

THE IDENTITY THIEF

Alex Bryant



K & M Books

READY OR NOT

The detective was easy to spot in the crowd. While everyone else jostled through the British Library's atrium, their eyes wide with curiosity, the detective stood stock still, deadpan, her eyes already focused on the Head of Security as he approached. She seemed totally unaware of the tide of humanity washing around her. She was in plainclothes, but her height and close-cropped black hair lent her a natural air of authority.

"Detective Inquisitor Jamila Khan. Security expert with the Sorcery Investigation Department," the detective said by way of introduction, flashing her badge.

"Ahmed Kalat," said the Head of Security, flashing a reassuring smile. He knew that his humongous bald head, not to mention the earpiece he was wearing, made him intimidating to most people, but the detective clearly didn't feel this way. No doubt she'd seen much worse.

"Thanks for agreeing to see me at such short notice," said the detective, her words as sharp and punchy as gunfire. "This appraisal really can't wait. I'm sure you've been seeing how Cuttlefish's attacks are becoming more and more extreme."

“We appreciate your input,” said the Head of Security. “I’m sure there’s a lot we can learn from someone like you. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised by the measures we have in place already.”

The pair didn’t bother to keep their voices down as they strolled through the atrium, and up a wide, rolling flight of stairs. The conversations all around them multiplied into a background ringing that made it impossible to make out the words of someone standing even six feet away. There was no real danger they could be overheard.

“How much do you know about Cuttlefish?” said the detective.

“Not much, I’m afraid. I know he’s some kind of identity thief. Impersonates other people so that he can steal stuff. He was big news, what, 10 – 15 years ago? And now he’s popped up again.”

“That’s about right, yes. But what’s less well known is that throughout his career he’s only ever been after one thing: sorcery books belonging to the Daedalus set. I assume you know about the Lyceum?”

“The Lyceum? They’re basically some kind of magic Mafia, right?”

The detective winced. “Something like that. They’re behind a lot of the organised sorcery in the UK. They’ve been around for centuries. Two hundred years ago, one of the Lyceum’s major players was known as Daedalus. We don’t know a lot about him, but we do know that he devoted his life to some project that even the rest of the Lyceum thought was a terrible idea. To this end, he built up a large collection of sorcery books which he marked with a burning torch symbol. Then, one day, he vanished. But he left his grimoires behind. Today,

those sorcery books are very highly prized not just for their contents, but for their talismanic properties.”

“Sorry. *Talismanic?*”

“They’re capable of enhancing the sorcery of their users. They make it possible to conjure up more powerful illusions, or ward against another sorcerer’s magic. That kind of thing. And, perhaps for this reason, or for another that we don’t yet understand, Cuttlefish seems to have made it his life mission to collect as many Daedalus books as possible. Naturally, this means most of his victims are sorcerers themselves, or at least sympathisers. However, we’re worried that sooner or later he’s going to target the British Library.”

“Right. I think I see where this is going.”

The pair had arrived at the top of the grand staircase. Most of the tourists had been diverted into the British Library’s main exhibition space, with its reverentially displayed artefacts, leaving them in the company of only the most intrepid academics. Their conversation paused as they headed through a reading room.

“First security barrier here,” the Head of Security pointed out, holding his card to the scanner by the door.

“How many staff have access?”

“Here? All of them. About 2000-odd. The next doors we pass through are more selective, limited to specific departments or senior staff.”

The detective nodded and stepped through the door, without giving away her opinions on this.

“You’ll see video surveillance actually continues in here, as well as the thorough coverage we have in all the public areas,” the Head of Security said, pointing out the periodical cameras down the corridor. “Monitored 24/7.”

The detective instantly shot him down. “That’s not good enough.”

“Can’t do better than 24 hours a day, love!”

“Cuttlefish’s specialty is mimesis. Adopting the appearance of other people. He’ll be able to fool anyone looking at him – even if they’re sitting on the other side of the TV screen. Do you use facial recognition software?”

