

Rat Catching Chapter 1

By James Strong

Chapter 1

The world is full of mysteries, but more than that: it's full of rats. Oily vermin like that, no good Oliver Burton, who betrayed the Kingsmen, who betrayed *us*. When I first heard he had cut ties with the family and stolen one of the King's treasures, I wondered why. That's not to say I doubted his verminous nature. I had never spoken to Oliver, though I had seen him on occasion. He was young and rather shrimpy for someone so high up in the family. An office, I wasn't surprised to learn, he inherited from his father instead of by his merit. That was the first thing that tipped me off to what kind of man he was. But you see, the reason I wondered why was that nobody stole from the King. Lest they feel the wrath of the Kingsmen.

The Kingsmen were a borderline clan, an alliance of academics, business dynasties, and people with nowhere else to turn to. Our job was to deal with things not quite human, and the sale, operation, and smuggling of supernatural objects that could not be handled by normal folks. The King collected these things for his and the family's use, and on rare occasions, I'd be lucky, or unlucky, enough to see what he had inside his treasury.

You see, I never even met the King. As far as I knew, he wasn't even human. That was, until Oliver's betrayal. I can't speak to what I saw or what happened during my meeting with the King, but what I can tell you is that I swore upon my honor that I would take back the stolen treasure and bring Oliver Burton to justice. Oliver did not know my weaknesses or my capabilities; he did not know the lengths I would go to present his head on a silver platter back to the King. But most of all, I could be trusted. After all, in my world, when you gave someone your word, you swore an oath.

The first order of business was tracking Oliver down, which turned out to be a simple task. He ran back to his hometown: Ashford, Massachusetts. It was a small city with a population just over a hundred thousand, nestled along the highways west of the Berkshire Mountains. With the King's blessing, I left for Ashford alongside a single other Kingsman.

"Are you sure about this informant?" I asked.

"Don't question me, son," Sebastian responded.

His sleek black car roared through the narrow streets of Ashford. We were the only car out on the road that night, dark clouds swirled ahead as the first few bits of blizzard snow began to fall onto the windshield.

Ashford was a scenic city, it was cradled within the whitetopped hills, and a frigid river ran through the middle. The city itself reminded me of some of the churches I saw in France. Elaborate rows of buildings, where on every corner a gargoyle crouched, glowering down to the streets below. Neon signs were bolted to the sides of the Gothic architecture, showing ads for cigarettes, theatres, restaurants, and more. This was the standard for Ashford, save for the occasional street that boasted a more colonial style of housing. In a way, it reminded me of the nicer neighborhoods back home. Places I had only ever walked through, but never had the gall to linger in for fear of sullyng the slice of normalcy with my presence.

Our first stop was an unnamed bar tucked away in an industrial part of the city. We had a few similar establishments back home. Speakeasies were neutral ground, a place where humans and non-humans could tangle together, no longer divided by the bounds of public normalcy.

The back alley we drove into was abandoned and pitch black save for the reflective light the snow provided, and the dull blinking of a lamppost where the street opened up to a civilian road. Sebastian stopped his car, and with only a snap of his fingers, he willed the machine to park and shut its own engine off.

Despite his age, he was only a novice Thaumaturge, a man who could control things and people with mere thoughts. I wasn't entirely sure of the details, only that it took a king's ransom of money to tutor someone in the art. I had seen other Thaumaturges in the Kingsmen do things from causing brooms to sweep the floor on their own to making blood explode into flames. The only extent to which I had seen Sebastian control anything was his car.

“No weapons. That’s the house rules.” Sebastian said as he stuffed one of his revolvers under the car seat, and I did the same. With a sigh, I opened the door and marched around the back, the cold air stung my face and forced me to squint.

In the back was a whole arsenal of weapons and equipment. Rope, gasoline, lockpicks, throwing knives, revolvers, handguns, sawed-off shotguns, hunting rifles, and, serving as the crown jewel of the stash, a Thompson machine gun. I swore to myself that by the end of the night, I’d make an excuse to fire it.

