

THE SHADOW REVOLUTION

Crown & Key Book 1

Excerpt

By Clay and Susan Griffith

CHAPTER ONE

A bold moon hung over the dark London cityscape. A shroud of fog obscured the ever-present grime as yellow smudges of gas lamps created black silhouettes of the skyline. London showed its hidden nature only at night. People moved like wraiths, appearing out of nowhere, shades made suddenly solid.

The misty moonlight gave the city an otherworldly aspect in which Simon Archer reveled. He nodded amiably to passersby, but his senses were tuned to the indistinguishable world around him, listening, feeling for a shred of anything out of place.

“Do you know where you’re going, Simon?” Nick Barker grumbled. “We do have important business we could see to. Or we could head to the pub for a pint.”

Simon twirled a gold key on a chain attached to his waistcoat. “You didn’t have to come.”

“Of course I did. What kind of a friend and mentor would I be if I went drinking without you?”

“What kind, indeed. Her note sounded urgent, but don’t worry, we won’t be away from the hunt for long.” Simon then intoned in a stage profundo, “Something hungry moves in the shadows of our fair city. We’ve heard it whispered in and out of every tavern. And we are the men to put an end to it.”

Simon arched an amused eyebrow. His dark hair, just slightly longer than was permissible in polite society, fell rakishly over his high forehead but did not cover his piercing green eyes. Sideburns slipped down to just above his jawline toward the curve of his lips, giving him a permanent sardonic expression. He wore simple tweed trousers with a somewhat threadbare coat, not his normal attire but one that would allow him to blend in among the locals of St. Giles Parish. Even so, he looked more fashionable than the shorter, stockier man walking beside him.

“So who’s this old friend of yours we’re meeting?” Nick asked. “Do I know her?” The man possessed the build of a common brawler and the sartorial tastes of one. Likely once a very handsome young man, Nick had creases born of time and experience as well as unshaven stubble, which made him appear somewhere over forty years old. His brown hair was short and ruffled, kept without care. Nick struggled to keep up with Simon’s purposeful long strides as they threaded their way into the wretched Rookery.

“She was from before I met you. Just after my mother died—God rest her soul—when I first came to London.” Simon couldn’t help the flicker of pain that crossed his sharp angular features even after so long. “Marie d’Angouleme was a . . . an actress of some repute back then.” He sighed at the memory.

“Marie d’Angouleme.” Nick whistled in appreciation. “You knew her? I saw her once at a party. Good Lord, why would you stray from that woman?”

"I didn't. She left me."

"She left you? But you're Simon Archer, London's greatest gentleman of leisure!" Nick grasped his chest in mock surprise.

Simon flashed a grin that blazed in the darkness. "I wasn't London's great gentleman then. I was a boy from Kent with no great place or purpose."

"And now suddenly she wants to meet with you again?" Nick gave a suspicious frown. "In this parish? After how many years?"

"Six or seven. I owe her a bit of my time. She was kind to a chap new to the city."

"She was kind because you paid her way. You, my friend, have never been able to tell the difference between genuine kindness and deception."

Simon tsked. "Sincerity can't be faked, only deceit."

The two men ventured deep into the wretched Rookery. They passed blocks of condemned structures pressed together and rows of tenements in such disrepair that planks of wood were used to hold up their dilapidated sides. Glassless windows were boarded up or stuffed with rags and newspapers. The streets were full of garbage and human offal. The stench was strong. The air was pitch-black in the narrow confines. This area enjoyed its shadows.

Among the ruins stood a female figure.

Enough faint light filtered from shaded windows and closed doors to illuminate her. She looked smaller and so much older than Simon remembered, and it struck him hard. Years ago she had been adorned with grand jewels and opulent fabrics, and yet even those had barely been able hold in her audacious and flamboyant manner. Now her garments were gaudy rags of torn lace and soiled silk. When her pale eyes alighted on his form, she must have seen the shock in his expression because she pulled her shabby cloak tighter, concealing her embarrassing attire.

"Beatrice." Simon smiled at her.

A frail laugh slipped from garishly painted lips. "You remembered."

"Of course."

"You're the only man who ever called me by my real name." Despite her gratitude, she glanced nervously at the darkness surrounding them.

Simon laid a gentle kiss on her pockmarked cheek, which had once been porcelain. He gestured to the man behind him. "May I introduce Nick Barker, a good friend. Nick, this is Marie d'Angouleme, grand duchess of the theater, queen of the West End, and thief of my heart."

Her features relaxed in friendly greeting, but there was unease in her eyes, the mark of a woman betrayed too often by sweet words and hasty promises. Her hand plucked at Simon's sleeve. It lingered on the material with practiced intent. "This doesn't seem your usual attire. Dressing for the neighborhood?"

"You might say that." He studied the even more shabby condition of the former demimondaine. It seemed incredible, as if she were dressed for a part in a play. "What happened, Beatrice? How did you come to this? You had everything."

"Yes, I did once," she said wistfully, regarding his tall frame. "But a wrong turn here, a twist of fate there."

