

Scalpel and Fang  
by Devon Drake

“Doctor Madangel, I presume?” Was the greeting I received from the butler as he opened the door. Such a cordial beginning to what I would later describe as an evening of ego-driven idiocy and raw justice.

Laughter echoed through the hallways and into the foyer behind him. The scents of a recently cooked feast drifted through the warm air. A dinner party in progress. Dessert was about to be served.

“You presume correctly.” I tipped my hat with my skeletal hand to gauge the butler’s reaction. “A runner hand-delivered this message to my home.” I pulled the note half way out of my vest pocket. “This is the house of one Doctor Mikail Fileston, correct?”

“It is, sir.”

“Well, I was summoned here for a house call.”

Yes, I make house calls. The fact that I’m a licensed necromancer serving out a redemption sentence by order of the Terra Guard Captain has made me a pariah in every hospital. In response to my sentencing, I had no choice but to open a private practice out of my home.

And since very few people are willing to be seen coming to my home, I make house calls.

Now, if there’s one thing doctors never expect to experience, it’s being summoned to the home of another doctor for a house call. Doctors are renowned—even infamous—for their over-confidence in their abilities to solve their own medical problems, whether they occur within family members or within themselves. For this reason alone, the invitation captivated my curiosity.

But once I’d stood in the doorway of Doctor Fileston’s home and immediately sensed all the signs of a social gathering underway, I began to wonder if this house call was going to be worth my time or a waste of it.

“Very good, sir. May I please read the note that summoned you here?”

“Why would you need to do that?”

“To verify that it was in fact the good Doctor that summoned you. I find it highly unlikely that he would send such a message, given that he is entertaining guests at the moment. I suspect you have been made the victim of a prank, sir.”

“You suspect that, do you?” I didn’t. But it was only a matter of time before Fileston himself came to his front door to investigate an uninvited guest, so I stalled by pretending to look for the note in my vest pockets. I’d rather deal with a fellow doctor than a condescending man-servant any day.

“I do, sir. The note, please.” I detected no questioning tone in his voice. He wasn’t asking, he was demanding. And being exceedingly polite about his demand, I must note. Even though he was looking down his nose at me as he made this demand.

Literally. Due to his height, my face happened to be located directly below his nose.

I handed him the note.

“It certainly appears to be the good Doctor’s signature.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” The butler shot me a sideways glance. I had surprised him with my knowledge. “And how do *you* know the good Doctor’s signature?”

I cleared my throat, cupped my mouth with my living hand and shouted. “Alpha Theta Omega! Come forth, ye presumptuous bastards all!”

The once lively house was briefly struck silent. My volume had effectively gotten everyone’s attention, despite that my words would undoubtedly confuse any of them not associated with my old fraternity.

But I knew at least one person present at this party who would recognize both the fraternal significance of those words and the sound of my voice. And, truth be told, I was growing tired of waiting for Fileston to notice he had an extra guest at his party.

Footsteps clicked through the hallway towards me, the sounds of a tall man walking in expensive shoes and Doctor Fileston emerged from the same direction in which I'd recently heard laughter. He was holding a pipe, wearing his finest smoking jacket and a look of elated surprise.

"Charles? By the dragons, it's been years. Come in! Living hell, Simmons, why didn't you inform me that we had a guest?"

"An unexpected guest, sir." Simmons, the butler, did not take his eyes off me. And he hadn't closed the front door behind me. Apparently, he felt throwing me out was still an option. "He's not on the guest list but, somehow, obtained an invitation. I was, naturally, suspicious."

"Oh, I don't care *how* he got invited. He's an old friend whom I haven't seen in too long. Let him in already."

Simmons and I had an amusing little exchange of eye contact as I walked past him. It wasn't until I broke the standoff and I turned my gaze to my old fraternity brother that I heard the front door close. The sharp breezes of the night were at once completely blanketed by the warm scents of baked desserts, expensive tobacco and some potent marijuana.

Fileston always knew how to throw a party. That is to say, he had an uncanny instinct for the correct number of people to invite. And, more importantly, *who* to invite. I always imagined he knew a mathematical formula for calculating various personalities and designating them to complement each other. He was *that* consistent. His parties were *always* a success.

I ignored most of his pleasantries and concentrated on taking in my surroundings as he led me from the foyer to the parlor.

This wasn't the largest house I'd ever been in, but it certainly ranked in the top ten. Polished marble seemed to be the reigning theme of the decor. The more-than-ample orb lighting hung close to the ceiling, five meters above us.

As I entered the parlor, opposite me were four archways framed by marble pillars. Thick black curtains, hanging outside the archways, were moving in time with the outdoor breezes and blowing against the transparent force shields generated by the interior of each arch. The shields looked half a dozen centimeters thick and I glimpsed a courtyard beyond the curtains.

Next, I noticed the best part of all the scenery. Sure there was artwork, architecture, furniture, and floral arrangements, all of which subtly screamed "I have more money than you." But looking past all that was easy for me. I've seen it all before. The vast majority of it anyway.

No, the most beautiful sights to behold in the parlor were the women. One could say they were almost too perfect, but that would only be a reflection of the fact that they were identical. Five of them, all with the perfect curves, perfect bodies, and perfectly identical features right down to their hair style.

And did I mention they were all naked?

They were the entertainment for the evening: women created through complex biomancy. Such biomantic cloning processes were what Fileston pioneered during his time at university. Tonight, he wasn't just showing off his wealth, he was showing off his work.

And I had to admit, his work was damn near flawless.

There were also men at the party of course. About ten of them. All dressed up. Some had well-dressed ladies on their arms. And most of those ladies looked like they were afraid to let go of their men for obvious and justifiable reasons.

Fileston nudged my shoulder. "You've stopped listening to me, haven't you?"

I nodded. "You expected I would."

"It's happened to almost everyone who has walked into my parlor tonight. My creations . . . they have that effect on people."

"Has the law ruled on these clones? The legality of such an issue is . . ."

"They drag their feet on the issue because they cannot decide whether or not clones are people. Until they decide, these clones are considered works of art."

I saw through that euphemistic label immediately. "Property."

He tapped his nose with his finger. “And as long as they’re defined as property, there’s no law that affects them. Other than laws regarding ownership and theft. Once the proper channels are in place to guarantee secure sales and exchanges—I tell you, Charles—I’m going to be set for life.”

