's what we're doing."

"Yes, Director Westenra. The second thing?"

"I'm in the mood for a Russian to celebrate. Get a girl arranged. Usual contacts."

"Yes, sir."

"Good man. A blonde if you can manage it."

The door closes and the office goes dark once more.

Jacob Samuels walks alone through the Stacks, the lower security area of the Archives. His shined black shoes make little sound on the floors. The smell of old paper is comforting as he searches for more pieces to the puzzle he's found. Hints of a conspiracy but only the edges of the spider's web. Most people wouldn't even notice that from what little he found. A chance meeting. A discarded

scrap. Enough for him to track it down. But now, a dead end, so time to look sideways at the clues, backtrack and start again to find the evidence. Because no one can hide everything forever... He stops. Was that a scuff? Footsteps? No one else was registered in the Stacks when he signed in. He looks up and down the corridor made between the shelves. The lights aren't the best, but there's nowhere to hide. He turns back, his hand caressing the shelves as he nears the area he's looking for. This should be enough for a promotion if he uncovers it. Even enough to prove there's a there there will be... A hand covers his mouth, jerking his head back.

"Should keep your nose out of other people's business."

The knife is so sharp he barely feels it as it slices open his throat, his blood spraying out in an arc of wet crimson. The hand clutching his mouth falls away. He puts his hand uselessly at his throat, his breath bubbling out as his lifeblood pours over the floor.

"Ta na shah, te..."

He recognises that, he thinks, as the world goes dark. Assyrian or Babylonian. The chant continues, his vision swimming between darkness and the purple glow above him. His mind spends its last moments not on what ifs, but on what those words mean. He just grasps the memory, realises the dark necromancy involved as his final scream is silenced in his own blood and the world goes black.

In her rooms, the Archive shivers. "It has begun."