

UNDER THE SKIN

Louise Pieper

“This folio was incorrectly filed.”

The words hung in the air, loathsome as week-old fish.

The senior archivists looked away. Such an aberration was no business of theirs. The younger staff sat trapped by the basilisk stare of the Head Archivist of St Guinefort’s Library for the Thaumaturgic Arts.

“Incorrectly filed on the fifth floor.” Mr Melton Feith’s upper lip curled, revealing large teeth stained as yellow as the folio. “Among the accessible sorcery texts.” He hissed the sibilants and his moustache whisked across his flagstone incisors like an angry broom. “It belongs in the sub-basement stacks.”

The stillness of the workroom grew more profound. Brass fittings gleamed. The fumes of an unstoppered glue pot reeked. No breath disturbed the stacked mounds and towers dedicated to the deities of paper preservation.

“Miss Chesney!”

As the most junior of the junior archivists, of course Mr Feith’s ire fell on Hester. She dropped off her stool, boots jarring on the hard wooden floor.

“Yes, sir?” she gasped.

“You may correct this error at once.” He consulted the fat watch chained to his waistcoat. “It lacks eight minutes of the hour, but none of us could abandon our posts knowing this matter stood unresolved.”

She snatched the folio, saw its file mark and staggered. The Streggha collection! Girolamo Streggha had been tried, convicted and executed for his unspeakable deeds a decade before. His books had gone to St Guinefort's library and his corpse to St Dreux's anatomists, in the hope someone might discover the source of his malevolence. His final book – a record of his crimes and a list of his victims – had been bound with his own skin. And on that list were the names of Hester's parents.

She'd taken three unsteady steps when Grady Jenkins cleared his throat and forced out a small laugh.

"Begging your pardon, Mr Feith, sir," he began, and Hester longed to turn and whack him with the folio for wasting time. "The sub-basement stacks?"

"What of them, Mr Jenkins?"

The professional distance of sirs and misters was a courteous fiction. Grady Jenkins referred to the Head Archivist, *in absentia*, as Uncle Melton. In any case, Hester wasn't fooled by Mr Feith's mild tone. She took another cautious step.

"That iron door, sir! And the lighting is far from reliable. Perhaps it would be advisable for Miss Chesney to have assistance?"

"Are you suggesting she cannot do the job I was made to hire her to do?" Mr Feith huffed.

"But, I say, sir, the sub-basement stacks!" Jenkins persisted with another forced chuckle.

"Oh! The sub-basement stacks are no place for a girl? Is that what you think? As it happens, I could not agree more, but not according to the Board of Trustees." Mr Feith threw out his hands in a tragic gesture. "My objections were over-ruled..."

Hester sidled out of the workroom. Her presence was not required for Mr Feith's grievance speech. There was little chance she could descend to the sub-basement, file the folio and return in what was left of the working day. Even if she could, thanks to Grady

Jenkins, everyone would be held back. Mr Feith's grievances required at least a quarter of an hour to be sufficiently aired.

They wouldn't blame Jenkins. With his toothy smile and hearty *joie de vivre*, he was heir-apparent of the archives. No-one doubted he would eventually take his uncle's place, even if they joked that old Melton Feith would prefer to be bottled, tagged and filed with the homunculi rather than retire.

Hester descended the main stairs, taking care not to run. Running was forbidden and inadvisable for someone hobbled by antiquated notions of feminine modesty.

Mr Feith had been confident no woman could pass an entrance exam which tested one's knowledge of six incompatible classification systems. As if to punish her for proving him wrong, her uniform did not include the small leather apron worn by her male colleagues but a voluminous white pinafore which covered her from chin to shin and which, she'd discovered, attracted dust like a sugar bun drew wasps.

One more thing to set her apart. No, the archivists wouldn't blame Jenkins. They'd blame the odd one out, the subject of Mr Feith's displeasure. It would be Hester's fault they were late. She crossed the Portgate vestibule to access the nether stairwell, wondering if Jenkins had irritated his uncle deliberately so she'd be blamed or if he had any real concern for her. Perhaps he simply disliked the sub-basement.