I gestured to the room around me with my cane. “Not scraping by like you usually do?”

“Oh, it’s all well and good to have one’s finances stimulated by an inheritance immediately after graduation,” he conceded to my sarcasm, “but it’s still a finite amount. Not a revenue stream. Besides, my father always taught me that the most important thing to do with your money is invest it wisely. I’m investing it in my own business. I’m creating the means by which I can make my own money.”

“I remember from university, you theorized on ways of making stable clones. So I assume these aren’t the muscle-bound drones that expire after two hundred days.”

“Thickmen, those are called. Usually created as disposable labor for dangerous construction projects.” He waved off the notion, shaking his head. “Someone else has already cornered that short-sighted market and they’re welcome to it. I’m making companions. Beautiful and one-hundred percent loyal, they’ll stay by your side and do whatever you want, for as long as you want.”

My eyes were pulled away from my old classmate for just a moment as one of the clones walked past me and smiled. Given the fact that my reputation is among the worst in the whole city-state and my left hand is freakishly bereft of living flesh, it’s been some time since a woman smiled at me in that way. “Does that include having a personality and not just a gorgeous smile?”

“You like the way they smile, do you?” His tone toyed with me.

I jokingly gritted my teeth and thumped the head of my cane against his chest. “Answer the question, Mik.”

“Still working on psychomantic programming. But we *can* create a mind that learns in the same way any other human mind learns: through experience. That’s a long learning curve, though, and I’m guessing my potential customers won’t be willing to wait. But the latest prototypes you see here are very promising.”

I noticed the clone that smiled at me was now standing behind me, less than half a meter away from my shoulder. And she was still smiling. I found myself willingly entranced by the sight of her. My left hand may be undead, but warm blood still flows through the rest of me.

“Mik.”

“Hm.” He turned, tasting a mouthful of flavored smoke from his pipe. He saw the eye contact taking place.

“Do they talk?”

“Not yet.” He clapped me on the shoulder and whispered in my ear. I could smell what he’d been smoking on his breath. “So enjoy her all you like, old friend. She won’t complain about your hand. Up those stairs, there’s a spare bedroom on the right.” He chuckled and nudged my shoulder again. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to be a good host and make the rounds. We’ll catch up later.”

I was alone at the edge of the crowd. It happens to me often enough that I’m used to it. But something in this clone’s eyes told me I wasn’t alone. Even though I had no reason to suspect there was anything of substance behind her seductive eyes.

So I attempted something that I had never attempted before: I reached out to take a lady’s hand with my skeletal hand.

She glanced down at my sharpened fingertips. Her own hand moved . . . hesitated . . . then completed the motion. She draped her fingers into what would have been my palm and her smile twitched. Then her eyes met mine and I could see that she knew exactly what I suspected.

She was no ordinary clone. Her mind was not blank. Quite the contrary, it was reactive. Despite her nudity inspiring all sorts of lascivious thoughts, my curiosity was aroused. This clone demanded further investigation.

I gestured up the stairs with my cane. She turned with me. Walked in step with me. I escorted her to the bedroom, and as we crossed the threshold, I felt her arm tremble.

I closed the door. Released her hand. Stared at her.

“Do you talk?” I asked.

With the tiniest tension in her neck muscles I saw her head move ever so slightly. She was shaking her head. She was answering. Communicating.

Taking a gamble, I lightly touched my skeletal fingertips to her head. With what psychomancy I knew, I reached in and probed the folds and layers of her mental—

*No!*

I yanked back my hand with a startling realization: *That was her thought. She had a thought.*

Her lips flickered out of a smile for a moment. She was frightened.

“Did you send the message that brought me here for a house call?”

Her head twitched to the left and to the right.

“No? Then who?”

She sighed. And in my mind I knew that it meant more than simply an exhale. It was an expression of . . . something.

I decided to speculate out loud.

“You can’t talk because you lack the neural-muscular training that a child gains from years of imitating its parent’s, the practice of forming words with the mouth. You’re newly created, like an infant, but not taught like one. And yet, I know there’s something more in your mind. Whatever it is, you must show it to me.” I reached for her head.

She took one step backward. Even trembling, she looked beautiful.

“Please. Trust me. We must speak.”

She blinked slowly. It meant *something*. And I could not guess what.

“Trust me. Please, trust me.” I then realized what I sounded like: I sounded like someone trying to calm down a wild animal.

Following that notion, I began to think like a wild animal.

I stepped backward, bent my back in order to place my head below hers, maintained eye contact, all while humming the deepest musical note my throat would allow.

Her shoulder blades tensed upward and her neck bent downward; this made her look like a cat ready to pounce. She didn’t break eye contact either. And her humming voice was poised on the border between threatening and hungering. Between violent and lusty.

She was definitely communicating by use of cat-like body language.

I nodded, instinctively. She understood the motion, just like she understood head shaking.

We remained locked in a visual stalemate, sizing up and interpreting each other with mixed results on both sides. But I knew exactly how to break this stalemate.

Below our peripheral vision, I transferred my cane to my skeletal hand. Then I slowly lifted the cane to the side of her head, keeping it at the edge of her peripheral limit. I could see her neck tensing. She wanted to turn her head; to answer the instinct to keep aware of potential threats. A sudden, noisy, moving stimulus was all I needed to distract her.

So, I dropped my cane.

Her head jolted to follow the sound as the cane bounced off a small table next to us.

That was the moment I needed to comb my bony fingers through her hair. Simultaneously, my psychomancy combed its way into her mind with the same gentility.

My perception morphed into the five senses of a creature with a striped coat of fur, four legs, large paws, and a long body. Three meters long! My face, shaggy and sensitive with long whiskers. My senses honed for hunting. My fangs, thick and sharp. My eyes as fierce as my growl.

A tiger! This woman had the memories of a tiger.

Which made sense. She certainly behaved like a tigress.

I had no idea what she saw in my thoughts or experienced in my memories. I only know that we both found the moment purely exhilarating.

In that moment, Tigress and I had bonded.

I eased out of the layers of her perception and found her eyes wide and trembling.

“And I thought the outside of you was beautiful.”

She smiled and hummed at me. Although, considering she had the mind of a cat, perhaps she was purring.

“You’re fond of me as well, I take it?”

She nodded vigorously. It was the first energetic motion I’d seen her make.

