

CHAPTER 5: THE ARCHIVE

by Paul Watson

The taxi pulls into King's Cross Station, horn honking to clear people out of the way. Stone pushes a red fifty-pound note through the slot. "Keep the change. And if anyone asks, you didn't see us."

"Didn't see nothing." The driver agrees as he folds the note and drives off.

"What was that all about?"

"Diversion. This whole exercise is about it." He walks into the station proper, Latitia following along into the sea of humanity.

"Diversion?"

"I've no doubt the department will be able to track us this far." he walks to the bank of ticket machines, "But if they think we're leaving London and heading north, they'll concentrate their searches there."

"So we're not going north?"

"Correct, we are most certainly not. But only a fool would buy tickets at these prices if he didn't intend to use them, right?" he leads her into a slightly secluded corridor, reaching into his jacket pocket. "Now, some dreamer's sand to make their job just a little harder."

"What does...?"

"*Mary if you'd be so good?*" he sprinkles a pinch of dust over Latitia.

"*To make your sugared lies become real? This time. But next time costs you.*" The dust sparkles, Latitia's skin turning pale, blonde locks cascading down her back, her suit becoming a mid-length skirt and blouse

"...it do?" she puts her hands to her mouth, hearing a cut-glass accent that she's never had.

"Disguise. You are a wanted woman, after all. Now, let's go."

"Go? Go where? We just got here?"

"We're going to the Archive, of course. It'll just be a short walk."

"The Archive? The actual Archive?"

"Probably not, but I do have permissions into the Stacks so we can at least see the scene of the crime. How else will we find out who is responsible to clear your name?"

Having no other plan, Latitia is swept along and onto the Euston Road, the cars crawling slowly along the road.

Five minutes later, they walk up to the red brick building, "Let me do the talking."

"Do I have a choice?"

"I heard that. Don't go sounding like my sister-in-law, harping on and on."

"*I heard that.*"

"*Not now, Mary.*" he walks briskly into the area and up to the information desk, "Good morning." he says pleasantly, "I'd like entry to the Stacks."

"That's a restricted area to the public, sir." the young woman behind the desk replies.

"Yes, I know that." he digs into his jacket for his wallet, bringing out a variety of cards before he finds the one he wants, "But I am hardly just the public."

She looks at the card, then at her screen, then back to the card. "Ah, yes, Lord Stone, sir. The Archive is expecting you."

"She is? I mean, good, good."

"If you'll follow my colleague..."

They fall in behind the waistcoated young man, the sides of his head shaved of his ginger-blond hair, a small pink, white and pastel blue flag pin on his lapel. "You seem familiar, young man. Were you here last time I was down?"

"Sort of, sir." he replies, "I wasn't yet myself then."

"And you're now?"

"Oh, Peter, I'm Peter."

"Good strong name that. Us Peters have to stick together."

"Yes, sir. Through here."

"I do know the way, Peter."

"Indeed, sir." he replies, swiping a badge against the scanner pushing the doors open. Dim lights flicker into full life along the corridor.

"Doesn't the Archive need to see?"

"I asked her that in another life." Stone replies, "She said she knew where everything was. She was the Archive, after all."

"Really?"

"Would I lie to you? But a more serious answer is that the spirits prefer less than bright light."

"Right. That makes more sense."

Peter stops at a door recessed into the corridor walls. He knocks three times. "Come in, Peter." a slightly raspy, ancient voice calls in response, "And tell Stone to stop gossiping about me."

Peter keeps his face resolute, but Latitia's eyes widen in surprise. "The Archive will see you now."

He opens the door and steps aside. Stone strides forward into the dim light, Latitia scurrying behind. The door swings closed behind them, the dim room uncomfortably warm. The Archive sits in a comfortable chair, clad in a simple white dress, her wispy age-white hair cascading over her shoulders, focusing rheumy blue eyes on them from a face worn through with the ridges and cracks of age.