She hurried around the curve of the stairs to the lower basement, breathlessly slicing through the bleach-scented air which lingered outside the cleaners' room. The green-tiled stairwell continued down, cold and echoing. Hester followed, although this was as deep as she'd come within the library. Mr Nugent, showing her the building, had waved a hand and said, 'Sub-basement stacks. Boiler room. Let's not bother, yet.'

Enough to do, learning the archives. Her brain felt stretched with alchemy, divination, incantation, mysticism and maleficium. Diaries, journals, grimoires and the unsanitary ephemera of mages, necromancers, witches and sorcerers. Endless tests and...

Was this a test? Had Mr Feith really found the Stregha folio on the fifth floor or did he know about her parents? Did he hope she would fail?

She stomped to the sub-basement level. Red light flickered in an infernal dance across the tiles. To her left lay the boiler room door, ajar. To her right, the closed door of the stacks. Iron tracks showed where the monstrous slab of metal was meant to slide. Cursing her apron's lack of pockets, Hester tucked the folio under one arm, grabbed the handle and leaned her weight against it. She grunted and pushed harder, boots grounded, muscles straining. Blast Mr Feith. She – *shove* – could – *shove* – do the job. She would prove it. She would not ask the boiler-room men for help. She would rather...

The door groaned, shivered and grudgingly creaked a few inches along its rails. A gap yawned. The darkness within seemed thick, almost expectant. She shivered, took a deep breath and reached her hand around, feeling to the left of the door for the light switch. She patted the wall, dreading to encounter... what, exactly? She did not know.

Her fingers brushed the switch and sent begrudging illumination around the room. Bulbs hung like withered fruit from wires draped over the old gas lamp fittings. They lit the bare walls, not bothering to disturb the shadows between the towering shelves.

"Very well," Hester said, but the silent stacks devoured her words. She raised the folio like a shield, hands trembling. Nonsense, she told herself, sternly, but did not say it aloud. She did not want to feed the room. She forced herself to move away from the door, to count the stacks as she passed them. The lights flickered and...

She stopped. Had she heard footsteps?

There was only silence and her breath and blood pounding, loud in her ears. The walls pressed in, the floors above pressed down. She jerked herself back into motion and found the correct aisle, a dark crevasse between the cold file boxes. She darted in, afraid if she baulked she'd not go on. She peered at the numbers, wished for more light. 96. 115. 129. There. She crouched, hand reaching, and someone sighed.

She did not move, did not breathe.

It was nothing. Just air in her boots or the fabric of her ridiculous apron. She dragged the box of records forward, scrabbled for the correct place and... The light at the end of the aisle dimmed. Hester dropped the folio into the box and shoved it back onto the shelf.

“Is someone there?” Her voice slipped like a child on a patch of ice.

A rush of air and dust loomed above her. It reached for her, hungry and intent. She pushed up from her crouch, through the paralysing cold of it, and a vile snigger wormed into her ears. Dry dust whirled as she ran. The lights flickered. She rounded the end of the stack and her apron caught, sending her crashing against the wall.

She struggled to her feet. The bulb above her popped and burnt out. The next light flickered and died. And the next.

Hester bolted for the only sliver of light left in the stacks. She threw herself at the gap, scraping skin, the cold metal burning, as the door began to creak. She was halfway up the stairs to the lower basement when it slammed itself shut. She ran on, past the basement levels, her only thought to get away. Away from... whatever it was.

She rounded the curve of the stairs to the Portgate and a reprimand brought her back to her senses.

“No running on the stairs.”

Hester stopped, gasping for air. A silver-eyed giant peered down at her. No, that was nonsense. It was only a very tall woman, even before she stood three steps above one, in towering black boots with her dark hair piled vertiginously on the top of her head.

“The new archivist, I presume? No running on the stairs, Miss Chesney. Someone should have informed you.”

Hester found her voice, dangling somewhere near her torn hem, and hauled it into her throat.

“Sorry, I was told never to run.”