“I’m flattered.” Not that I had reason to be. She had the mind of a tiger. For all I know, tigers mate indiscriminately. Or they might be the highly selective type that mate for life.

And I suppose mating was on both our minds.

Enlightenment flashed through my thoughts upon making that connection.

Fileston had said that the psychomantic programming of these clones was still a work in progress. Well, the best way to create any program, especially a program as infinitely complex as sentience, is to start with a template and build on it from there. My old friend had been using the mind of a tiger to program the minds of his new clones. And with an animal mindset as the template, these women were programmed to live as naked as animals. They would think of clothing as strange and unnecessary, provided they were kept in a warm enough environment. If they never felt cold, they would never realize they needed protection against it.

And animal minds have only the simplest desires: food, warmth, shelter, protection from predators and, of course, the need to mate. With the right adjustments, the right kind of obedience imprinted into the consciousness, animal minds would make for perfect sex slaves.

It was no wonder why Fileston took such pride in these “prototypes” and had such high hopes for them.

That was the word he used. Prototypes. Not life forms. Not people. Not even animals. Just works of art. Products to be manufactured, sold and shipped.

Property.

And yet, there was absolutely nothing criminal in what he was doing.

*That* was the thought that gave me pause.

Fileston was trading in lives. He was no different or better than a slave merchant. But he *still* had not broken a single law.

While as I, with my skeletal hand, remained trapped in my redemption sentence for doing what I had felt was right.

I heard the bones in my left hand grinding and realized I had been clenching a fist.

Tigress touched my arm, hoping to relax me. A calming, musical growl stirred in her throat.

So simple a gesture. And yet it achieved the desired effect. I felt surprisingly comfortable at how accurately I could read her intentions, a likely side-effect of our mental bonding.

Then a knock at the door interrupted everything.

I felt my face go from startled to offended when I saw the door open. Apparently the knock was a meaningless courtesy, as this person was determined to barge in on my private time with Tigress.

At first I thought I was about to meet either the most inebriated or the most impolite guest at the party. But I was doubly surprised to instead see Simmons quickly and quietly step into the room and close the door behind him.

“What the—?”

“I sent the note. I forged the signature. I brought you here,” said the butler, giving me my third surprise in the span of five seconds.

“Slow down!” I held up my hand to stop him, thinking he was about to trample me. “Before anything else you have to answer one question: why are you choosing *now* to tell me this?” I nodded sideways at the naked woman to my left.

It was then that I noticed she had taken her hands off me.

I turned my head and saw her backing away.

The look on her face damn near defied description. She was breathing deep, her chest heaving. She was lusting, but I couldn't tell for whom. Her eyes quivered but did not fill with tears. She sounded as though a moan and sob both struggled their way out of her throat, though neither one escaped.

Her reaction told me that her mind couldn't process the conflicting emotions. And the obvious reason for this sudden conflict was standing in front of me.

I looked back at Simmons and waited for him to fill in the blank.

"Because she's my wife." Simmons did his best to maintain the stiff upper lip required of all butlers. It didn't last long. Seeing what his wife had become cracked his facade. I was concerned his mind would crack next, assuming it hadn't already.

After all, if he'd called *me* into this mess, I could reasonably assume he wasn't thinking straight.

Given the circumstance, I made an attempt at levity. "Well, let me break the awkward silence by saying you have exemplary taste in women, sir, even if she is a bit younger than you. And let me go on to assure you that I planned on being nothing less than a perfect gentleman with—"

"A perfect gentleman?" His hands suddenly balled into fists. "You were going to be a perfect gentleman while you fucked her like an animal? Because that's what he's turned her into, an animal."

That was the first time in my life I'd ever heard a butler use foul language.

"Calm down, Simmons." I had to distract his rage away from me. "Can we get back to the glaring discrepancy in age between you and her? Because your wife here looks at least forty years younger than you. Not that I'm judging, but I would like an explanation."

Simmons flinched like he'd been stabbed. He swallowed hard and answered slowly. "I know. This *is* my wife. This *is* how she looked forty years ago . . . on our wedding night. She was a picture of beauty that I will never forget for the rest of my days. Even as she aged, she always looked beautiful to me. All her life, she was as beautiful to me as she appears now."

The words he chose could only mean that his wife was no longer alive. I felt I should respond to this by offering a hand of condolence. But people who go out of their way to contact me aren't looking for a grief counselor.

More often than not, people call on me out of desperation.

"How did she die?"

"Some cowardly thief was running from the city guard. He fired his talrod over the heads of the people in the market to get everyone out of his way. He didn't intend to hit anyone. But that day, she happened to be visiting her sister and watching the pursuit from a second-story window. The screamer blast hit her in the face. I was told she died instantly. Felt no pain. Her killer was cornered minutes later. Not wanting to be taken alive, the coward forced a shoot out with the guard. And he got exactly what he wanted."

I scanned my eyes up and down Tigress's body just to confirm what I already knew from previous observation of her flesh: she had no scars. Her skin was as flawless as a doll. Her body had never been injured. No human lives without pain. But Tigress had never lived a human life, because she was an artificial replica of the woman Simmons had married.

"When did Fileston clone her?"

"I'm not sure. Probably around the time she was killed. Two months ago. He only started bringing these clones out of the lab two weeks ago. When I saw what he'd made . . . I was sick with rage. I vomited so much I had to be treated for dehydration."

I nodded, the timeline of events taking form in my mind, as I looked for the possibility of something illegal having taken place. "To create a full clone of her, he would need her complete genetic code. He would need a sizable blood or tissue sample taken from her while she was alive. Unless he used necromancy."

Simmons shook his head. "He asked for several blood samples from us, saying it was for research into genetic maladies. We volunteered, thinking we were helping a good man cure diseases."

“Good man,” I scoffed. “At best, he’s a pimp. At worst, a slave trader.”

“I mourn my wife every day. But then there are days when I find myself relieved that she’s not alive to see these . . . *things*.”

“They are not things, sir. I won’t allow your grief turn these woman into objects in the same way your employer’s greed already has. They are living beings. They certainly aren’t your wife, not anymore. But that does *not* make them objects. No matter how much their existence may offend you.”

The look I saw on Simmons’s face was one that I’ve seen too many times. It’s a kind of paralytic stillness in the facial muscles, revealing that the person I’m speaking to agrees with what I’m saying, but cannot bring himself to say it aloud.