But the thing that stood out to me the most was a suitcase tucked in the back, bolted shut with a dozen chains and locks. Even with the additional sealing, the chained suitcase bulged and shook as something within snarled and smacked itself against the interior. I had my questions, but kept them to myself.

We disposed of our remaining guns and knives, and Sebastian led us down into a crack between two buildings so thin it could barely be considered an alley. At the end of the narrow strip was a wall upon which a neon sign flashed ‘*music and smoking.*’ Under the sign was a door with chipped paint and a rusted doorknob. I knocked thrice upon the ragged wooden door, and it opened up into a wide, empty hallway, where an orange glow came from further inside.

“C’mon,” Sebastian said. He hastily brushed past me, pushing me to the side. I chose to keep my mouth shut and followed him inside. The door closed behind us by the command of an unseen will, and warmth washed over me. The sound of howling winds was replaced by the sounds of my own breathing and the labored grunts of my companion as he hobbled over to the bar. He sat down with a sigh and shed his overcoat. I followed suit and laid mine across the chair next to his.

The wall opposite the bar itself was lined with empty tables, chairs, and a roaring fireplace, which served as the sole source of light. The room glowed like the last rays of twilight, and a gentle and warm sensation filled the air. Across from me, and over the bar, a gramophone sat motionless with a set of records nearby. The bartender, an older man dressed in a black suit with a clean white apron, emerged from behind a set of curtains and approached, setting a disk upon the player. A chorus of brass and deep voices sang from the metal device, with the only disruption being the occasional pop from the record or the crackle of the fire behind me.

“It’s an honor to meet you, gentlemen.” He bowed at the waist as he spoke, “It is always a pleasure to work with the Kingsmen. Would you like anything to drink before we conduct business?” The bartender looked between us slowly, with his gloved hands folded behind his back.

“Bourbon,” Sebastian said as he raised two scarred and weathered fingers. With his back to the fire, the darkness etched long lines through the wrinkles on his face. And the light behind him made his grayed hair appear thinner than it already was.

The bartender turned to me, and I shook my head.

“No thanks. I don’t drink during working hours.” I said.

“Very well, sir.” The bartender nodded once and turned to make my companion’s drink.

“You’re a prude, you know that?” Sebastian said before he punched my shoulder, a strike hard enough to make me shift but not to move me.

“I might be a prude, but you look like a prune.” I scowled.

Sebastian rolled his eyes to try to play it off, but I could see his whole face grow red in the firelight. “Can you believe this guy? What kind of person turns down the gift of a free drink? This kid’s a flat tire, am I right?” He said to the bartender.

“Of course, sir.” The server said as he slid the bourbon to my companion.

“See, even the bartender agrees with me. Lighten up, Hector, you’re only young for so long. No need to act like you’re my age.” He shook his head before downing the entire glass in a single continuous gulp. “Ah, now this, this is the good stuff. Better than the hooch we get sold in the city.” Sebastian nodded to the bartender, who did not return the gesture.

“Alright, what kind of info have you gathered on the crown?”

The bartender knelt on one knee and produced a lockbox from under the counter. He raised it to his lips and whispered something to the lock before planting a kiss upon the metal. The box opened, and he withdrew a leather folder that he presented to us.

I thanked him and flipped it open. Inside were all manner of records, bank statements, birth certificates, and city hall documentation. The topmost item was a transport register showing the crown’s movement from Munich to London, and finally to Boston, where the buyer, our guy Oliver, acquired it from an auction on behalf of the King. At least that is what he was supposed to do before he cut ties and ran off.

Before I could get a start looking for addresses and relevant names, the bartender snapped me out of my focus by clearing his throat. I looked up to see him holding his hand out expectantly.

“Oh yeah... uh. Just put it on the King’s tab. He said he’d pay for all of this.” Sebastian said as he tapped his glass once more.