“Unless you have cause.” The woman’s bright gaze took in Hester from her mouse-brown hair to her plain black boots. “Kindly give this card to Mr Feith in the morning, with my compliments, and inform him I wish to speak with you, in my office, at ten. Until tomorrow, Miss Chesney.”

The woman inclined her head and turned away, crossing to the Portgate door as Hester stared at the card in her hand.

Miss Dulcinea Melnik

Senior Librarian, Special Collections

Atmotic Waiting Room, Upper Mezzanine, St Guinefort’s Reading Room

Locked bookcases alternated with windows around the plushly-appointed waiting room. It was set like a jewel between the wind-swept airship platform and St Guinefort’s great glass dome. Hester stared down at the bowed heads of the statues burdened with the reading room’s soaring supports.

“An inspiring view, is it not?” Miss Melnik said. “One can almost see the readers’ unvoiced thoughts teeming and seething like fantastical fish.” She turned to an enamelled samovar and poured two cups of tea. “When the library was built, atmotic airships were seen as the future of travel. What does that tell you, Miss Chesney?”

“That we might catalogue prognostications, but we do not heed them.”

Hester took the proffered cup and followed the librarian to a seat, feeling like a housemaid trailing behind a duchess.

“Exactly so, although the platform remains useful for research queries from dragons.” Before Hester could be certain that was a joke, Miss Melnik said, “Why you were running on the stairs?”

“There was something...” Hester put down her cup. “Something awful in the stacks. It was cold and hungry and made of dust.”

“Dust?” Miss Melnik frowned and smoothed the pinstriped skirt of her finely tailored suit. “Why were you in the sub-basement?”

“I am the newest archivist, as you said, and a folio needed to be filed.” Hester quickly described what had happened, trying not to dwell on how that cold sniggering had found its way into her nightmares.

“The Stregha collection.” Miss Melnik rose and crossed to one of the glass-fronted cabinets. “His books are too dangerous to be in the open collection. Many of them are too dangerous even for the archive. Tell me what you do not see in this bookcase, if you please.”

What she did not see? How could she know when she’d never seen these books, pressed cover to cover except for one wide gap, where... Hester checked the shelf tags and shuddered. It could only be one thing.

“The record of Stregha’s crimes. The one that is, er—”

“Bound in his skin. Yes. The practise of anthropodermic bibliopegy is thankfully uncommon.” Miss Melnik glanced around the elegant room. “Although not as rare as one could hope. The record lists his crimes and his victims, although many more suffered for his deeds.” Her clear, gray gaze lanced Hester. “I assume you are one of those.”

“He killed my parents,” Hester murmured.

“I am sorry. His victims are a matter of public record and Chesney is an unusual name. The coincidence concerns me. You are not named in that book but you suffered for Stregha’s crimes. It might give him power over you. And if someone has added your name to that list...”

“But Stregha is...” Hester paused. What did it matter he was dead? He’d been a sorcery and a necromancer and they were standing in the greatest thaumaturgic library in the world. “Where is the book?” she asked. “And what is in the sub-basement?”

“I fear it may be the shadow of Stregha’s ghost, the spectre of his skin.” Miss Melnik strode across the room and stared down, as if peering into the darkness at the very base of the building. “It could use dust to give itself form. What is dust, after all, but tiny particles of dirt and paper and human skin?”

Hester shivered but Miss Melnik seemed not to notice.

“What do you know of Special Collections, Miss Chesney?”

“Nothing. No-one told me of it, nor of a female librarian.”

“Typical.” Miss Melnik turned and gestured at the shelves. “Some of these books are cursed so that any man who touches them will die. St Guinefort’s has always found it expedient to employ at least one woman. But the department heads like to exert their authority where they can. Three weeks ago the Head Archivist borrowed the Stregha text.”

“Mr Feith? Just before I started? Would he—” She searched for the right words. “I thought filing the folio might be a test. But would he lay a trap for me?”

“I would not have thought so,” Miss Melnik said, “but he was unhappy about employing a woman. There are mutterings that it’s past time he retired.” The librarian frowned. “I shall look into dealing with Stregha’s spectre, Miss Chesney. In the meantime, I think it would be best if you go nowhere near the sub-basement stacks.”