Most people don’t like it when I’m right.

Many are downright disturbed when it happens.

“Doctor, I need to stop this. I need your help.”

“If you summoned me here to ask for help, why didn’t you say so at the front door?”

“Because I’m not the only servant in this house. I know, if given the chance, most of the staff would betray me to earn favor with Doctor Fileston. I couldn’t risk any of them knowing that I’d brought you here, and I had to get you alone before revealing why.”

I sighed. “And here I am.”

“Can you help me, Doctor Madangel?”

“How? How could I possibly help you?”

“I know you’re under redemption sentence. And I know your redemption requires you to work with the guard whenever they request your expertise.”

“So?”

“So if, in your expert opinion, you believe Doctor Fileston’s cloning to be wrong, you could summon the proper authorities. And they would *listen* to you. My accusations will be seen as that of a disgruntled employee or an enraged widower. But your unbiased testimony to the guard will carry far greater weight. They often seek your counsel, don’t they?”

“The fact that I’m under redemption sentence means that I’m still, technically, a criminal. The guard asks for my consultation from time to time, but I’m not exactly on friendly terms with them.”

“Regardless, if *you* reported a crime, the guard would listen.”

“*If* there were a crime to report.” I matched his growing volume. “He’s done nothing illegal.”

“There must be something illegal about what he’s doing.”

Silently, I shook my head and watched the despair eat away at his rage.

Behind me, I heard Tigress make a sound like a deep, moaning purr. She placed a gentle hand on my shoulder.

Wanting to answer a gentle touch with a gentle touch, I place my living hand on top of hers.

“Doctor, please.” Simmons spoke through shuddered breathing. “I cannot allow my wife to be used like this. I have to do something.”

My eyes were drawn to Tigress. Her eyes seemed to be actively avoiding Simmons. I could see she recognized him, but it was unusual. Her head moved slowly between facing him and facing me, but her eyes would only touch on him for a second.

I remembered that her mind was not fully human. Her behavior matched her mental state.

“There may be something . . .”

Through the gentle contact between our hands, I carefully reached into the memories of Tigress. I found memories that were congruous with the morphology of a tiger linked to the senses of sound and smell. But the sense of sight was left mostly blank.

Stranger than that was what I found in the sense of touch: human hands. Five fingers without claws caressing bare flesh without fur. A tiger would have no memories of that kind. Somehow human memories had been seeded alongside animal ones. These could have been memories that Fileston stole from Simmons’s wife before she died.

However, if that were the case, such a crime would be next to impossible to prove unless the owner of those memories were alive to verify what had been stolen. For that reason, I decided not to mention the possibility to Simmons.

Then the obvious struck my mind like a slap in the face: she had been programmed with the mind of tiger. So where did the tiger come from?

A solution began forming in my mind.

Fileston was no animal lover. Tigers are rare and expensive. But if Fileston was using a tiger to program his clones, he would need to keep one in his lab.

And if such an animal got loose, tonight of all nights, when Fileston needed everything to go as smoothly as possible . . . it might just create the solution that I had in mind.

Tigress smiled at me, because she knew what I was thinking.

“Simmons, I need you to tell me everything you know about this house.”

He could see the spark of inspiration in my eyes. “Of course, Doctor.”

“I need to know everything Fileston keeps in this house and where it’s located.”

I heard him draw an eager breath of hope. “If it will put an end to this atrocity I’ll help you any way I can.”

I looked him in the eye to make sure he was serious.

He was.

“Good. Because once you’re done giving me the information I need, your next two tasks are going to be increasingly more dangerous.”

\* \* \*

The first part of my plan required the manipulated assistance of a gossiping social-climber. And, as luck would have it, there were two at this party. In fact, they were attending the party together. I had recognized them from across the room when I first entered the parlor.

The Rellingtons, a brother and sister who recently inherited the Rellington family fortune. Said fortune was accumulated over the course of a hundred various construction contracts that built three of the eight city-states on the continent. Even though Prima Terra, being the first city-state, was not one of their crowning achievements, they were still responsible for at least five of the largest buildings here.

The Rellington family had a legacy of strongly embracing the sorceric arts. The first generation of them, the ones that had immigrated directly from Old Earth through the Draconic Portal, built with their own sorceric skills. Which would not have been possible were they not a family of exceptional evocationists, biomancers and talismanologists.

But remember: they *had* a legacy of embracing the sorceric arts. Sometimes the apple falls so far from the tree you can’t even recognize what tree the fruit came from.

This latest generation of Rellingtons were happy to sit on their asses, live lives of idle leisure, and profit off the dozens of underlings who mastered all the necessary sorceric arts and did all the hard work for them.

This brother and sister in particular viewed sorcery as a hobby, not a vocation, and not a way of improving one’s self. They also viewed sorcery as a way to clean up messes that the less wealthy could not afford to clean up. Their underlings didn’t just do the hard work, but the dirty work as well.

For example, it was often whispered that the Rellingtons were shameless practitioners of incest. This was evidenced by the fact that this brother and sister were walking arm in arm and whispering about having a threesome with one of the clones when I approached them. The family kept master-level biomancers on the payroll to undo genetic defects whenever offspring were desired, but there is only so much that even the best in the business can do.

I suppressed a grimace of disgust as I cordially greeted them, holding my cane with my skeletal hand behind my back.

Wouldn't want to offend the incestuous siblings with the sight of my necromantic limb, now would I?

"Lord and Lady Rellington, is it? I don't believe we've met. Doctor Madangel, at your service."

"*The Doctor Madangel?*" said Lady Rellington, touching her fingertips to the space above her enhanced breasts. "In the flesh? As I live and breathe?"

I tilted my head and nodded to the dried-out double entendre, remaining as cordial and pleasant as ever as I lied. "Ah. Two displays of wit that, I swear, I've never heard before, m'lady."

I bowed slightly and offered to take her hand: an antiquated gesture practiced only by the needlessly pretentious and over-privileged. I know of such gestures not because I have an appreciation for them, but because I was raised in such a world of privilege and pretension.

My greeting was well-received. Though I could not tell for certain if Lady Rellington took my hand out of respect, novelty or condescension.

Whatever her reasons, I didn't care. I had her attention and I planned on using it.

"And what brings you to this occasion, Doctor?" asked the Lady.