“Very well, sir.” The bartender withdrew his hand. His expression was as unchanging as a statue, but I saw a twinge of annoyance flash in his eyes as he filled Sebastian’s glass again. I watched as the bartender whispered, and bourbon manifested within the glass, right out of thin air. I had seen similar, but often brighter and drawn-out parlor tricks by the thaumaturgists back

home, but something in the way the bartender was so controlled sent a shiver crawling down my spine. Sebastian took the papers from me and tucked them into the briefcase he had brought with him.

“Say, has anyone else come by asking about this information?” He asked as he stood up from the stool, putting his weight on his good leg first, then his bad one.

“Yes. But if you care for intimate details, I will require additional payment,” The bartender narrowed his eyes, “Up front.” His lips curled up into what I assumed was the closest thing to a smirk he was capable of. I myself almost burst out laughing at Sebastian; he looked like a deer in headlights.

“Well. I suppose that’s that. Thanks for the drink, pal. And Hector, take this.” Sebastian said, taking one last swing of bourbon. He shoved his briefcase into my chest and hobbled out like the grumbly pirate he was.

“Thank you.” I nodded to the bartender, who did not return the gesture.

With a degree of hesitation, I stepped out into the cold. The thin layer of warmth I had gathered was snatched away the instant I stepped back out. Wind blasted down the narrow backstreet, whose buildings clawed so high into the sky I could barely see the thick overcast. Snow fell hard; it had built up in piles at the base of the buildings and blew into my eyes.

“Great, it’s snowing again. God damn it!” Sebastian said. Even in blizzard conditions, the sound of his nasally complaining drowned out everything around him.

When I was about three yards away from the car, I felt an unusual shiver rack my body. It wasn’t from the biting cold; no. It felt like I had just passed the crosshairs of a sniper’s scope.

“Halt!” An unknown voice ordered.

Sebastian whirled around, pulling his gun out from under the seat, but a shot rang out from somewhere behind me. Sebastian cried out and dropped his revolver. At first, I thought Sebastian had been hit, but the shot had merely punched through the car door, having missed his chest by a mere few inches. Immediately, he stuck both his hands up and gestured for me to do the same. I complied, though not because he told me to.

Sebastian quaked, though if it was from the cold or fear, I could not tell. I imagined it was both. He glanced between the gunman behind me and me, and he gave a judgmental look, as if I had messed up and needed to fix this issue.

Slowly, I turned around to see that it was no mere mugger. It was a lean man, dressed in a gray trench coat, similar in style to the ones I had seen the Germans wear during the war. He had a cream-colored scarf and black leather gloves. His tanned face was marked with a large scar that led down from his temple to his throat. He stood poised, unmoving in the cold as if he were a statue. It was hard to meet his gaze due to the snow blowing in my direction, but his pearly white grin was just as chilling as the blizzard.

Behind him, up along the street, were five other men dressed in similar grey jackets. Three of them also sported pistols and had them pointed at Sebastian and I. The other two stood behind the scared man, carrying a large storage trunk.

“Guten Abend, my American friends!” The scared man said his foreign accent was light but unmistakable. I groaned. I had hoped to never hear German for the rest of my life.

“Who are you?” Sebastian called out.

“Please, call me Egon, Fourth Master of ze Rein-Hammer Lodge.” The man performed a deep bow.

Back home, I had heard whispers of the Rein-Hammer hunters' lodge. A band of monster hunters so ruthless and cunning, the Kingsmen treated them like the boogeyman. Before the war, they operated out of Europe, but after a killing spree of rival hunters and even some Kingsmen agents, they were black listed from the entire continent. When the war drew to a close, they seized the opportunity and jumped ship out of Europe to start working in the States. A lot of smaller, independent hunters went quiet after their arrivals. Out of fear or something worse, I couldn't say. As to why they were in Ashford, I had a feeling I knew why. Their Master, Egon, would confirm my suspicions.