Hester hurried down the spiral staircase to the reading room. She skirted the edges of the hushed space as if she feared the thoughts which buzzed in her head might swim up to join those Miss Melnik had fancied, and somehow become visible to the world.

Mr Feith? He was fussy and bad-tempered but she’d not thought he would use dark sorcery to harm her. Although the shadow-thing hadn’t actually harmed her, had it? Did the Head Archivist only want to scare her off, so he could say he’d been right about employing women?

She clattered down the main stairs from the sixth floor. Mutterings, Miss Melnik had said, and gossip in the archive workroom said Mr Feith had forgotten scheduled inspections and neglected to lock his office. Would he be foolish enough to risk necromancy?

“Old Feith didn’t give me a chance. He was on that folio like flies on—”

“Yes, Sochowski, nothing short of a miracle can stop Uncle Melton. But it would benefit us both if you could bring future problems to my notice.”

Hester didn’t recognise the first voice which drifted up the stairs but there was no mistaking the second. She reached the fifth floor landing and found the doors closing behind one of the junior librarians. Grady Jenkins leaned against the wall of the stairwell.

“A surprise to see you up here, Miss Chesney,” he said, smiling his toothy smile, but she had the feeling he’d been waiting for her.

“Sorry about that folio business yesterday,” he said, falling into step with her.

“I don’t think you have anything to apologise for,” she said carefully.

“Well, Uncle Melton can be somewhat...” He paused, but went on when she didn’t offer an opinion. “No, er, problems? Down in the sub-basement stacks?”

Hester kept her eyes on the stairs but felt his gaze dart to her when she murmured, “No, sir.”

“That door can be heavy.”

“Yes, sir.”

They descended to the Quad, busy with readers and researchers, and he waited until they were almost to the third floor to ask, “What, er, what took you up to Special Collections this morning?”

If he knew where she’d been, why pretend surprise at meeting her on the stairs? She glanced at his smiling face and said, “Miss Melnik asked to see me.”

“Oh?”

The pause lengthened, became uncomfortable. He forced his smile wider, but Hester's words froze in her throat. What could she say? He must know something about what was in the sub-basement or why ask these questions? She swung off the stairs and he darted forward, courteously opening the door for her. The archivists looked up from their work.

“I hope you filed that folio alright yesterday, Miss Chesney,” Mr Nugent said. “Mr Feith's just off to the stacks on inspection.”

Hester's gaze flew to Grady Jenkins' wide, white smile, and she didn't have to stop and think. She knew.

“Miss Chesney?” Mr Nugent called as she turned and raced back to the stairs.

All too soon Jenkins's boots pounded behind hers. She hitched up her apron and scampered on.

“Miss Chesney!” he shouted. “Wait!”

But she wouldn't wait. She couldn't. He'd offered assistance, yesterday, because he hadn't wanted her to see the spectre. The trap wasn't meant for her, but for the Head Archivist who refused to retire and make way for his ambitious nephew. Old, forgetful Mr Feith who left his office unlocked where anyone might find the Stregha book and add a name to the list of victims.

She bolted across the Portgate vestibule, ignoring shouts and questions. Jenkins was right behind her, his breath tearing the air, his boots hammering the stairs. Surely he would push her, crush her, grind her bones rather than let her ruin his plan. Her lungs burned as she barrelled on and he grunted out curses. Close, then closer and then he caught her apron ties and tugged.

She jerked and missed the next step. Fell, legs buckling, arms jarring. She smashed into a bucket and it hit the door of the cleaners' room and rebounded, soaking her and crashing the mop down on her head.

“Damn you, Chesney,” Jenkins panted, stepping onto the lower basement landing.

Eyes stinging from the bleach, she kicked the heavy bucket at his legs, scrambled to her feet with the aid of the mop, and ran. Her wet apron flapped open like the broken wings of an injured dove.

“Mr Feith!” she cried, darting down the final set of stairs. “Wait! Mr Feith!”