“Not routinely, no.

“That’s going to be essential. No matter how talented he is – and believe me, he is talented – Cuttlefish won’t be able to fool a computer programme. The trouble is, even facial recognition software is only useful if it knows what it’s looking for, and right now we have no leads as to Cuttlefish’s true appearance or identity.”

The Head of Security reopened the previous conversation as they walked on. “So you’re thinking Cuttlefish is going to come after the sorcery books stored here. In particular, the ones that have this torch symbol in them.”

“Exactly. It seems that a handful of Daedalus books have been added to the British Library’s collections over the years. I’m not entirely clear why. If you ask me, the safest thing to do would be to store all of your magical material in a maximum-security facility. Or better yet, just destroy it.”

The Head of Security scoffed. “You probably know what I’m going to say to that. This is a debate we have fairly regularly. These books you’re talking about aren’t just dangerous weapons. They’re a vital part of our cultural heritage, they’re very important to historians and academics of all kinds, and to make them totally inaccessible, or worse yet destroy them, would be truly criminal. And it’s not like the books we house contain any

information that sorcerers nowadays can't just find on the Internet."

"True. But when a grimoire is made, the pages, the binding, even the ink is enchanted for the sake of enhancing the sorcery it's used for. And the older the book, the more enchantment it soaks up, and the more powerful a weapon it can be in the wrong hands."

The Head of Security snorted. "That's just superstition, isn't it?"

"Most sorcerers would disagree with you. Cuttlefish would certainly disagree with you. And ultimately, that's the only thing that matters right now."

"Well, I assure you, there's no need to worry about Cuttlefish breaking into this facility. Our security has been designed to keep the nation's most rare and valuable written material safe, and so far we've done a bloody good job."

The detective narrowed her eyes. "We'll see about that."

They stopped in front of a metal door. A sign overhead read **MAGICAL MATERIALS DEPT. AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY.**

"All right, this is it!" The Head of Security said proudly. "The inner sanctum. Reinforced walls, floors and ceiling. Only two entrances, both of them blast proof. So if Cuttlefish tries to blow a hole anywhere..."

The detective shook her head impatiently. "Cuttlefish can't do that. He's a sorcerer, not a demolition expert."

"Sorcerers blow stuff up all the time, don't they?"

"In appearance, not reality. Yes, if he wanted to, he could probably find a way to make these doors *look* like they'd been destroyed, but he'd still be incapable of going in. So you have nothing to worry about there."

“Right. Yes, of course, that was stupid of me. Anyway, the tech we’ve put on these doors is state of the art. Combination code which changes monthly, and a fingerprint scanner. Both of them mandatory.”

The security here was similar to the security in place around dozens of other rooms in this building. The security elsewhere protected books from the dangers of the outside world. The security leading to this room had the opposite purpose: to protect the outside world from the dangers of these books.

“Equipment like fingerprint scanners are your best line of defence against Cuttlefish,” the detective said. “No matter how easily he can trick a human, he’ll never be able to trick a machine like this. However, this equipment only works if you use it strictly. From now on, I recommend everyone entering this area is required to scan themselves in separately. That means no guests, and don’t even bring another authorized member of staff with you unless they prove they can get past this scanner. Even if they’re your most trusted colleague. Remember, that colleague could be Cuttlefish.”

“Right. That makes sense,” said the Head of Security, punching this month’s combination code into the keypad. Then he placed his thumb on the scanner, and the blast proof metal doors slid open.

Stepping through the door was like travelling 500 years back in time. They were transported from dull clinical corridors into a wonderland of ancient books. It was the smell that always struck the Head of Security first: that dense and venerable combination of leather, dust, and wood. In this airtight space, the smell was more overwhelming than anywhere else in the library.

Looking around, it would be impossible to guess that the books in this room were any different from the

thousands of other ancient tomes kept safe in this building. It was hard to imagine the pain, the suffering these books had wrought for hundreds of years, before finding their way to the British Library. To the institution burdened with preserving the nation's words, no matter how dangerous those words might be.

