

The Doctor Next Door
by Devon Drake

“Whoever is there, stop knocking. I’m on my way.” I shouted at my door, curling my spine to peel myself from my favorite couch and glancing at the clock beside my fireplace. “And, given the hour of your calling, someone better be dead or someone will be.”

I don’t sleep. So a knock at my front door is not something that jolts me from my dreams in a disconcerting way. I don’t stir into full consciousness feeling cheated out of rest that I don’t need.

But I do dream. It’s a meditative process that immerses me inside my mind. Like dreaming, it’s a way of holding visual discourse with my subconscious. Unlike dreaming I have exceptional control over my meditative visions honed from years of practice.

And when the visions that my subconscious and I have agreed upon for the night are particularly colorful, detailed and . . . sensuous . . . I have been known to answer my door in a less than hospitable manner.

I was wearing my special bracer on my left forearm—primarily because I can never remove it. I was also wearing my favorite black silk robe which is decorated with beautiful embroidery depicting serpentine, crimson dragons.

Point being, I was wearing nothing else when I yanked open my front door.

Standing there, covered in the droplets of the recent drizzle, was Lieutenant Wolfson of the city guard. And he was in uniform too: solid leather bracers, tight-fitting shirt made of stretch-fabric, loose fitting pants for fast running, a Klavokk Model 6 holstered on his belt, and the distinct red half-cloak of the city guard draped over his left shoulder and hanging down to his knee.

Wolfson is a skinny man, below average in height, and one of the fiercest sorcerers I’ve ever seen. Not that I fear him, but I have openly laughed at those stupid enough to underestimate him. And with good reason. Watching him put muscle-bound criminals in their place is so much fun.

But seeing the lieutenant on my doorstep at this hour could only mean one thing.

“Someone *is* dead, Doctor Madangel.” He confirmed my assumptions. “Captain Vallas has requested your consultation. I’m to take you directly to the crime scene. But I’m assuming you’ll want to put something on first.”

He pointed downward in a none-too-subtle way.

My head followed his finger, looking straight down, causing my long hair to fall to either side of my face. But my vision wasn’t obscured by my hair, I saw exactly what he was trying to bring to my attention: I had forgotten to close my robe.

“Hmm . . .” I stood there, frozen for a moment. Not because I’m an exhibitionist but because the rain-soaked breezes of that night felt rather bracing to the touch of my skin: simultaneously pleasant and chilling. “You assume correctly. Give me five minutes.”

I slammed the door shut, discarded my robe and went about the task of making myself ready for work.

My work pants are custom-made black denim. They have six pockets on either side.

I threw on a gray silk shirt and my leather vest over it. The vest has two inside pockets and two outside pockets on either side.

True, most doctors—being addicted to old fashions—carry a medical bag. I prefer having my tools organized into pockets.

I grabbed my top hat, adorned with my surgical goggles, and tucked it onto my head.

Last, my leather work boots and my walking cane. The cane serves a dual function: fashion and protection. Every time I pick it up I hope that I won’t need to use it.

I opened my front door. Wolfson was fixated on a pocket watch in his hand.

“Four minutes and fifty-two seconds.” He remarked with a frown, mildly impressed.

“I’m a man who keeps his promises.” I made my tone as pleasant as I could.

"You didn't promise anything. You simply demanded five minutes and slammed the door."

"True." I closed my door and locked it. "Because I'm a man who keeps his promises, I make it a point to avoid trouble by never promising anything. Demanding is much easier."

"Yes, Doctor. Those of us in the guard are very familiar with your demanding ways." Wolfson stowed his watch away somewhere beneath his half-cloak as he made his way to the sidewalk and turned right. "This way."

"Shouldn't we be running?" I asked, readying my sorceric speed in my mind. "Usually crime scenes that require my attention are filled with people who hate to be kept waiting."

"This is no different, Doctor. But there's no need to run."

We walked for about twenty meters and turned right again.

I had to stop in my tracks, noticing there were several guardsmen all over the property, securing the scene and gathering evidence. The realization hit me like a needle in the heart.

The crime scene was my neighbor's house.