“Let's be cordial. I'm willing to play by ze Kingsmen's rules. If you let us borrow ze information on your turncoat, I'll be sure to deliver his head to you. In exchange, we'll be keeping ze crown.” He said.

“How can we trust you, Kraut?” Sebastian said, sneering.

“I swear upon my father's name and my title as Master.” Egon's smile drew tight across his face, his

I had my suspicions before, but hearing his 'promise' set off an almost animalistic urge to fight or run. My options were limited; I could have reached for my gun, but there were four guns trained on me. I'd get dropped before my finger could reach the trigger. The car was too far to reach in a single bound.

That was until I felt the wind start to change, and I blinked as the snow started to fly in the direction of the Huntsmen. While running was still a risk, it was a risk I'd have to take.

My gamble was rewarded as another heavy gust of wind blasted through the street, kicking snow up and sending it directly into the hunters' eyes. They shouted, and I ran.

I tossed the briefcase at Sebastian, and he dived onto the hood of the car to catch it.

The sounds of metal on metal echoed through the alley as the huntsmen opened fire, racking the side of the car with holes. A loud whistle filled my ear as I dived over the hood and scrambled behind the car just as Sebastian jumped inside.

I crawled inside just as the gunfire ceased; the hunters needed to reload. With some shoving and yelling on our parts, Sebastian slid over to the driver's side, and the engine roared to life the moment he put his hands on the wheel. The tires squealed across the slick cobblestone streets, and we sped off down the street. Only, instead of driving past the Huntsmen and out into the main road, Sebastian drove directly into them. He plowed right into one who had run to catch up with us, sending him over the hood and rolling across the roof. But that mook was a mere obstacle, as Sebastian willed the car to go top speed as he hurled towards Egon.

The Hunt Master saw us coming and rolled out of the way just before Sebastian could turn him into paste. Egon yelled to his two closest subordinates, and they dropped the trunk they had been carrying. All of the huntsmen, save for their master, fled to somewhere I couldn't see.

“Damn it! Shoot him, Hector!” Sebastian shouted as he brought the car to a stop.

I fished out my gun from under the seat and rolled the window down, but it was too late. Egon heaved a dry cackle as he pried the lid of the trunk open. From within a swirling mass of darkness began to fall out, like black smog rolling over the streets. From within the case, half a dozen beasts leapt out to their master's aid.

They were black hounds. Vicious, wolf-sized creatures with slick, oily skin instead of fur, and bright, translucent eyes that possessed only a deep and insatiable hunger.

“Fetch me their hearts, my pretties!” Egon ordered as he pointed to Sebastian and me.

Within the blink of an eye, the hounds leapt up onto the car and began to thrash at the metal. Their dagger-like teeth pried at the metal and cracked the glass of the windshield.

“Back up! Back up!” I yelled, and Sebastian willed the car into reverse. He sped off down the road, even though the hounds held on firmly to our car. When the back alley opened up onto the main road, Sebastian suddenly stopped the car. I smacked my head on the back of the seat and heard a screeching, whining sound that came from the dogs.

“Sebastian, what the-” I couldn’t finish before he turned and began to speed off down the road. I looked back to see that his sudden stop had sent the hounds flying off our car. Some had crashed into the glass window of a storefront, and one had hit a lamppost so hard it had bent the metal in half. The beasts lay still for only a moment, and before we could even get a few yards away, they bolted back upright and continued their chase. Glass shards were still stuck in the muzzles, and the one that had hit the pole had its spine folded in half. But as they ran, their wounds vanished until it appeared as though nothing had happened to them in the first place.

Just before we rounded the corner of an intersection, I saw Egon step out from the shadows of the backstreet.

“Don’t run, they just want to be your friends!” Egon cackled; his laughter echoed down the street, following us just like his hounds.

“Don’t just sit there, where are we going!?” Sebastian said as he sped up. This only prompted the hounds to begin slowly matching and then surpassing our speed.

