

The Undead Chancellor

Chapter One

‘Who loves you at this hour?’

‘Beats me.’ I blindly reached over to grab my phone. The screen’s blue light made me squint, and I frowned. ‘Clients aren’t supposed to email me.’

Neither of us said anything for a moment. I heard some students from the next hall over cackling loudly as they returned from a night out.

‘Must be spam,’ Eraphy said.

‘Yeah.’ I chewed my lip. ‘Though... it is weirdly specific for spam? Addresses me by name, knows my job, all that.’ Eraphy murmured in agreement as I scrolled back up the message. ‘Look, it says she paid a deposit.’

Another moment passed.

‘Well?’

‘I feel weird checking my balance with you watching.’

Eraphy playfully put their hands over their eyes, and I smiled.

Shivering, I sat down on the bus shelter’s dripping bench. A thick sheet of rain obscured everything but vague outlines of houses across the road. I tried wringing out my pointed hat and sighed. Two minutes until pickup time. Probably wasn’t worth taking out my phone.

I took out my phone. There were a hundred and eighty unread messages in our group chat - Eraphy’s [YES BITCH] the most recent - so I ignored it. For the third time that morning, I checked the email.

[Dear Ammy Verris,

It will be to your advantage to make yourself present at the home of the Undead Chancellor on the morning of the 13th of November at 10 A.M. sharp. The Chancellor has request of your services as a witch for hire.]

The rest followed with pleasantries and the address for the bus stop I found myself at now. Why the Undead Chancellor - the world's first and only necromancer - was interested in my services was beyond me. There was also the small factor that she was meant to be dead thirty years, but she *was* a necromancer, and the deposit had landed in my account all the same. My debt wasn't going to pay itself.

Hooves sounded on tarmac.

They were quiet over the downpour, but they really were hooves. Shielding myself with my hat, I poked my head out, eyes widening. I was being approached by a carriage pulled by two horses. Skeletal horses.

Their bones were slick with rain, and they looked so *thin*; their ribs didn't connect at the bottom, and the lack of skin or muscle made their frames seem too small. Yet they trotted along with obvious purpose, ignorant of their own fleshlessness. It took me a moment to notice that no one was steering. The horses' reins were attached straight to the black carriage that looked out of the eighteenth century. It drew to a stop in front of me and a door opened.

A skeleton servant stepped out.

'Miss Ammy Verris?'

Rain bounced off his skull, and his dark, empty sockets made it difficult to tell where he was looking. His black suit jacket hung off him, a cuff dangling from his outstretched hand. The bony fingers were long against a tiny palm.

I tucked my hair behind my ear and took his hand, trying not to grimace at the handshake; his bare bones were rigid in a way that would feel like I was holding something

inanimate if not for his fingers wrapping around mine. If he noticed, he didn't comment, and beckoned me up the steps. I grabbed my satchel from the shelter, and, as quickly as I politely could, climbed into the carriage.

Black velvet seats were positioned opposite each other, with a surprisingly plain light embedded in the ceiling - maybe I'd expected a miniature chandelier. He gestured to a seat, and I took it, conscious of the amount of water I was getting everywhere.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'We'll clean up the carriage as soon as you leave.'

'Oh. Thanks.'

'You could say that we, ah, live to serve.'

I stared. His teeth were all bared and set in place, so it's not like he could smile. He gave me a shrug.

'Sorry. Just a spot of undead humour.'

We started moving. I jolted and collected myself with a glance up at the skeleton. I couldn't read his expression, which was unsurprising considering he didn't have one. The window was fogged up, so I looked at him again.

'Are you driving?' I asked. He shook his head.

'Heavens, no. Our horses are smarter than they look.'

I almost said, "they look *dead*", but bit my tongue. He sat with his palms placed on his lap, shoulders straight, yet could not stay fully still; the light scraping of a foot, the way his... yes, the way his chest rose and fell. All the while, he stared straight at me, empty sockets locked with mine.

'So,' I said hurriedly. 'Um.'

'Quite.'

I swallowed. The skeleton's gaze bored through me. 'Sorry. I've never met a skeleton before.'

‘I’d wager most haven’t. Try not to think of me any differently. In life, I was a man named Bert, and in death, I am a man named Bert.’ He coughed politely - with what lungs? - and extended his hand again.

More ready for it this time, I shook his hand. ‘Okay. Bert. Well, it seems you already know me.’

‘I do.’ He shook my hand firmly and withdrew it to his lap.

‘So. Uh. Bert.’ I absently pulled at my sleeve. ‘You been working here long?’