The Head Archivist paused as he stepped into the sub-basement stacks.

“Really, Miss Chesney, I hardly think—”

He was snatched into the room and the great iron door groaned a protest and began to close.

With a cry of denial, she threw herself forward and jammed the mop into the tracks. Inside, dust swirled around Mr Feith. He batted it, yellow teeth bared, eyes bulging as he choked. For a moment she could only stare. How did one fight dust? Then she wrenched off her apron and flung it wide, bundling up the dust with the wet cloth.

“Hold it, sir,” she demanded, pressing it into his arms. “Don’t let it out.”

“What the devil?” he cried, but she didn’t have time to explain.

She pelted past the rows of shelving to the Streggha files. Reckless, she upended boxes until she found a large book of loathsome pale leather.

“Where is he?” she muttered, flicking past the trial details to the list of victims.

Azoulay. Bishwas. Chesney.

She faltered but forced herself on.

Davidson. Endo.

There. Added between Eliza Fairley and Garcia Fernandez, because of course an archivist would place the name alphabetically, was Melton Feith. Hester wrapped her finger in her wet cuff and rubbed at the name until it was nothing but a brownish smudge.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Mr Feith cried, “but it’s contrary to regulations.”

She snatched up the book and charged back to find Grady Jenkins smiling and the Head Archivist clutching the damp apron like a baker with his last sack of flour.

“Come now, Uncle Melton—”

“He wrote your name in the list of Stregha’s victims, sir,” she said. “I’ve rubbed it out but I don’t think you should release the dust thing.”

Jenkins turned his smile on her, letting the edge grow feral.

“How busy you are, Miss Chesney. Busily interfering.” He glanced over, as if expecting his uncle would take up his usual grievances. Mr Feith only stared back in dawning horror. Jenkins shoved his hands in his pockets. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, you know.”

Hester lifted the book bound in Stregha’s skin. “So you wouldn’t care if I wrote your name in this?” He shrugged, nonchalant, but paled when she added, “In blood.”

Mr Feith’s moustache twitched as he tutted. “Really, Miss Chesney, there’s no call for necromancy. We are archivists. Tell me, what is that dark arts’ Barcello classification?”

“BC-P-1589,” she said promptly, although her brain reeled. Was this the time for tests?

“Ghosts, apparitions and hauntings in the Arlu-Sintaj system?”

His knuckles whitened on the apron as it began to writhe.

“113.48 Occult sciences, 7b phenomena.”

“Hermetical synthesis in the Biblioteca de Magia?” he shouted over the book’s rising shriek. “Stay back, Grady, I’m warning you.”

“Theta 1614.OFd,” she yelled, grasping the purpose of his questions. “And exorcism in the Paduan system is S-85:9-N3.”

“Excellent, Miss Chesney! Open that book.”

She wrenched the reluctant covers apart and Mr Feith flicked the apron like a whip, cracking it against the pages. The dust slapped a murky stain on the paper and Hester slammed the book shut.

“Classified!” she cried.

“As for you, wretched boy!” Mr Feith cracked the wet cloth again, but this time it whipped a stinging slap on Grady Jenkins’ leg. “How dare you deface a book? I’ll see you demoted to a shelver for this.”

“You old buzzard!” Jenkins screamed, clutching his thigh. “I’ll see you dead! I’ll—”

“Come quietly now, won’t you, Mr Jenkins?” Miss Melnik leaned in the doorway. Grady Jenkins’ mouth snapped shut in a frightful, frozen smile. “Mr Feith.”

“Miss Melnik.”

The Head Archivist and the Senior Special Collections Librarian exchanged cool nods before she held out one hand.

“The exorcised book, please, Miss Chesney.” As Hester surrendered it she added, “That was very promising bibliomagy. I’m certain...”

“You can’t have her,” Mr Feith said quickly. “She’s an archivist.”

Miss Melnik raised one dark brow at Hester. “Indeed?”

“Yes.” Hester smiled. “I’m an archivist.”

“And in any case—” Mr Feith glared at the Stregha collection spilling out from the stacks. “She has filing to see to.”