The mixture of disgust and hatred continued drilling a needle-sized hole through me as I asked the most bitterly obvious question for the sake of expediency. "I'm a suspect, aren't I?"

"Not yet," said Wolfson. "But the night is young. Give it time."

"Has anyone laid odds as to my guilt yet?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm not a gambling man."

We began walking up to the house. "And why not, lieutenant?"

"Because, in my opinion, winning a bet is just a stroke of luck often with no skill involved. It's random and therefore meaningless. Justice isn't random, it's deliberate. And I take great satisfaction in thinking of myself as an instrument of justice. And I've always taken comfort in believing that, sooner or later," he looked right at me, "everyone gets exactly what they deserve."

Wolfson could be so delightfully subtle at times like this, which is why I chose not to respond. No need dragging out a debate on what's already been decided.

I deliberately slowed my pace, remaining a step behind Wolfson and allowing him to lead me into the house. I stayed focused on what was in front of me and did my best to not react to any of the accusing looks from the majority of the guardsmen we passed.

To say I knew my neighbor casually is being kind. I could tell she never wanted to know me any more than casually. I knew she was a wealthy heiress who often entertained guests. Sometimes a few, sometimes several dozen, but at least twice a week she had a party. And I was never invited.

Her house was actually a mansion, like most of the houses in my neighborhood. My house is of an older style, though. It's significantly smaller, perfect for the dual purposes of remaining comfortable while not drawing attention to myself.

Her name escaped me as I walked through the foyer and up the wide, curling staircase. I do a much better job remembering names once I've matched them with a face. As I reached the top of the stairs, however, I saw how this would prove to be a problem.

Upon immediate observation I noticed her hair was a bright, golden blonde and her body looked healthy, though it lacked any hint of athleticism. A puddle of urine had pooled beneath her. There were no blood stains anywhere so this wasn't like most crime scenes or most murders for that matter. However . . .

I then noticed her skin was pulled tight over her bones, her neck muscles were tensed and paralyzed, her face was dried and wrinkled, and skin cracks were forming over her lips. All of these observations gave the appearance of dehydration, but the color of her urine told me she was well-hydrated and her kidneys were healthy enough at the time of her death. This wasn't dehydration.

These same observations could be signs of artificial aging, a common side-effect of murder by necromancy. And when it's murder by necromancy, the guard is usually interested in what I have to say.

I am Doctor Charles Vidocq Madangel, licensed necromancer for the city-state of Prima Terra. My job title carries a phenomenal amount of suspicion, hatred and an altogether bad reputation.

So why would anyone want such a job? Well, licensed necromancers are either exceptionally high-paid private physicians, exceptionally learned professors for the local university, or exceptionally talented and dangerous criminals serving out a redemption sentence for their crimes.

I'll let you guess which one of these best describes me.

I approached the dead body. A man was already kneeling beside it and the insignia on his dark red half-cloak bore the unique rank of captain.

He turned to face me: Captain Vallas, Terra Guard.

I lowered myself beside the captain to observe the body. Vallas watched me, not saying anything. He nodded at Wolfson and I heard the lieutenant's footsteps trail away.

Vallas is smart enough to leave me alone and let me work in silence. It's one of the few reasons I like him.

The victim . . . damn it, what was her name? I continued to draw a blank, so I focused on my examination.

Her dying expression was frozen on her face. Mouth and eyes open, but not wide open.

Apparently she'd been exiting her bathroom at the time of the attack. She only had a towel around her. One hand clutched the towel. The other was reaching into the space directly in front of her face though her arm wasn't fully extended.

The curve of her arm had a certain grace to it. I wondered if she had been a dancer.

"When was it called in?" I asked.

"Her dying scream was heard a little less than half an hour ago." The captain was studying me. "One of her lovers heard the scream. He claims no one else was in the house but the two of them."

"She's already in rigor. But she died half an hour ago?" When rigor mortis happens that fast, necromancy may as well be written all over the corpse. This was easy to determine. Too easy.

So why did the captain request my opinion?

I glanced at Vallas. He continued studying me. Possibly suspecting me. So I returned my attention to the victim.