I cracked the case open and began to pore through information. Birthdays, school records, banking information, and address books, all of it was in there. The whole life story of not just our target, but his stinking-rich family was in my hands.

Just as I began to flip through the address book, Sebastian took a hard turn onto a long and open central road. The barking of the hounds was further away, but every time I glanced

back, I could see them rounding the corner of the street, as well as a large truck that I had a feeling belonged to our newly acquainted friend, Egon.

There were well over a dozen addresses in Oliver's or his family's name in Ashford alone. I scanned through them as best as I could, given Sebastian's driving. The most likely locations were the Historical Society, which was owned by Oliver himself, and a townhouse that was a part of the Burton family estate.

"There's a townhouse at 36 Vector Street, it's owned by the Burtons. There's also the Historical Society, which Oliver owns himself." I said as I flipped open the map we were given, "The house is in a neighborhood called Silverhill, just up the street. The Historical Society is in the mercantile district across the river, though."

Sebastian groaned and smacked the wheel. "God damn it, Hector!" he shouted.

"What are you yelling at me for? How is this my fault? They're so far away?" I yelled back.

He grumbled some superfluous reasoning under his breath as he sped up, his eyes darting back and forth as he pondered our options. Though it didn't take him long to come up with something barely passable for a solution.

"We'll split up. You check out the house, I'll check the office." He said.

"Are you mental? The last thing we should do is split up!" I shook my head.

He turned towards me and glared. His wrinkles were drawn tight across his face.

"We don't have time to screw around. Those dogs are gonna chase us 'til kingdom come, and lord knows who else is gonna be on our tail. So we'll cover as much ground as possible. I'll distract the hunters while you check out the house. If you find the crown, get out of town any way possible." Sebastian said his peace and turned his eyes back to the road.

I shook my head in disbelief, laughing at the absurdity of the night. But even in that brief moment of respite, over the howling winds, I could hear the howling hounds in the distance.

Vector Street was a bright part of the city, an upscale neighborhood full of electric lights, posters with smiling faces, and quaint shops. Rosey red-bricked townhouses lined the cobble street, made to stand out all the more against the fresh snow that piled up along the sidewalks. It was beautiful, save for the residence of house number 36.

It was a dismal heap of dull brick and sagging mortar. The house slumped in on itself, as if it had no care for standing up. Dark windows revealed the emptiness inside. Of course, I was going in there by myself.

“Hurry up! And take something with silver in case the black hounds sniff you out. It’s the one thing that will put them down.” Sebastian yelled as I was climbing out the door.

I snagged two revolvers and a sawed-off, which was loaded with silvered slug shells. In addition to the firearms, I snagged a ring of lock picks that was within the pile. The instant I slammed the trunk shut, Sebastian shot off, whirling around the corner of the street so fast he jumped the curb.

Trudging through the snow on my way to the townhouse, I could barely hear the ice crunch under my boots beneath the blizzard and winds and distant howling of the hounds. I hoped the weather would mask my scent from those beasts.

The front door was in stark contrast to the rest of the house. It was a tall slab of wood coated with a rich green color, and embedded on the front was a golden-plated knocker that was an amalgamation of a lion and a boar.

I crouched before the mighty door and began to try the lock picks. All the while, I could hear the hounds approaching. Sweat froze along my brow as I heard a tumble and a click. I pocketed the lock picks and tried the doorknob. I attempted to crack the door open, but a strong gust pushed it all the way open, and a sudden blast of warmth clashed with the invading cold. As I peered inside, I saw a long hallway before me, with polished wooden floors and velvet red walls ornamented with paintings, vases, and furniture. At the end of this hallway was a steep and thin staircase that led to the upper levels. Tension seized me as I gazed beyond the precipice and into a place unlike any other.