"What about your magic?" Simon asked. He noticed her worried gaze dart to Nick, but he gave her a reassuring nod. "You were quite skilled."

Beatrice shrugged with a wan smile before stepping back into the shadows once more. "As with all things in my life, I made missteps there too."

"You should have come to me earlier." He reached into his coat. "How much do you need?"

"Jesus God, Simon." She glared at him in anger. "I'm not asking you for money."

Annoyed, Nick demanded, "What is it you want if not that?"

Ignoring the accusatory barb, her hand alighted on Simon's chest, her finger tracing a strange symbol on his shirt. She actually shivered although Simon didn't think it had anything to do with the cold. Her skin turned abruptly pale beneath the cheap rouge. "I have a . . . customer. An aristocrat named Lord Oakham. Do you know him?"

"I've heard the name," Simon replied.

"He isn't a regular, but not a stranger either. I was with him last night and, afterward, I saw him fall into an argument with another man on the street not far from here. About what I do

not know. But I saw . . .” Beatrice faltered, fear overwhelming her countenance. Her shuddering grew worse, her voice lowering.

Simon brushed a soothing hand across her forearm. “What is it, Beatrice? I will help you if I can.”

She steeled herself with the same determination that Simon had seen her use before stepping out alone onto the stage. “I saw him transform into a beast and slaughter that man.”

“You saw Lord Oakham murder a man?”

Beatrice shook her head violently. “No. Just what I said. One moment, he was a lord and the next he wasn’t. He changed his shape, Simon. He became a monster.” Her eyes rose to meet his. “Do you believe me? I wasn’t drunk. Nor am I now.”

“Have you seen him since?”

“No, but it’s worse,” Beatrice stammered. “Lord Oakham saw me witness the event.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Simon struck a cavalier pose. “Well, let’s simply shift you away from here. I would take it a kindness if you would stay at my home at Gaunt Lane for as long as you need.”

Beatrice paused, looking at his face for signs of hesitation, but there were none. Even so, she shook her head. “Dear Simon, I don’t fear for my own life. But someone should know. Someone who I hoped could do something. I thought of you.”

Without warning, a huge shape fell among them, bearing Beatrice hard to the ground and batting Simon and Nick roughly to the side. A massive animal snapped its long jaws and clamped onto Beatrice. Her terrified scream lay heavy in the fog. Simon scrambled to his feet, but he wasn’t fast enough to stop the great beast as it twisted its head and ripped through the woman’s shoulder.

“No!” Simon screamed.

A menacing growl rolled loud, hammering the men’s ears as a pair of red eyes punctured the black veil of night. The creature rose on canine hind legs, tall and loose-limbed, to a height of eight feet. Its snout was almost the length of Simon’s forearm. Saliva and blood dripped through

the long sharp teeth in its open jaws. The hair on Simon's arm rose as his breathing deepened and energy flooded his body.

"Damnation," muttered Nick. Then he snapped his fingers. A flicker of flame sprouted from his fingertips, lighting the gloom. The stench of blood mingled with the distinctive musk of wet fur. "Don't rush in. Don't be stupid."

"It killed her!" Simon yelled.

"It'll kill us too unless we keep our wits." Nick pulled his friend a step away. "That's a werewolf, in case you didn't know."

Simon shrugged off the man's hand. Where sensible men would have run, Simon strode toward the menacing shape. His leather shoes squished with each step in the garbage-strewn lane. He uttered a single word that was not English and brought his hands together, stiff-armed, in a sharp clap. Thunder crashed. The hulking beast was blasted back, slamming into the bricks behind it. The force left a deep crater in the wall.

With bricks clattering around it, the thing gathered its long limbs and stood, growling. The rank stench of rotting flesh washed over Simon, but he didn't hesitate, moving closer to the shadowy beast.

Nick came up on the left, forcing the werewolf to choose between them. The older man slapped his palm onto a nearby wall and the flames on his hand transferred to the spot on the bricks where it stayed, offering light in the dark alley.

"Steady," Nick breathed, casually placing his hands in his pockets.

Simon had already selected the spells he needed to cast.

The werewolf's head swiveled as if debating which to strike first. Its frustration erupted in a violent roar that flecked spittle across the alley, striking both men. Neither flinched. The creature turned to Simon and stepped forward.

"Now," Simon shouted, as the werewolf drew close.

Nick's hands flew from his pockets and balls of fire shot from his palms. Two flaming orbs splashed against the werewolf's massive chest. It howled in pain; its fur and flesh were seared in a wash of fire.

The enraged werewolf lunged. The snap of teeth came within a hairsbreadth of Simon's face as he flung himself back. He kicked out, connecting with the snapping jaw, striking it to the side, spraying blood.

"Again!" Simon commanded, scrambling to his feet.

Nick let loose another barrage of fireballs, while Simon grabbed a thick wooden beam from the side of a building and smashed it over the head of the beast. Its howl of pain became a shout of fury.