She was lying on her side but her spine was straightened. She didn't die lying on her side. Her legs were bent in a way that suggested she was sitting on the floor, scurrying herself backwards until her spine met the wall. Then she died . . . and her stiffened form fell to her right.

Why the hand in front of her face?

What was her name?

Her shrunken, shriveled visage gave me no hints. Yet I knew she had introduced herself to me at least once. Her name . . . I suddenly remembered it was a name from Old Earth. Rhonda, I think. Or was it Rhinda, the New Earth equivalent.

In my mental struggle, I closed my eyes and took a deep inhale to concentrate. That was when I smelled the distinct stench escaping from her lips: decomposition.

I lifted her just a little to look beneath her.

"No blood pooling on her side. It hasn't had time to pool. But her internal organs are already in a state of decomposition. Unless . . ." I gently reached between her parted lips and pried open her jaw just a little. Her teeth were as black as onyx, chipped and crumbling. Not the mouth of a rich girl born with enough money to have the best dental work done in her youth. I wasn't just smelling her rotted insides but her mouth . . . it was the most rotted part of her insides. Meaning her mouth had rotted first. I nodded to myself, then to the Vallas. "There's your cause of death, captain. If I were to draw an immediate conclusion, I suspect a necrotic breath predator. But, of course, I can't be sure at this time."

"Why can't you be sure, Doctor?" His voice was equal parts suspicion and curiosity.

I countered his tone with a gush of sarcastic formality. "My dear captain, that reason is rather obvious, isn't it? I haven't had an opportunity to perform a full autopsy. This is simply an on-the-spot examination."

"But this isn't your first necromantic crime scene."

"No, it's my eighth." I looked him in the eye. "Should I have brought a cake to commemorate the occasion? Or a dozen signed witness statements giving me an alibi?"

"I don't like cake." *How could he not like cake?* I thought. *He must be joking.*

But Vallas wasn't smiling. Which meant he wasn't joking. Which meant I needed an alibi.

Unfortunately . . . "I don't have an alibi. I've been home all night. Perusing my journals. Reading novels. And dreaming."

"Being home alone is the worst possible alibi in this case, Doctor." Maybe I was imagining it, but he seemed just slightly troubled by my lack of an alibi. "I can't ignore your proximity to the victim at the time of her death."

"I happen to live next door."

"Regardless, I can't ignore—"

"And I just allowed Wolfson to walk me to the crime scene. If I had killed this woman, I'm doing a very stupid job at concealing my guilt."

"I know you're not stupid." And I could tell he was about to use that against me. "In fact, every guardsman knows it. Everyone also knows how experienced you are at psychological manipulation."

I raised my voice and stood to my full height, holding my left hand above my head for all to see. "And everyone here knows the terms of my redemption sentence."

The bracer on my left forearm is of special design. A truly unique talisman, literally the only one of its kind. The material is a woven design of dark leather and shining silver. And I can never remove it for several reasons. The most important of which is that it holds back the necromancy that would otherwise consume my body and complete a most horrific transformation that's been held in stasis for almost half a year. The bracer confines the necromancy entirely to my left hand . . . which is why my left hand is completely barren of all flesh. Bleached-white bones are all that remain of my hand. And the necromantic spell matrix holding the bones together also make my hand move like it's still alive.

"Now tell me something I don't know. Do you care at all what I have to say about this murder or did you bring me here just to arrest me?" I held out my hands to be cuffed, hanging my cane on my bare wrist bones. "Because if it's the latter, I prefer you just get it over with."

"Living hell!" shouted a voice I'd never heard before. "*Him?* The doctor with the undead hand? You brought that freak here?"

I looked down the stairs into the foyer and saw a young man with light brown hair and dark brown eyes swollen from crying. He was the only one other than me not wearing a half-cloak, so I made the leap of logic that he was the lover who had reported the murder.

"Ah, my reputation precedes me." I snatched my cane with my right hand and tipped my hat to the young man with my left. I always tip my hat with my left hand. I want everyone I meet to know exactly who they're dealing with. The reactions I elicit can be quite entertaining, depending on the person. Most of the time the sight of my skeletal hand is unsettling. In this case, it was enraging.