"Anna..." he stops at a reproving look, "Archive. You're looking well."

"Don't you try to flatter me, Peter Stone, you old rascal. I look like I'm about ready to be interred." she gives a dry cough of a laugh, "And as for you, dear, please drop that gaudy seeming, I can barely focus on you." Latitia's false face sloughs off her in a shower of shadows, "That's much better."

"You were expecting us?"

"Perhaps you're getting predictable in your old age at last."

"Perhaps."

"I assume you're here about the boy."

"You could say that."

"And about that subject, I know nothing. A fine affair, no? A murder in my own building and the Archive of Bone knows nothing about it."

"But you knew we were coming?"

She sighs heavily, "There was a prophecy."

"Ah."

"Incomprehensibly vague as always. I wish the spirits could be a little more direct in their warnings, none of us are getting younger, especially me." she pulls out a piece of paper with a gnarled hand.

"You should probably read it."

Stone raises an eyebrow but takes the paper.

"Chains and Stone,

'Flowers and Bones,

'Ghosts and Rats and Serpents,

'All together for the last dance'" He pauses, "I'm not arguing about their vagueness, but they certainly need to work on their scansion for certain. Why does prophecy have to be such doggeral?"

"You can see why I was expecting you."

"Indeed. But it tells us absolutely nothing about why."

"As I said, infuriatingly vague. But they usually only come to me if they're portentous."

"Quite. When did you..."

"Three nights before the death. I've had the staff out front on watch for you since then. I knew you'd involve yourself somehow. You always do."

"I see. So when they said you were expecting me..."

"I just thought it would be nice to have you off-balance, even a little, for a change."

"A good jest, madam. May we get down to business?"

"We might as well. Fergusson is positively apoplectic with you, you naughty boy, so tread carefully."

Not that you will, but I thought I might as well try. What do you know?"

"Aren't I supposed to ask you that?"

"And yet, I asked you. Or should I ask the woman of the hour?" she turns towards Latitia. "It's quite all right, you can come forward, I don't bite. And even if I did, it's not like my dentures will do much to you."

"Uhm...yes, ma'am, Miss Archive..." she steps forward.

"So, as Stone clearly believes you didn't kill young Jacob, what did?"

"I...I don't know. He gave me some papers," she digs into her bag, "something about a conspiracy, but he's...he was always better than me at unravelling mysteries."

"Indeed. Peter!" Peter appears through the door. "Take these. Get me three copies, and then have them indexed and returned to their proper places."

"Yes, Archive." he vanishes back into the corridor.

"You didn't have this information, did you?"

"I do now. And should it come to anything, I'll probably inform you as well as Jonathon."

"Appreciated. Probably."

"So, we have a series of unconnected files. To what end?"

"Jacob says...said there was a conspiracy..."

"And his murder suggests he was right about that. Or he came across something else that decided it was better to be sure they remained hidden."

"We'd better hope it's the former. Overturning every conspiracy and secret organisation in the Department would take all the years I have left and then some. It might even take a decent chunk of your remaining years."

"Quite so, Madam. So, to business. You have our information, now for yours. Who is dx023? Mr Samuels thought that was a significant id."

"It's not a standard one."

"Indeed not."

"Peter!" he appears in the room, "Find out everything in the system on dx023."

"Is he standing outside the door at all times?"

"He's there to protect me."

"From us?"

"Well, from you. Stone isn't a threat to me. You, on the other hand, are a murder suspect."

"But..."

"I know, I know. It's not fair, but it is what it is. People around here are very protective of an old lady."

Latitia sighs, "No, that makes sense."

"You've managed to collect a surprisingly sensible young lady this time, Stone. Do try to remember she's not as hard to kill as you are."

"What does..."

"So, while we wait for your man's return, Mr Samuels said the plan was to liberate the Philosopher's Stone from my possession. But to what end? Turning lead into gold isn't the feat it was."

"There is the matter of immortality."