It leapt and landed beside Simon. He swung the beam again and it splintered across the werewolf's smoldering arm and chest, shattering into wood pulp. The creature towered over him, its arm lifted for a killing blow.

Nick grabbed the werewolf's throat and his hand burst into blue-hot fire. With an agonized howl, a hairy arm swung wildly and slammed Nick's shoulder, sending his limp body flying amidst the debris. Then the creature lunged after him.

Simon seized the beast's hind leg and his fingers dug deep into the bristly fur. When he whispered a druidic phrase, the huge werewolf jerked to a halt. It glanced furiously over its shoulder, so Simon heaved it off its clawed feet and threw it to the side as if it were a spent rag. It crashed into a heap ten feet away.

The massive wolf head swiveled toward Simon for a moment but then opted for easier prey, turning again for Nick. Simon slapped his hands together. The deafening crack filled the alley and sent the beast careening into a spin. It dropped to all fours and clawed for purchase, leaving deep gouges in the cobblestones. Simon knelt and slammed his hand to the ground. A whispered word sent a wave of power shaking through his arm, as if it would snap the bones, before it passed into the earth. He wrenched his hand from the powerful grip of the ground, cutting off the power.

A cascading shock wave rumbled toward the werewolf. The monster tried to leap away but lost its footing and fell. The wave tore past and hit the side of a building. Bricks cracked and shifted. Then with a shudder, as the great beast was rising, the wall collapsed on top of it in a shower of stone and dust.

For a moment, Simon thought the fight over and moved toward Nick, but the sound of shifting rubble made Simon turn. The werewolf rose from the mound of stone, its fur a smear of blood and dust. It sprang with horrifying speed at Simon, knocking him down. The back of the man's head struck something hard. He heard Nick shouting. The foul breath of the beast gagged him. He was inches from the salivating jaws.

A black shape fell from the heavens. There was a whistle of steel and the werewolf reared up with a shriek. Simon caught a glimpse of a man clad in black, wielding a long claymore one-handed. The beast clutched its side, black blood spewing between gnarled fingers. It cowered from the new figure, showing fear for the first time. Then it leapt away into the darkness.

"That's right, you curl!" The man in black fired a heavy pistol that sounded like a cannon at the creature's fleeting form. "You know me now, don't you?"

Simon came to his feet, shaking the last of his vertigo aside with the determination of a bear. His coat was in ruins, but he was largely unscathed. He felt a slight tremble in his legs; the magic had left him weak, but he felt a rush of relief at being alive. He clapped a grateful hand onto the newcomer's shoulder. "You came in the nick of time, sir."

"Shut it!" snapped the sharp retort in a thick Scottish brogue and the man brushed Simon's friendly gesture aside. "You came to a werewolf fight without silver. I've been tracking that beast for days. I won't have you two mucking things up with your petty sorcery. That beastie belongs to me, and me alone!" Then he was gone, racing on the trail of the bleeding beast.

Simon stared after the Scotsman for a brief moment, but then he turned and ran for Beatrice, shouting to Nick as he passed, "Are you all right?"

"Right as rain." Nick rolled his shoulder with a wince of pain.

Simon fell to his knees in the blood. Beatrice's brutalized body was splayed on the cobblestones amidst the refuse, twisted like copper wire, clothes shredded. He slid his hands under her. She coughed weakly and her eyes opened. Simon shouted, "Nick! Quickly."

The other man was at his side already. He squatted and put a hand on Beatrice's forehead. "She's nearly gone."

"Then stop talking," Simon cried, "and help her."

Nick concentrated on the woman's face. He breathed heavily and closed his eyes. Beatrice jerked and cried out in pain. She reached up a red hand and took hold of Nick's wrist, trying to wrench it from her head.

"Stop," she whispered.

"No, Beatrice," Simon soothed. "Nick has some vivimancy. He can help you."

"Don't." She looked up at Simon. "Don't."

"Yes." Simon tried to pull her hand from Nick's arm.

"She's right, Simon," Nick said. "I can't do her any good."

"What do you mean?" Simon asked sharply. "You've got the power. Use it."

Beatrice touched Simon's cheek. "Aether is killing me. I abused it for so long. I'll die soon anyway. You can't save me. Just let me go."

"No," Simon argued. "Just let Nick get you balanced. Then you'll come to my home and I'll care for you. I can come up with something."

"Simon, please." She smiled with bloody teeth. "There's nothing you can do."

"She's right, old boy." Nick took his hands away from her. "You're overstimulated by your own aether, but try to see it straight."

"No!" Simon shouted, glaring angrily at Nick.

Beatrice murmured, "I'm glad I saw you again, Simon. You're exactly the same as you were." A strange look of sadness and disappointment passed over her face, then all emotion departed, leaving only waxy flesh. She went limp under his hands.

Simon squeezed her cool hand. "Damn it."

"She was eaten up, Simon. The aether was in every part of her. She should've been dead months ago." Nick stood. "But at least she gave us Lord Oakham. If we can find him again."

Simon's voice was brittle. "I know where we can find him. We'll see to Beatrice first." He placed her hands gently on her chest.