‘Yes, though probably not as long as you’re expecting.’ I waited for him to expand on that, which he didn’t. ‘I apologise for my curiosity, but I must say that you are a first.’

‘Oh?’

‘I don’t even recall the last time the mistress called someone to her estate. Decades, certainly. And - again, I must apologise - I’ve not seen anyone as young as yourself since I died.’

I still wasn’t sure which was more unbelievable: the Undead Chancellor actually being alive, or the fact that she really did want *me* for some reason. Clearly, this undead servant - Bert - didn’t have any more answers for me on that front.

‘I’m as confused as you are, to be honest,’ I said. ‘Does she always have her guests wait at random bus stops in the middle of nowhere?’

Bert laughed politely. ‘Not always, no. I can’t say I understand how the mistress’s mind works.’ He leaned in. ‘If it’s to avoid attention, maybe she should give up the carriage drawn by undead horses.’

I smiled. Bert really was just a guy. A dead one, of course, but we all had our eccentricities. ‘Yeah. I’m surprised she doesn’t hire a chauffeur.’

‘To be sure, but would you trust a skeleton to drive?’

We stopped. Half-surprised and half-grateful for the excuse to not reply, I tried to glance out the window and found it fogged up. Bert pulled up his sleeve and glanced at a watch dangling from his wrist tilting his head.

‘Excuse me a moment.’

He opened the door, and the chill of the rain crept into the carriage. Past him, I could see we’d stopped on a small stone bridge, with a forest stretching out behind it. Already out of the city. I shivered as he left, closing the door behind him.

After fidgeting for a moment, I pulled my phone out, rubbing its wet screen against the seat to no effect. The group chat had been active and was now up to two hundred-odd messages, so I scrolled to the bottom. As far as I could tell, Eraphy and Tress were arguing about who was more bored, which was fascinating considering they had the same cashier job. After a poor attempt to dry my hands, I sent a message:

[Skeletons are cool]

The conversation changed.

[do they talk]

[Do they rattle?]

[do they have dicks?]

Tress, Simone, then Eraphy. I smirked. [Yes, no, I don’t know]

[so they’re real???

I jumped as the door opened, and Bert reappeared. He took his seat, and we started moving.

‘My deepest apologies for the interruption. The mistress asked me to speak with the gardener on our way back.’

I shrugged. ‘It’s okay. I have nothing else planned today, so there’s no rush.’ A pause. ‘Uh, I mean, of course I’d still be prioritising this. Not meaning to disrespect.’

‘No disrespect taken.’ He gestured to my pocket. ‘Perhaps during the meeting it would be best to keep your phone out of sight. I don’t mind it, of course, but the mistress has a dislike for such technology. I suppose you might have guessed as much by the contraption we find ourselves in.’

‘I see.’ The horses’ hooves were still audible, crunching over gravel. I regarded Bert. ‘Are all skeletons like you, then?’

‘Heavens, no. Are the living all like you?’

I raised my hands. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean you all talk the same, act the same, whatever. I meant... Um, do you all have as much life in you?’

Bert stared for a moment. I looked away. I couldn’t tell what kind of silence this was.

‘What a curious expression,’ he said. ‘Yes, Miss Verris, I believe we do.’

We rolled over smoother gravel and gradually came to a stop. Even through the foggy window, I could glimpse a large, dark building outside. Bert stood, beckoning me out the door.

As I stepped down, I saw at least twenty skeletons waiting. They were all sorts of shapes and sizes, and they all appeared to be servants; the women wore long black and white skirts, while the men had identical attire to Bert. In unison, they bowed deeply. Behind them stood an impossibly large building, made of black stone that looked shaped for purpose rather than painted. Bert stood before them, and gestured widely to the mansion.

‘Miss Ammy Verris,’ he announced. ‘Welcome to the home of the Undead Chancellor.’

I nodded, not sure where to look. Eyeless skulls stared through me. Behind them, a huge door opened heavily, creaking loudly.

I was led inside.

The entrance foyer looked more like that of a museum. Red walls were decorated with portraits of important figures I vaguely recognised from centuries ago, the walls furnished with drawers and cushioned benches. A suit of armour stood in each corner. At the far end of the

room, there was a shining staircase that seemed to be made of gold. Despite the spotless and shiny floors, there was an odd smell that was hard to place. It reminded me faintly of something burning.