"She means, how did you get into this party, despite your reputation?" corrected the Lord.

Clearly the brother was the more direct of these two. "I happen to be an old acquaintance of Doctor Fileston. We attended university together."

"Oh? How very quaint!" Lady Rellington sounded just loud enough to be unaware of her volume. This gave me a clue as to how intoxicated she'd become. Especially when she bent her head to my ear and whispered to me, loud enough that I can only barely call it a whisper, "Perhaps you know a secret or two about how he made these *exquisite* clones. They're the most adorable things I've ever seen. Such young, flexible bodies. And such a hungry look in their eyes. Oh, I *so wish* we could take one home with us tonight."

"Regrettably, no. Mikail was always tight-lipped about such things. I imagine he'll take his money-making recipe with him to the grave." Behind my fake smile I didn't just imagine such a thing, I hoped for it. "But I *can* tell you an embarrassing story about him in exchange for a bit of inside information on your part."

"Oh my!" Once more her light and dainty fingers went to her cleavage. "Doctor Madangel, are you proposing that you'll show me yours if I show you mine?"

"We're all aware of how you love to *show* yourself, sister." Lord Rellington snickered to himself while searching the room for someone more noteworthy than me to converse with.

With a quick working of sorcery I created a tunnel between myself and the Lady that would keep all our sound waves just between us: a beginner's spell known as the clear whisper.

Through the clear whisper, I taunted her. "Only if you show me yours first, m'lady. After all, you've already seen right down to my bones." And I tipped my hat with my skeletal hand.

She pursed her lips while slowly sliding her fingertips across the upper curvature of her breasts.

*Living hell*, I thought. *This woman certainly loves to touch her own breasts.*

"You have but to ask, Doctor, and I'll show." While her speech was significantly subdued, her voice was not contained by her own clear whisper. Apparently, my spell had to do the work for both our voices. Sad that she lacked the skill for such a simple spell.

"If you would confirm a rumor for me, m'lady, does Mikail have a pet tiger?"

Her face quivered with an invigorated smile. "Oh, you *do* go for the *juiciest* bits, don't you Doctor Madangel?"

"Aren't they always the tastiest?"

"Oh, they *are*, Doctor. They *are*." Her gaze was distracted by the sight of a server balancing a tray that held eight champagne glasses. She nudged her brother with her arm. "Brother, would you be so kind as to get us some more drinks?"

Lord Rellington released himself from his sister and plucked two glasses from the passing tray, which had only four glasses left by the time he reached it. As he returned with the drinks, he handed

one to his his sister and . . . I could have sworn he was about to hand me the other glass.

But when his sister swiftly transferred her free arm into mine, Lord Rellington's body language changed instantly. I could see the feeling of rejection realign his posture as he looked in my eyes and took a deliberate sip from what was now his glass.

Lady Rellington flashed a taunting smile at her brother, then a seductive one at me. "Shall we walk, Doctor Madangel?"

"Yes, my Lady. Let us partake of the autumn night. I've heard Mikail's gardens are among the loveliest in Prima Terra."

I allowed her to lead me to the marble archways at the other end of the parlor.

There, my cane bounced off the thick shielding.

The Lady giggled. "I do hope you're not as drunk as I am, Doctor. The shields open when you break the field at the very bottom. Slide your foot along the floor and the shield will deactivate."

"Yes, of course." I kept my smile pleasant and filed away her useful information for later. We stepped into the courtyard, feeling the chill of the night and smelling the crisp air of autumn as we crossed the threshold and pushed aside the curtains.

The sounds of the party were cut silent as the shield reactivated behind us.

"Now," the Lady took a long sip from her glass, "where to begin? As I'm sure you know, the biomantic cloning that Mikail has demonstrated in there is cutting edge. He's been going on about it all night. Bragging that his clones have the same stability and lifespan as a regular human. Completely superior to our thickmen. Although I suppose there's no way he can prove that without actually having them live for twenty years or more. Unless he were to have some chronomancer age them artificially, and I'm sure *you* know how such a demonstration would attract the worst kind of attention from the Terra Guard." She took another sip. "But I've strayed a little far from the point. Which is simply that the same difficulties for cloning exist for animals as well. Tigers are not native to New Earth and only a couple dozen were brought here through the Draconic Portal. Tigers aren't superior predators here either; drakes are. Breeders of tigers have had to fight an uphill battle in order to keep their animals alive and mating. They hope to one day genetically enhance tigers to become superior to drakes. And they've needed to use a great deal of biomancy to cure new diseases and improve the immune systems of each new generation."

"This is why pet tigers are so expensive. I know." And why it sounded like exactly the kind of purchase Fileston would make to show off his wealth.

"Oh, Doctor, I don't think you do." Both her smile and her tone were patronizing me. "I'm not just explaining to you why *buying* a tiger is expensive. I'm explaining why *keeping* a tiger is a far greater ongoing expense. And if you can afford to *purchase* such an expensive status symbol but not afford to *maintain* the good health of such a creature . . . despite your inheritance *and* your university degree declaring your biomantic expertise to the world . . ."

Her unfinished sentence effectively led me to her unspoken conclusion. "It would be a very embarrassing show of both personal and financial incompetence."

She sucked down the last of her champagne and hummed her approval of my words. "You know how important reputation is among our kind, Doctor." She led me to a stone bench where we sat, still arm in arm. "The only way anyone can hope to enter our social circles is with money. And if one has money, but not intelligence enough to make sensible decisions with their money, then one is seen as undeserving of their money and thus unqualified to remain within our circles."

"Circles that Mikail would want very much to remain in if he intends to charge the highest price possible for his companion clones."

"Oh, my! What an astute observation, Doctor." Her pleasant smile told me that she agreed without saying she agreed.

She was telling me everything I needed to know without explicitly telling me about anything that had actually happened. An experienced gossip indeed.

“So, *if* Mikail owned a pet tiger . . .”

“And I’m not saying he does.” She turned slightly away from me, setting her glass down on the bench. Her smile was purely mischievous; it was the most beautiful she had looked all night.

“And *if* said pet died while under his care . . .”

“And I’m not saying it did.” Her eyes rolled upward and she blinked innocently.

“He would go out of his way to make sure no one at this party found out.”