"True, some people are always seeking that out as if a life-unending was a good thing. But it seem unlikely to be just that, doesn't it? A conspiracy requires benefit to more than just the leader. So what else?"

"I'd have thought the King's Alchemist would know more than a humble librarian like myself."

"I know more than most true, but even I don't know everything."

"Quick, make a note, I'm going to want to remember this date."

"Very funny, Madam. Now, if you wouldn't mind getting back to the matter at hand."

"You are accumulating favours rapidly, my Lord of the Stone. You should be wary. I may call them in at some point." The Archive's eyes go black, speckled with light, "The Philosopher's Stone. Ancient beyond recorded history. First recorded by Zosimos of Panopolis. Associated with the primordial chaos from which all matter was born. Transmutes the elements, most famously base

metals into gold. Also believed to be a component of a draft of immortality, but no evidence has been found for that conjecture. Last known to be in the possession of the Lord of Stafford, Peter Stone, Queen's Alchemist to Elizabeth I, disciple of John Dee. It was lost in a cataclysm that destroyed Stone's family and has not been heard from since." her eyes return to their normal hue. She coughs with a rasping breath, "Damn weakness. Ancient history always takes it out of me. So nothing we didn't already know. And very few hints why. Unless the Stone is only part of the scheme. There are other primordial stones of power"

"Which suggests our vast conspiracy is hopelessly ill-informed as most of those have been lost for centuries."

"Or that they have information we do not, Stone."

"Possibly." he replies, waving the possibility away as Peter returns.

"Ma'am, that identity is a floating one, currently assigned to the Office of the Deputy Director."

"The Deputy Director? Fergusson? No, no, I do not believe that for one single second."

"You think he's that loyal?"

"I think he's that useless. The man's a preening fool. He wouldn't be able to help himself from showing off if he was involved in something like this. When was it assigned?"

"Three years, seven months ago, sir."

"Three...wasn't there some trouble at his office around that time?"

"He lost his assistant to claims of inappropriate behaviour, but she vanished before that could be investigated fully. She hasn't shown up in the Archive before you think to ask."

"But he got a newly vetted assistant at that time, didn't he?"

"He did...oh, you think she is using him as a screen?"

"It's a thought worth following, I should think."

"Good luck with that, Stone. Fergusson is hardly likely to cooperate with you, is he?"

Stone smiles, "I was not intending to ask him for his cooperation, Madam."

"Oh, go ahead and play your spy games. I shall continue investigating on my end."

"Of course. As always, it is a pleasure to have your time, Madam. But we do not need to intrude any..."

"There are some police outside, sir, apparently waiting for something or someone."

"As I told you, Stone, you're getting predictable."

Stone adjusts his jacket, "Predictable, moi? The very idea."

At the glass doors, Stone stops, "My, they're subtle, aren't they?" he asks indicating the mismatched pairing of police standing outside. One is stubby, barely clearing 5 feet, several stone overweight, chewing something in his flabby mouth. The other is tall and lean, a scarecrow of a man towering over his companion but seeming to take up much less space.

"Are...are you sure about this?"

"Quite sure, Mary does impeccable work."

"*And don't you forget what you promised me for it, Peter.*"

"I assure you, Mary, I have not forgotten."

"There's something about them..." she insists.

"Is there? Let's see." he pauses, his eyes glow softly white, revealing the truth behind the policemen. The stouter one cloaks a humanoid frog, goggly black eyes on the top of his warty face, a mouth wide enough to swallow a man's head chewing absently, dark drool leaking from the corners. The taller one is even more spindly, its white face featureless, it's spindly limbs longer than humanly possible, bending at odd joints, ending in needle-like points. "Oh, I see. Yes. Summoning demons, Westenra? Really? Well, forewarned is forearmed and all. You remember where to go if it all goes wrong?"

"I remember. But are you sure..."

"Don't you worry about me. I'm an old hand at this sort of thing." he pushes on the glass door and strides out into the dreary afternoon light.