The detective looked around, her expression not betraying any sense of wonder at her surroundings. "This is a lot of books. Tell me, how would Cuttlefish be able to find what he was looking for?"

"Our cataloguing system has just been upgraded," said the Head of Security proudly, heading to a computer terminal. "You can now search through everything stored in here on all kinds of parameters. Including, I think, whether the books come from the Daedalus collection. Yeah, here we go!"

The Head of Security printed off a list of titles in a flash and handed it to the detective. Eight books in total, together with their shelf mark.

The detective raised her eyebrow at the piece of paper. "I'm sure that's very useful, but all you've really done is hand Cuttlefish a list of the exact books he intends to steal."

The Head of Security's face fell for a moment. But he quickly recovered. "Of course, the terminals are password protected."

"That's not going to help if an authorised staff member simply retrieves the information and gives it straight to Cuttlefish," she fired back.

The Head of Security guffawed. "That's not going to happen! Our staff are very well trained. There's no way they'd just hand that information over, under any circumstance."

“How about the books themselves? How are they protected?”

The detective turned her attention to magnificent bookshelves in front of them. Referring to her sheet of paper, she located the first of the eight Lyceum books on the list.

“There’s no security on the books per se,” admitted the Head of Security. “It’s hard to do without damaging the books.”

“What? No tags? No sensors? So if Cuttlefish wants to take a book from these shelves, it’s as simple as *this*?” The detective pulled a grimoire off the shelf.

“Yeah. But he’d have to get all the way in here, and then all the way out again.”

The detective shook her head impatiently. “I feel like we’re running in cycles here. I’ve seen hundreds of cases of magically assisted theft, and it’s always the same thing that lets down a security system. The human element. As soon you have humans involved in the process, you have a weakness which any good sorcerer can easily exploit. No matter how hi-tech your security, all Cuttlefish needs to do is convince an authorised staff member to bypass it on his behalf. And believe me, he’ll find a way to do that easily.” By now, the detective had located and retrieved two more books on the list.

“Don’t worry. There’s only a handful of people with clearance at this level, and they all answer to me. So it’d be me in the firing line if anything happened.”

The detective nodded. “That’s good. Keep it that way. And pay very close attention to anyone – I mean *anyone* – who approaches you try and get information about your security. No matter how good their credentials are, no matter how well you think you know them. Cuttlefish could strike at any time. And he could be

anyone. He may be in the British Library as we speak. In this very room. He may even be having a conversation with you at this very moment. Is that clear?"

The Head of Security nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. Don't worry, we're ready for him."

The detective found the last book on her list and brought it back to the central desk to join the others. "Look at this! A copy of Shakespeare's First Folio." She opened it disbelievingly, but sure enough, there was the torch symbol on the title page, just like all the others.

"What's that doing in here?"

"The Lyceum are far older than Shakespeare. You'd be surprised what ancient books they have in their collection. But to be honest, I'm alarmed by how easy it would be for Cuttlefish to stroll in here, collect up all these books, and stuff them into a duffel bag, much like the one I have here." The detective began packing the books away. "I'd recommend training your staff to be as suspicious as possible. Challenge everyone, even people you recognise and trust. Even if Shakespeare himself turns up and asks to see his work. In fact—" the detective caught herself and stared thoughtfully into space for a moment, "— *especially* if Shakespeare himself turns up. You get the idea?"

"This all seems a bit far-fetched to me. But your advice is appreciated."

Clutching awkwardly onto her heavy bag, the detective made her way out of the room and back down the long, narrow corridors to the public space. The Head of Security followed suit.

As they returned to the high-vaulted atrium, the detective's eyes lit up. "Ah. You didn't mention that there was a café."

"What's the relevance of that?"