“But, Doctor,” she pursed her lips in mock confusion, “if at least one person within our circles knew he had a tiger, say perhaps because he’d shown the animal off once or twice in the past, how could Doctor Fileston hope to conceal that the animal was no longer alive?”

“Well, he could sneak the corpse out of the house and claim he sold it.”

“But only someone within our circles could afford such a purchase. Therefore, one of us would have to play along as a participant in his deception. It takes two to tell that lie.”

I nodded. I had to admit, I was enjoying this game of gossip. “Well, he could have the animal moved to a remote end of the house and simply claim that the tiger wasn’t feeling well every time a guest asked to see it.”

“That’s a temporary solution at best, Doctor. Such a tactic wouldn’t have lasted him this long. Not if, say, the animal was purchased over a year ago.”

The way she swatted down both of my hypothetical solutions gave me the notion that something more sordid was at hand.

“I suppose, given such limited options, someone with Mikail’s resources could arrange for an illegal solution.” With my own mischievous look, I held up my skeletal hand and implied necromancy by flexing all five fingers.

Lady Rellington, in a sudden moment of girlish glee, gripped my arm in hers and giggled like I had tickled her in just the right spot.

“And I’m not saying he did, Doctor.” She blinked at me and rested her fingertips on her cleavage. “But a person in my position hears a lot of rumors. And rumors often stem from truth.”

They do indeed.

“Now, Doctor, I’ve shown you mine. Your turn to show me yours.”

In order to enact the next phase of my plan, however, I needed to be free from the grip she had on my arm. Such a maneuver required just the right touch that I knew my skeletal hand could provide.

The sharpened fingertips of my skeletal hand caressed her jawline, down her neck and across the softness of her breasts with a gentle, yet needle-like, effect on her nerve endings. Her breath sounded lusty as she inhaled through her quivering, painted lips.

I had guessed correctly.

She not only enjoyed touching her own breasts, she enjoyed *any* physical contact on that area of her body. And my skeletal hand provided a touch she’d never felt before.

“During our days at Olraasa University, Mikail had a sexual relationship with a man.” I slipped my arm out the instant her grip relaxed.

Her head jolted at the disappointing bit of gossip I’d handed her. “What? Is that all? Come now, Doctor, there’s nothing even remotely scandalous about that. Everyone I know did *some* experimenting during their university days. Am I to receive only this paltry bit of tripe in exchange for all that I’ve given you?”

After taking two steps away from her, I turned and smiled. “The man he had sex with was his primary professor. That’s how he *earned* his degree. And that’s why I’m twice the biomancer he is.”

I didn’t stay to watch her jaw drop. But, as I left her, I did enjoy listening to the Lady Rellington sing her laughter into the cold autumn air. “Oh *my*, Doctor, the juiciest bits *are* the tastiest.”

\* \* \*

After loosening the curtain rod above the archway, I opened the shield and returned inside. I immediately cast my gaze over the heads of the party guests in search of Simmons. Given how long my conversation with Lady Rellington took, Simmons had plenty of time to follow my instructions to completion. If the butler had failed to do so, my whole plan might fall apart before it began.

Simmons was nowhere in sight, so I conducted a different search.

Prior to my conversation with Lady Rellington, Simmons had told me that Fileston purchased a tiger, but that the animal had not been seen or heard in several months. Simmons noticed that the animal had become suspiciously absent from the property, but after his wife was killed he had stopped wondering why and had even forgotten that Fileston owned a tiger.

This is why I questioned Lady Rellington about Fileston's tiger; I had to discern whether or not the animal was still here.

And both the butler and the gossip had given me all the knowledge I required.

According to Simmons, Fileston kept his laboratory in his basement chamber directly below the parlor. And if, as I suspected, the tiger was being used to program the minds of the clones, it would be kept there.

I stretched my left arm, spread out the fingers on my skeletal hand, closed my eyes and took at least two full minutes, reaching and concentrating my sorcery through my undead limb and through the floor into the room beneath me.

My suspicions were confirmed. I had found the tiger.

My original solution had been to unleash the tiger and use it to kill Fileston. But what I now sensed in his lab was so much more useful than just a tool for murder.

Just as I had implied to the Lady outside . . . necromancy was at hand.

When Simmons had first begged me for help, I was unsure as to whether or not any crime had taken place. Now, I was sure Fileston was criminal . . . though, his crime was not what I'd originally imagined.

Perhaps this was going to be easier than I had thought. Embarrassing Fileston would've ruined him to a point, but it left open the possibility that he could still recover from it. Killing him would end his cloning, but it would also be messy and difficult to get away with. But exposing his crimes and his incompetence simultaneously would be so much more satisfying.

"How dare you go snooping around in my lab," Fileston shouted. "You're fired!"

I looked up and saw Fileston pursuing Simmons into the parlor. Simmons was leading Fileston back to the party in order to make their angry exchange as public as possible.

"Sir, I did what I felt I had to do." Simmons stood his ground and declared his response with a defiant pride. "Fire me if you wish, but I have no regrets."

"Then I'll have to see to it that you receive more than your share of regrets. You *will* regret crossing me, Simmons. I promise. Now get out of my house before I send for the city guard."

"Sir, I have already sent for them. They're on their way."

I had to act fast and find a place to sit down for the next part of my plan.

The attention of everyone in the parlor had been drawn to the argument between the host and his butler. I saw a woman standing up from a comfortable couch just two steps away.

The second she rose up I slid my body beneath hers, flopping my limbs into a carelessly relaxed posture that sank me into the soft cushions. She looked at me, gasping at the brutishness of my haphazard seating. So I responded as she expected.

"M'lady . . . so s-s-sorry. I . . . jus-s-st needed to take a load off. My head's gotten too heavy." I punctuated my slurred words with a belch, puffing out my cheeks to give the impression that I was holding back vomit. This had the desired effect; she quickly distanced and distracted herself.

I removed my hat, rolled my head backward against the cushions, closed my eyes and placed my hat over my face. I needed to concentrate if I was going to do this quickly. Which meant I needed to block out as many distractions as possible.

Again I reached my sorcery through the floor. Working sorcery through a barrier is extremely difficult, and it's fair to say that I only know how to do it because I had a better teacher than most. The fact that I'm not nearly as good as my mentor is the reason I needed to be free of distraction. I planned to use my sorcery in order to create a tenuous but potent connection through the floor and into the mind of the tiger lying in its cage.