A servant coughed behind me, and I jumped. He wordlessly gestured to a coat rack, and I obediently hung mine up as another servant offered me a towel. I was ushered to the right by Bert, and, at that, everyone began moving. Some servants disappeared down corridors, others up the stairs, and by the time I'd finished drying myself off, I was alone with Bert again. He gestured, and I followed him into a new corridor, thinking about the mistress of the house. The Undead Chancellor. With a start, I realised I didn't know what a Chancellor actually was, and then I realised I also didn't know her real name. I was halfway to panicking before remembering that Bert had also used the title, so it was probably fine.

'Is something the matter?' Bert asked.

'No. All good.'

I went to shove my hands in my pockets and remembered my coat had been taken.

We passed bookshelves filled with authors I didn't know, the walls between them adorned with painted portraits. The people depicted in these ones I didn't recognise, and they looked surprisingly young; maybe the mansion's opulence had made me assume everything was old. There was only one photo, standing alone in a small frame on a bookshelf. A couple wearing sunglasses stood arm in arm, and, judging by their pair of mouthy grins, the photographer had caught them mid-laugh. The woman had a hand over her stomach. The photo's edges were frayed, the colour faded.

At the end of the corridor, a pair of ornate wooden doors with golden handles awaited us. Bert opened one, giving a small bow as he motioned me through it.

We arrived at a parlour with comfortable looking sofas and an unlit fireplace. It was comparatively quite a tame room, though it *did* have a grand piano in one corner and an

immaculate tea set in another. It was the first room to look lived in. Bert motioned me to a large-backed chair that sat alone in the centre of the room. I hesitated, glancing at him.

‘The mistress will be along shortly,’ he said.

I sank into the chair, realised I was still holding the towel, and handed it to him. Damp still clung to me. It was hard to get comfortable. Bert gave a low bow.

‘It has been lovely to meet you, Miss Verris.’

He made to leave, and I reached a hand out to make him pause. I bit my lip.

‘Um,’ I said. ‘Is there anything I should know?’

‘In what manner?’

‘You said she doesn’t like phones. Is there anything else? Like, what if I offend—’

Bert interrupted me with a soft laugh. ‘Miss Verris, I have worked here a long time, but every day I am astounded by the mistress’s patience and kindness. You needn’t worry yourself.’

With a final bow, he left.

‘Okay,’ I said to nobody, and waited. I heard a dripping, and realised I was still wearing my hat - trust me to forget something I was wearing on my own head - and took it off.

I frowned. I could still hear dripping.

A door opened.

I tried not to stare. Two skeleton maids came in, carrying a modest armchair between them with an old woman in it. They set her down before me, and one of them left. The other, a tall maid with hands clasped before her, stood by the chair. The door slammed shut, and I jumped.

The woman in the chair looked older than anyone I’d ever met. Flaky trails of grey hair hung from her head, and she wore a purple night gown that was baggy on her frail body. Grisly marks laced her skin. One arm lay loosely across her lap, and the other was gripping the chair’s

arm, knuckles bulging with the effort. There was a stench emanating from her that I couldn't place. She did not move.

'So,' she said. 'You are the witch for hire.'

I was failing at not staring.

'You— You saw my ad?'

'Indeed.' I'd expected her words to sound strained and weary, but they weren't. Despite her appearance, her voice was clear. Only her eyes moved, scanning me up and down. The unnatural stillness in her face made me shiver. 'Ammy Verris. Am I right?'

'Yeah. Yes.'

'Is Ammy short for something?'

'I'd rather not use my full—' I stopped. 'Sorry. It's—'

'Don't tell me,' she said - forcefully, but not harshly. 'I quite understand distancing oneself from a name.' She paused for a moment. 'Though, I imagine your name was chosen rather than given. I did not ask to be called "Chancellor", but I do prefer it over being labelled something as fiendish as a "necromancer".'

'I get that,' I said, not getting it at all.

Again, she studied me up and down. 'Verris— or do you prefer Ammy?'

'Verris is fine,' I said, crossing my legs.

'Verris it is.' I kept expecting her to nod or gesture with her hands, but she stayed perfectly still. 'This is not an interrogation. You may speak with me the same way you do with your friends. Though, considering your generation, maybe a touch less crude.'

'I'll try. I mean, of course.'

'Tea?'

I shook my head. The Chancellor didn't say anything, but the maid by her chair moved anyway, over to where the tea set lay.

‘This is Marge,’ the Chancellor said. ‘The first member of my staff.’

Marge turned from her work to give a deep curtsy but said nothing.

‘She doesn’t like to talk with me around.’ The Chancellor gave a small laugh. ‘What is it about the fifty acre estate that makes people so uptight?’

I laughed awkwardly. ‘It is an awfully big house.’