"You stay away from Rhonda's body, you necro-fuck." He was lunging his way up the stairs at me. And I was enjoying watching the guardsmen hold him back with ease.

I wish I could say this kind of reaction to my presence at crime scenes was rare, but it's not. The Terra Guard have grown accustomed to holding back the outraged, grieving family members of whatever victim I'm brought in to examine.

People see my hand and they see death . . . and they cannot understand how I am still alive or how I use my unique skill to save lives.

But the fact remains, I am alive. And, occasionally, I save lives as well.

I walked down the steps with a lively bounce in my feet . . . all while keeping a careful grip on my cane.

"Necro-fuck? I haven't heard that one in weeks." I was close enough that he could strike me if the guardsmen released him, but they were smart enough not to. The outraged man, however, wasn't

smart enough to stop struggling. I switched my cane to my dead hand and held out my living one for a handshake. "Doctor Madangel, at your service. But I'm assuming you already knew that. After all, I live next door."

"Don't you touch—next door? This corpse-humping psycho lives next door?" He was a young man with dark hair and plenty of it. And I say that because he was wearing only pants, allowing his plentiful chest hair to be fully displayed. "Why haven't you arrested him? He obviously did it."

"I believe I just introduced myself, sir. If you're going to throw around accusations like that you could at least return the courtesy."

"Stephall. Rhonda's my . . . I mean . . . she *was* my lover." He took a moment to wipe some tears that I hadn't noticed. Then he pointed at me while directing his words behind me. "Now get him out of here. I don't want him anywhere near Rhonda's body."

I glanced over my shoulder up the stairs. Vallas was watching and feeling the palpable need to explain the unusual situation. "Doctor Madangel is here on my request. He's a consultant for the city guard."

"Consultant? You need *him* to tell you she was killed by sorcery? You can't tell just by looking at her?"

"I don't jump to conclusions in my investigations." Vallas easily over-powered Stephall without touching him. "Especially in cases of murder by sorcery."

"You said her name was Rhonda?" I quickly interjected, distracting Stephall with a question.

Stephall nodded, looking confused and insistent.

"Are you sure it wasn't Rhinda?"

And then he was angry again. "Yeah, psycho. I'm sure."

"Just calm down, Stephall. Doctor Madangel is here to help." Vallas did his best to guide the young man to a lower volume.

"Interesting." I studied Stephall, knowing Vallas was studying me simultaneously. Vallas sometimes allows me to ask questions. Officially, I'm not an investigator. But Vallas knows I often ask questions that no one else thinks to ask. He wasn't stopping me so I continued asking, "You're the one that discovered her body?"

His throat sucked in a breath and he nodded. His eyes squinted and his lips quivered.

"Did you see anyone or anything at all?"

He shook his head, curling his lips inward to seal off all his words. And somehow, I got the impression that he didn't want to talk to me.

"Stephall, this will go easier if you speak to me. I need you to describe—"

"What? Nothing? Because that's what I saw. Nothing. You want me to describe nothing to you in as much detail as possible?" Apparently talking to me was making him angrier.

"No." I allowed my voice to become a hair louder than his. "Not what you saw. I don't ask questions more than once unless I think I'm being lied to. I want you to describe what you heard."

Again, Stephall was confused. But this hadn't changed his anger in the slightest. "I . . . what I heard? You . . . want to know what I heard?" He sucked a deep breath into his wide-open mouth and threw his hands up in what I suppose was meant to be seen as further outrage. "I heard her dying scream and ran up here. I found her like that. She was already dead. I didn't hear anything else."

"You didn't hear her talking to someone?"

"No."

"You didn't hear footsteps?"

"No. I told you I didn't hear anything. I thought you didn't ask questions more than . . ." his voice grew quieter as he realized my suspicions. His rage evaporated in a surprising moment of silence.

"Unless I think I'm being lied to." I took a step closer to him. "My examination tells me that an undead predator killed your lover. My current theory is that such a predator sneaked into this house, sucked the life out of her as she was exiting the bathroom and then somehow exited this house without

you noticing. *Or . . .* is it possible you heard something? Because if she fought with or saw an undead predator, I find it hard to believe that she would remain silent until her dying moment.”