I kept my lips sealed as I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. It wasn't just warm inside the house; it was humid. The air was suffocatingly stuffy, as if I had stepped into a different climate entirely. I shed my winter jacket and breast coat after mere seconds of standing inside. I wiped fresh sweat from my brow as I drew my gun and stepped further down the hallway.

The townhouse was inconspicuous enough. There were doors in the hallway that led into a kitchen and a living room, neither of which had anyone inside.

The living room had a grand fireplace, which roared as I peered into it from around a corner. I covered my eyes from the intensity of a flame that burned too bright and too large to be safe. The air in the room steamed and waned, but despite its ferocity, nothing around the room burned. No bit of furniture, portrait, or decoration was touched by the flame. It was as if the

place was a mirage, and beneath such an illusion, the townhouse was burning down before my eyes in a way that I could not see.

The kitchen was a similar story, though the heat from within was less intense than that of the living room. A softer flame burned in the iron oven, and the electric lights above shone brighter than even the street lamps outside. Assorted cookware was scattered throughout the room. Metal pots and pans rested on the counters and above the oven. Stray utensils were strewn about the countertops and the large table in the center of the kitchen.

The heat was worse the further I moved in, like noon on a summer's day. The warmth of the interior made the air hazy and unfocused, like how paint smudges on canvas. The saliva in my mouth dried, and sweat clung to the inside of my shirt. As I traversed the room, my trigger finger itched to shoot the first thing that moved.

I ended up shooting a rat. The little thing had crawled out from under one of the tables in the middle of the room, and I blasted the poor creature. It squealed and collapsed onto its side, or rather, what was left of its side. After a moment spent calming down, I approached to see that I had blown a hole straight through it. Bits of blood and rat viscera were strewn across the tiled floor, and the smell of iron mixed with the warm air in a way that made my head spin.

Then it spasmed. At first, I thought it was in its death throes, squealing out its final cries of life. I primed my revolver and aimed for its head; the least I could have done was put it out of its misery. But then another rat appeared.

I almost shot the second one out of sheer reflex, but managed to hold back. The second vermin approached the first and began to sniff at its dying brother. Then it began to peck at the wound before fully shoving itself into the side of the other rat. Bones snapped, and muscles twisted as the living rat grafted itself to the dying one until they appeared to be as one.

In panic, I stepped back, my revolver still aimed at the verminous amalgam. It raised its two heads at me and shrieked before running to and then under what I had assumed was a pantry door. I swallowed dry spit and stepped towards the door. Through the crack beneath it was the same warm light that glowed through the rest of the house.

I barely had a chance to question it when the sound of glass shattering drew my attention to the living room. From the kitchen doorway, I saw, veiled by curtains and snow, three black hounds. The beasts stood up despite their legs being perforated by glass, and they growled at me.

Pure instinct took over, and I kicked rationality to the curb. The hounds lunged at me from the living room in a single bound as I opened the pantry door and slammed it shut behind me. I felt them crash into the door, scratching and barking as they began to rend the wood. I searched my pockets for the sawed-off and stepped back to give myself as much distance to shoot when the door inevitably fell. But my back didn't touch any wall.

In my panic, I hadn't realized I had stepped into another hallway, which extended far into what should have been the neighboring house. But as the hounds' snouts started to peek through the holes in the wood, I ignored the impossibility of the house's layout and ran. This peculiar hallway was lined on either side by doors, with one large double door at the end painted green with golden accents. By the time I had reached the door at the other end of the hallway, I heard the hounds crash through the false-pantry door, and they began to chase after me.

I opened the double door and nearly tripped over the ledge it opened up to. Before me was an impossible space, a room of proportions so large it dwarfed the entire neighborhood. Stairs led up and down at angles that made them impractical at best and death traps at worst.

Pillars rose like obelisks into some unseen height that reached high up into the sky. While chandeliers dangled down on chains that must have been several hundred feet in length.

One of these chandeliers hung close to the edge I stood at, and with the hounds approaching me rapidly from behind, I saw no other choice but to jump.