“Let me explain. Other than the Daedalus connection, we’re struggling to spot any trends in Cuttlefish’s criminal behaviour. But one fact we can’t ignore is that Cuttlefish loves nothing more than a post-robbery snack.” The detective stopped and pointed at a colourful cake display. “If I were you, I’d seriously consider upgrading the security measures in place in and around your food service areas. Take this exquisite-looking cake selection, for example. If I know anything about Cuttlefish, he’ll be unable to resist the temptation of a blueberry cupcake. But currently, I’m worried that you’re making it almost too easy for him to help himself to whatever he likes.” The detective’s voice was muffled by crumbs. “Do you want something, by the way?”

“Me? No, thanks.”

The detective sat at one of the café’s metal tables. The Head of Security, not knowing what else to do, sat opposite her. A robotic voice coming from a walkie-talkie alerted them to a pair of guards approaching the table.

“Ma’am, could I take a look inside this bag?” the nearest guard said.

“Be my guest.”

The guard inspected the haul of ancient grimoires inside the duffel bag. “Ma’am, can I ask under whose authority you have these books?”

“There we are!” the detective said to the Head of Security, gesturing emphatically at the guard. “This man is the first to question me or what I’m doing here since I walked in. This is the kind of protocol you all need to follow if you want to have any chance of stopping Cuttlefish. However, if Cuttlefish has already acquired the books he’s looking for – namely, the ones in this bag – he’s going to be a very significant threat.”

“Excuse me, ma’am? I do need an answer to my question,” insisted the guard.

“Great job persisting,” the detective said. “Always be suspicious of anyone who seems to be evading your questions. But as I was saying, Cuttlefish is a mimetic, only able to change his appearance. But once he gets hold of books like these, he’s able to conjure up significant illusions, capable of nyxing people. We’ve seen the same pattern in every single one of his crimes.”

“Significant illusions? What kind of thing do you mean?”

The detective picked up the duffel bag. “Oh, this kind of thing,” she explained, drawing her pepper spray and firing it straight into the guard’s eyes. He let out a guttural screech and retreated, clutching his face. The detective twisted in her chair and did the same thing to the second guard before he could turn away.

The other café guests shrieked and fled, knocking metal chairs and tables to the floor in their haste to get away. The chefs dived behind the counter. A piercing alarm ripped through the echoing hubbub of the atrium.

“The more books Cuttlefish manages to steal, the greater the illusion he’ll be able to create,” the detective shouted over the relentless sirens. “If you catch him early, he won’t be a threat. But if you leave it too late, it will be child’s play for Cuttlefish to dispatch your security team, in a manner such as this.” The detective fired her taser over her shoulder into the heart of a stealthily approaching guard. He screamed and fell to the floor, twitching uncontrollably.

“I see,” said the Head of Security.

“These cupcakes are disgusting, by the way. They’re almost entirely icing. I may need to speak to your catering team about this. They’re likely to make Cuttlefish angrier

and more dangerous to the public.” The detective threw a stun grenade across the café. It exploded at the feet of another couple of guards, sending them tumbling across the floor.

“I’ll pass that message on,” said the Head of Security, shuffling in his chair.

“I should probably take off before the situation gets any more out of hand,” said the detective. “But before I go, this one final thing you need to understand about Cuttlefish’s modus operandi. He tends to nyx each of his victims. So be on the lookout for anyone who seems to be have suffered a magical death.”

“Magical death, huh? What does that look like?”

The detective drew a pistol from her utility belt. “Like this.” The detective shot the Head of Security through the heart. “Any questions?”

The Head of Security thought for a moment, then slowly shook his head.

“Good. Just remember, Cuttlefish could strike at any time, whether you’re ready or not.” The detective emphasised her words with a couple more gunshots across the room, then took a final bite of her cupcake and hurried away with her duffel bag under her arm, her gun and taser knocking down anyone who stood in her way.

The room went dark. No – wait – that was just the Head of Security’s vision, narrowing and blackening in an almost dreamlike way. He was so tired. But he wasn’t worried. If Cuttlefish ever showed his face in *his* library, he’d be ready. Oh yes, he’d be ready, alr -