‘Too right. Verris, if you ever come into money, don’t spend it on this nonsense. A vain youth will embarrass you, but the right stocks won’t.’

I hadn’t even the beginning of an idea as to how the stock market worked. ‘I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you.’

Marge brought over tea. I was curious how the Chancellor was going to drink it, and the answer was simple; she opened her mouth, and Marge gently tipped the blackest tea I’d ever seen down her throat. Marge stepped back, still holding the cup.

‘You’re staring,’ the Chancellor said.

‘No! I-I’m—’

‘It’s okay. It’s not far off the reason I brought you here today. As you can plainly see, I can barely move. I can’t even pick up a wand.’

I, again, failed at staring.

‘You— Wh— You need *me*? To do magic for *you*?’

The Chancellor managed the faintest trace of a smile - her first real expression since I’d arrived. ‘You are smarter than my staff.’ Marge didn’t respond, but the Chancellor glanced her way regardless. ‘Except you, Marge. You are wonderful, of course.’

The Chancellor opened her mouth slightly, and Marge tipped in more tea. I tried to choose my next words carefully.

‘Miss... Madame... Chancellor. I’m honoured - obviously - but, um, there are probably better choices for you. I’m still a student. I’m not even very good.’

Marge dabbed at the Chancellor's lips with a napkin, and stepped back as the Chancellor regarded me. A long moment passed.

'Verris, I want to make something quite clear to you. My home may not suggest this, but I am sincerely exhausted by my legacy, and those that think so highly of me. If I invited some well-to-do famous mage, they wouldn't have stopped grovelling since they entered the room.'

'What about a classmate, then?'

'I don't understand why you are quite so desperate to not take this job.'

I swallowed down a bitter taste in the back of my mouth. Her beady eyes did not move, and I glanced away, down at the ground. 'I think maybe I'm a little scared.'

'As am I.'

My eyes widened. 'Really?'

'There is something that must be done, but I lack both the ability and the will to do it. I confess that entrusting myself to a stranger like this fills me with unease.'

I was quietly surprised by her openness, but a voice from inside me whispered what was plain to see between the lines. Her work was important, yes, but it was private; if a skilled magician saw it, they would be able to copy it. Maybe she thought a student like me would be good enough to help, but not good enough to imitate it. Someone middle of the road. Unexceptional.

'I see.'

'I'll double your usual rates,' the Chancellor said. 'Treble it, actually. What's the point of having all this money otherwise?'

I tried to stop my jaw from dropping.

'Honestly, that might even be too little,' she said. 'This job will take considerably more effort than... what was it your advert said? Fixing pots and pans?'

I was still reeling, but I did manage a laugh. ‘And some circuitry stuff.’

‘See? That’s an area you know more than me. I couldn’t begin to tell you how a mobile phone works.’ The Chancellor’s faint smile made another appearance. ‘We’ll mostly be working within the field of Runes, which I understand is a specialist field of yours.’

‘Oh, yes. Though, uh, that wasn’t in the ad?’

‘Even if they think I’m dead, I’m still a Chancellor of your university, Verris.’

Many, many questions came to mind, all of which I choked back with a nod and a smile.

‘But yes,’ she went on, ‘Runes are my primary concern. We’ll meet every week, same time as now, and you will perform the magic necessary for my studies.’

It took a second to notice she wasn’t wording it as an offer. We’d passed that stage. I was already hired.

‘Yes,’ I hurried out. ‘Yes, of course. Thank you.’

‘It’s been fascinating to meet you, Miss Verris.’

Shakily, with agonising effort, the Chancellor lifted her hand from the arm rest. She held it out to me. All I could think was, *triple my usual rates*. Very lightly, I took her hand, and—

I did my best to hide a sharp inhale. I grinned, perhaps too widely, and finished the hard handshake.

Marge came over, gesturing towards the door I came from. I ran a thumb over my palm, heart hammering. Putting my sopping hat back on, I got to my feet.

‘Thanks,’ I managed to say. I couldn’t shake the feeling of the Chancellor’s hand in mine. ‘This has all been, um, quite surreal. For me.’

‘I suspect it has. See you soon.’

I nodded, maybe saying “bye”. I could feel her eyes looking into my back as I followed Marge outside.

Only when the door closed behind me did I let myself exhale again. I glanced at Marge's hands. Bony, long, a little more yellowed than Bert's, but... they were so clearly different from my own. Fleshless. And I'd seen the Chancellor's hand, right? The skin had been tight over her knuckles as her muscles strained, but she still *had* skin. Her grip should have felt wafery, loose; like shaking hands with a scrap of paper.

So why had her hand felt like Bert's?