

CHAPTER 20: BAD PENNY

by Paul Watson

The control room of the investigation into the British Library assaults, the day after the events. The lead detective walks in, face like thunder. He walks to the white board and the room quiets, turning towards him. "Right. We're done here."

"We're what? But..."

"Orders from upstairs. The spooks will be dealing with this one. National security."

"They killed police officers! We're supposed to..."

"Yes! Yes, you are. Yes, I am. Yes, we all are supposed to leave it alone. Furthermore, it's being classified so if any of you speak out, that'll be a breach of the official secrets act, which, I'm sure I don't need to remind you, carries up to two years or an unlimited fine and you best believe they will make damn sure you serve every second!"

"But..."

"There are no buts, Barnaby! None. It's been decided. This investigation is over."

"Interrogative query: Have the officers harmed been identified?"

"That applies to you, too, Copper! Don't think not being a flesh and blood officer will protect you."

"Response accepted. Thank you for your cooperation."

"Right. No sense any of you hanging around here. Go get new assignments and get working on them."

The room breaks up, darkly muttering. "Bloody spooks. Should have known. As soon as he showed up in the footage..."

A cold metal hand lands on the detective sergeant's shoulder. "Query: Who is 'he'?"

"That old guy. The one doing the fighting at the start. Seen him before. And that was closed and classified, too."

"Query: Where have you seen him before?"

"Thirty years ago. Doesn't look like he's aged a day since. There'd been a raid on some rich guy's house in Sloane Square. I was just a constable in those days, crowd control mostly. We were just getting involved, when he showed up and ordered us off. Official government business. Don't know who he is, don't intend to find out. And if you're as smart as they say you are, you won't try to find out."

"Response accepted." the hollow, electronic voice replies, "Thank you for your cooperation."

"Yeah. Sure. You, too." he walks off, muttering, "Creepy fucker."

The control room of C.O.P.P.E.R., the Cybernetic Officer for Policing Paranormality and Emergency Response, banks of computers humming. "What is it doing?"

"We're not sure. It's still operating well within its operational parameters, but there's a lot of background activity when it isn't directly involved. It might be dreaming."

"Of electric sheep, no doubt. How long's it been going on?"

"Couple of days. Since Unit 3 was reassigned to the fraud team from the British Library case."

"Find out what it's doing. And if it interferes with the operations, I want it stopped."

"And if not?"

"Just observe it. For all we know, this is how it's supposed to be working. Although what set it off, God knows."

Inside the computer stacks, the electronic intelligence that comprises C.O.P.P.E.R. continues its work.

- White Tower murder, 1978...Case closed. Classified.
- Related secondary sources...Classified.
- External sources...Not available.
- Ravenscraig burglary, 1946...Case closed. Classified.
- Related secondary sources...Classified.

- External...
- Subject profile identified...Personnel records...MI13...Senior agent, retired...Lord Peter Stone, codename Alchemist...File corrupted.

The intelligence experiences something akin to frustration.

- Identifying...
- Diana Eurayle...Associates: Evanthia Eurayle (Mother), Minos Berahkis (Father)...Further information...Classified.
- Latitia Morn...Personnel records...MI13...Agent in training...Classified.
- Emmanuel King...Associates: Mark King (father)...see convictions listing, Samantha King (mother, deceased)...see coroner's report into suspicious death, Jason, Sarah, Charles (siblings). See social service reports. Convictions: Vagrancy: Numerous...Classified.
- Identification officers, attempt 7...Failed. Try again?
- Property records...Lord Peter Stone, Stafford Hall...
- Evanthia Eurayle...Personnel records...MI13...Agent, retired... codename Medusa... Classified
- Minos Bullman...Personnel records...MI13...Agent, retired... codename Minotaur... Classified
- Complaint: Evanthia Eurayle. Rude and aggressive questioning by officers. Location: Madame Eurayle's Cafe. Cross-referencing...No officer logs note that location.
- Joint Action Task Force (Paranormality) Meeting Minutes, 17 Aug 2001. MI13 represented by Lord Peter Stone...
- Cases listing Lord Peter Stone as consultant/expert/assistance: 105...753...1,784...2,658...5,153...
 - Common theme: Paranormality
 - Word cloud from reports
 - Essential
 - Arrogant
 - Knowledge
 - Ignores protocol/orders/procedure
 - Saved
 - Without him
 - In charge
- Local news: Lord Peter Stone opens fete. July, various, 1702-Present.
- Cross-referencing: Death records: Lord Peter Stone. Negative.
- Birth records: Lord Peter Stone. Negative.
- Marriage records: Lord Peter Stone. Negative.
- Education: Lord Peter Stone. Negative.
- House of Lords: Attendance records: Lord Peter Stone of Stafford. 1801 (Founding)-Present.
- Burke's Peerage: Titles of Lord Peter Stone. King/Queen's Alchemist. Granted: 1598. Previous holder: John Dee. Believed to become an inherited honorific after alchemy fell out of fashion
- Camera: Location: British Museum.
 - Subject identified.
 - Subject switches places with subject Morn.
 - Subject: Emmanuel King identified.
 - Smoke obscures subject, source unclear. Cross-referencing. No source identified on cameras in vicinity.
 - Subject no longer identified in recordings.
 - Unidentified female approaches subject King.
 - Female and King leave.

- No later images of Subject Stone, King or unidentified female identified.
- Anomalies in assault pattern:
 - Subjects react as if attacks are occurring that are not visible on camera.
 - Police react as if struck when subjects do not connect.
 - Police react as if attacks are occurring that are not visible on camera.

Days later, the control room of C.O.P.P.E.R. again. “This is no longer amusing. What are those blasted computers doing?”

“We don’t know. It’s...”

‘There is no cause for alarm.’ appears on the screen.

‘High-level maintenance functions are being performed.

‘This will not impact performance.

‘It was not considered that this would cause distress.

‘C.O.P.P.E.R. apologises for any distress caused.

‘Thank you for your cooperation.’

”Does that freak you out, too?”

”Always. Almost makes you think C.O.P.P.E.R. is alive in there.”

”Don’t be stupid. It’s just an A.I.”

”Right. But we should probably leave it alone, right?”

”Definitely.”

The next day, the furious resource usage declines to within 12% of baseline, where the the reports remain, with an occasional spike.

Two weeks later, the facility that manufactures the C.O.P.P.E.R chassis experiences an unexplained power failure that halts production for ten hours. Afterwards, a test chassis destined for recycling is discovered missing, along with several items of clothing from the staff lockers. The security cameras are offline during the incident and record nothing.

One week after that, a report of a mechanical man boarding a train to the home counties vanishes into the system, mislaid and misfiled electronically by an unforeseen glitch.

And so today, two days after the fete, Lord Stone is interrupted by a visitor at the gates, a visitor with ill-fitting, mismatched clothes and skin gleaming like brass.