In the same way that I had peeked into Tigress's mind, I now immersed myself into the senses of the tiger beneath me. And with the senses, came the sensations of its limbs, body, mouth and claws.

Yes. I planned to make use of those claws, in a way no tiger could think of. By connecting my mind to this creature via my concentrated sorcery, this tiger had become my puppet.

A tiger's eyes can see in the dark; mine cannot. A tiger doesn't know how to slid open a simple latch lock with its claw tip; I do. Mentally combined in this way, we made a perfect duo.

The cage door swung open with ease. The laboratory door would have proved to be a much trickier obstacle, had I not instructed Simmons to unlock it. Originally, I'd thought this would help me break *into* Fileston's lab. Instead I found myself breaking *out* with only a nudge.

Outside the lab, my luminescent eyes beheld the monochromatic image of a stairwell spiraling upward against the wall of a cramped, square-shaped tower. Letting out a satisfying growl, I began ascending the stairs on my four fur-covered limbs.

"Doctor Madangel," Lord Rellington sounded like he was standing to my immediate left. Had someone been watching the tiger, they would have seen the animal's head twitch to the left in response.

This was a distraction that I did not need. And the damage it caused would only accumulate as it continued.

I began moving faster up the stairs.

"Doctor, a word please, if you don't mind. I've a matter that I wish to *discuss* with you." And with the word "discuss," the Lord kicked me in the shin. A jealous tone tightened his voice.

As I felt the kick, the tiger's left hind leg retracted from the pain. This caused me to stumble. I would have slid backwards down the steps were not for my cat-like reflexes. Once my feet were solidly planted, I looked up the stairs.

I was less than three meters from the door, but my vision was beginning to blur. One mind cannot occupy two bodies for long. And with my senses being pulled in two directions this way, my connection would only last another thirty seconds if I was lucky.

And I've learned not to rely on luck.

"Just what are you up to, Doctor?" I then realized something: standing as close as he was, Lord Rellington could undoubtedly feel the pulse of my sorcery, no matter how subdued I kept it.

Assuming he possessed no sorceric training, he would not know specifically what I was doing. Not only could I use that ignorance to my advantage, but I still had my cane in my right hand.

The tiger was at the top of the stairs now. I could hear Simmons and Fileston arguing on the other side of the door. I could hear Lord Rellington's voice getting far too close for comfort. I then felt his hand on my throat.

"Whatever sorcery you're working, I wonder if you can do it without breathing?" His grip closed on my esophagus. "I saw you two in the garden, Doctor. You shouldn't have touched my sister like that. Or did she fail to warn you just how jealous I can get?"

With this violence visited upon my person, my connection was vanishing fast.

In the evaporating seconds left, my mind shouted one command into both bodies.

*Attack!*

And in that same moment, the door bell rang.

The tiger roared and crashed through the door, knocking it off its hinges.

Simultaneously, my skeletal hand latched onto Lord Rellington's wrist. Remembering his height and build, the physical contact gave me enough information to gauge his location without seeing him.

I swung my cane hard and struck his left ear.

Lord Rellington reeled backward at the crippling pain ringing through his skull and I held onto his arm—letting him pull me to my feet, letting my hat fall—all so that I could look him in the eyes when I pressed the head of my cane against the curve of his throat.

My sharpened, skeletal fingertips dug into his flesh as I brought our faces nose to nose.

I hated him enough to kill him.

And I could . . . with terrifying ease.

But I've learned the hard way what prices there are to be paid for indulging such momentary hatred. And I've learned the best way to avoid most regret is through patience.

As the parlor around us erupted in panicked screams, I stared daggers into his eyes, pushed him away, and let him go without a word.

When I retrieved my hat, I saw all the guests and all the clones crowding against the walls, away from the tiger that stood between them and the foyer.

The tiger looked ready to pounce.

"You bastard!" I heard Fileston over all the screams in the room. I watched him take Simmons's throat in both hands, spin him about, and throw his former butler at the raging animal.

In the last second, Simmons grabbed a handful of Fileston's hair and pulled his former employer down with him.

The tiger pounced on both of them.

Whoever rang the doorbell was now shouting and pounding at the front door.

And I . . . turned my back on the whole mess I'd created.

Simmons had plenty of reason to hate Fileston. All I needed to do was give Fileston ample reason to hate Simmons.

Fileston needed nothing to go wrong this evening, thus I figured he wouldn't need much to be pushed over the edge.

That's why I told Simmons to break into Fileston's lab, look for anything incriminating and to leave it unlocked. Then I told him to summon the city guard and I would do what I could to make an arrangement with them. And last I told him that, if Fileston should catch him doing either of these things, he should be defiant and unapologetic to the point of utter disrespect.

With those few instructions I had set Simmons and Fileston at each others throats.

And, by an effort of my sorcery, I had thrown a raging tiger between them.

Sometimes the art of manipulation works so perfectly, it's beautiful.

Leaving the sounds of tearing flesh, roaring, and screaming behind me, I walked to the archway I had entered through, opened the shield and, with a single pull I sent the curtain rod clanging to the center of the archway.

Lady Rellington was staring back at me as the curtain came down.

"Doctor Madangel," she smiled. "Up to no good, are we?"

I smiled back at her. "Just trying to cool things off." I knew how such talismanic archways were programmed: as long as something occupied the threshold floor, the shield would not reset.

Behind me I could hear the front door being blasted open and watched Lady Rellington jump at the sound.

"CITY GUARD. NOBODY MOVE!" I glanced over my shoulder to see Lieutenant Ashekerra rushing into the parlor with four more guardsmen flanking either side of her. None of them were prepared for what they saw.

Fileston cried for help from beneath the tangle of claws and fur.

With a flick of her wrist, Ashekerra sent a shrieking blast of sonic energy into the tiger's neck. The blast knocked the tiger off Fileston and sent it rolling across the parlor.

Lord Rellington yelped as he scurried away from the tumbling beast.

"Secure the room. Nobody leaves," she ordered the guardsmen beside her. "One of you keep an eye on that creature."

“Help me.” The words bubbled out of Fileston as he crawled to a nearby chair, sounding like his throat was filled with blood.

“What happened here?” Ashekerra asked.

Fileston tried to answer, but I could see the hesitation in his eyes as he stalled to think up a lie. He was obviously inexperienced at lying to the city guard. So he made a choking sound and closed his eyes, hoping to use his injury as a means of buying himself time to think.

“Sir, I can stop your bleeding if you allow me to administer what biomancy I know.”

Fileston shook his head and waved her off.

The pride of some doctors.

“Are you insane?” shouted Ashekerra. “What kind of fool refuses an offer to save his life?”

This was too perfect. If my old friend wasn’t going to speak up, I would just have to be a good friend and speak for him.

I walked across the parlor, stabbing my cane hard against the floor. I wanted everyone to hear it.

I was also straightening my hat with my skeletal hand. I wanted everyone to see it.

“Lieutenant Ashekerra, if I may be so bold as to introduce the fool crawling before you, his name is Doctor Mikail Fileston. This is his home. The naked women you see all around this room are his clones—his property. And the tiger that you just blasted into the sofa is his property as well.” I got close enough to see Fileston’s shocked face. I could also see the lifeless body of Simmons lying on the floor. I pointed at the corpse with my cane. “And that dead man there is his butler.”

“Thank you, Doctor Madangel,” said Ashekerra. “Now I need Doctor Fileston to explain what exactly happened here. Doctor Fileston, can you please heal yourself enough to talk?”

My eyes met with Fileston’s. I felt his sorceric pulse as he stabilized his wound. And I watched his face tremble as he shook his head at me.

He could see my intentions painted across my face like the smile I refused to hold back.

He knew. He knew I was about to ruin him.

“Tell me, Lieutenant, have you noticed yet that the tiger you shot is not bleeding?”

An instantaneous glance was all Lieutenant Ashekerra needed to confirm my words. “Not only that but the animal’s head is still twitching. My shot severed the spine at the neck and paralyzed it. Most animals would have died from such a blast.”

“Yes,” I agreed with Ashekerra. “The tiger doesn’t seem to be reacting to the pain from its injury *or* the cold air from the outside.”

“Why is that, Doctor Fileston?” Ashekerra asked.

Mikail’s silence was music to my ears. After a lifetime of having money solve all his problems, there was no buying his way out of this. And little chance of him talking his way out of it.

“Why is your animal not bleeding, Doctor?”

I raised my skeletal hand. “Perhaps I can offer an explanation as to why this tiger does not bleed, why it isn’t howling in pain, and why it does not react to the cold wind. It’s because what you have here, Lieutenant, is an *undead* tiger. And let me add that I would be happy to testify to this in open court as both a licensed necromancer and consultant for the city guard.”

Mikail’s silence was replaced by the song of Lady Rellington’s giggling.

“Doctor Fileston,” Ashekerra closed in on him, “it is my duty to inform you that, because you kept an undead animal in your home and said animal caused the death of a citizen, that makes you guilty of murder by necromancy. At best, you’ll be banished from Prima Terra. At worst, you’ll be given the death penalty. That is, unless, you have something to say in your defense.”

I studied Fileston’s face as his mind raced to calculate the consequences of everything that had just happened.

He had been publicly accused of a serious offense by a city guard lieutenant.

Everyone knew his pet tiger was undead and would—correctly—assume he had reanimated the tiger with necromancy to conceal that his pet had died in his care.

He had blood on his hands and incompetence written all over his face.

His reputation was crumbling before his eyes and the eyes of his potential clientele.

This evening was meant to be the beginning of a highly lucrative future for Fileston. It was supposed to declare the creation of his brand new business, the sale of human flesh for fantasy. Instead, he was facing a downfall the likes of which he had not the mental fortitude to withstand.

Most predators are killed by a sharper pair of fangs. Some need a scalpel to remove them like a cancer. But once in a while, if you know how to fight a predator, it will roll over and expose its jugular, conceding defeat. Fileston was that kind of predator; the kind that would go down *without* a fight.

His sorceric pulse thudded against the air and Fileston reversed all the biomancy he had focused on his healing. His wounded throat peeled wide open. An entire liter of blood spilled out of him.

Suicide: the coward's solution. A rather predictable reaction given what I knew of the man.

But this, I feel, is exactly what he deserved for wanting to trade in human lives—regardless of how artificial or manufactured those lives may have been.

I watched him die and felt justice had been done.

The rest of the evening was spent cleaning up the mess. Witness statements were taken. The bodies, hauled away. The remains of the tiger, destroyed. But the clones were a very different matter.

Officially recognized as property, the logical thing for the guard to do was gather them up as evidence from a crime scene. But evidence that needed to be sheltered and fed was unheard of.

Several attendees of the party offered to purchase one or all of the clones in order to take them off the city guard's hands. Lieutenant Ashekerra expressed, with unrestrained volume, how offensive she found such an offer. Even the Rellingtons, in their intoxicated state, had enough of their wits about them not to press the matter any further.

But I had a much better idea. And I took Ashekerra aside to explain it to her in private.

"Ashe, these clones are a conundrum. They've been programmed with the minds of tigers. You can see that in how they're reacting to the cold by huddling together. Not one of them thinks to put on clothing or hide under a blanket because they think like fur-covered creatures. Unless someone makes the effort to teach them humanity, they'll never be more than pets."

"I take it you have a solution in mind."

"I do. Allow me, as part of my redemption sentence, to personally take time out of every other day to stop by the Terra Guard Headquarters and help train these clones into becoming people. And, when they're ready for it, teach them some sorcery as well. They could become valuable assets for the Terra Guard. By rekindling their humanity we can turn these women into something far more extraordinary than their creator ever envisioned."

Ashekerra shared a secret smile with me. "I like this idea."

"Furthermore, I think that you alone should be in charge of them, Ashe. I cannot think of anyone in the guard better suited to the task or less likely to take advantage of them."

"I like that idea even more. And I'm sure I can convince Captain Vallas to go along with it."

"Of course," I added "to adequately study the best methods by which to train these clones, I ask that I keep one of them at my home, to live under my personal care."

"An unusual addendum." She squinted at me. "What's your reasoning behind this?"

"Merely, that one particular clone and I bonded by way of mental contact earlier this evening. I hazard to guess that she won't trust anyone other than me. Therefore, it is logical that I take her under my private care and tutelage. This will ultimately be for the benefit of all of them."

"I see." Ashekerra looked over the clones sitting together in the parlor. "Which one is she?"

"She's actually waiting for me in one of the bedrooms upstairs. I call her Tigress."

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