He seemed caught in mid-stutter for a moment. I suppose it’s only natural; people are more focused when they’re angry. “She . . . I . . . we had just made love. Downstairs . . . th-the sofa by the fireplace, it’s our . . . was our favorite place. I fell asleep. She must have gone to take a shower . . . didn’t want to wake me. But her scream woke me. That’s probably why I didn’t hear anything. Okay?”

I wasn’t sure if I believed him. But regardless of that, I said: “Thank you.”

Certainly a feasible explanation. But in my experience I’ve learned: the more feasible the explanation, the more likely it could be a lie.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Wolfson walk into the foyer. He ignored my stand-off with Stephall and reported directly to his captain. “Captain, we’ve found no sign of forced entry and only one point of entry that could have been exploited by the intruder. An open window on the second floor that faces the street.”

“That window’s always opened,” I commented with a casual shaking of my head.

It took me all of three seconds to realize how much activity had stopped at the crime scene. Other than myself, Vallas, Wolfson and Stephall, I counted at least three other guardsmen in the foyer who were gathering and examining all possible evidence. Now everyone in the foyer was completely engrossed in the silent activity of accusing me with their eyes, because they had all taken note of what I’d said. The silence filled me with the sudden realization that I’d just made a tremendous mistake.

I had just implicated myself in the very murder investigation I was supposed to be aiding in.

Doing my best to explain away the words that I knew no one was going to forget, I quickly said, “I happened to notice it one of the several hundred times that I’ve walked past this house because I happen to live next door. That window’s always open. Except during winter.”

Stepping outside myself for a moment, I realized my explanation was so feasible that it could easily be a lie. I sighed, closing my eyes to shut out the tiresome stares of idiots.

“Thank you, Lieutenant Wolfson.” Vallas deliberately broke the uncomfortable silence. “Could you see that Stephall is given some coffee? We’re done with questions for now.”

I heaved another sigh, keeping my eyes closed as I heard Stephall and Wolfson leave the room. The silence finally ended as I heard the rest of the guard resume their duties. I had no idea how many people had heard me implicate myself.

Finally I opened my eyes and began walking down the stairs until I heard Vallas ask, “And where do you think you’re going?”

“The Terra Guard Station, of course.” I replied, pleasantly. “I figured I’d save you the trip since you’re going to arrest me anyway.”

Vallas slapped a firm hand on my shoulder and stopped me. “I’m not arresting you.”

“By saying that out loud, Captain, you’ve insured that everyone in this room thinks less of your intelligence.” I told him, with a side-long stare.

“That’s a chance I take every time I invite you to a crime scene.” Vallas spoke more quietly now as he walked me back up the stairs, back to Rhonda’s body. “I don’t have enough evidence to arrest you at this time. But eventually I’ll have coincidence, public fear and at least a few false witness statements lined up against you.”

“Well it’s good to know that *one* of us is an optimist.” I snickered.

“Doctor, you’re one of the best assets the city guard has available. I’ve never once given half a shit about whether or not the public or the rest of the guard approves of your redemption sentence. I know you can do good. And I know you want to.” He paused as if expecting me to respond. I did not. I kept deliberate eye contact with him, filling my gaze with the silent contempt I carry for all the people who brazenly believe that I deserve no redemption . . . because many of those people serve under Vallas. “If you want to prove your innocence and continue to do good, I suggest you find this undead predator as soon as possible. Given your expertise in necromancy, you *are* the best man for the job.”

I thought about what he said for a moment. “Prove my innocence, eh? Captain, who in their right mind has ever called me innocent?”

“I’ll gladly be the first, if you bring me the real killer.” He may have thought his words would be encouraging. But they served more as a reminder of how very few friends I have in Prima Terra.

I breathed deep and nodded, accepting his unofficial mission as an unofficial investigator.

“You’ll need a security escort, of course. Someone who can perform the actual arrest and—”

“I’ll take Ashekerra,” I interrupted Vallas. And Vallas did not like being interrupted. At the time, I really couldn’t see why. I was only stating the most obvious conclusion to his proposal.

“You’ll take whomever I assign to you.”

“We both know she’s the only one who’ll work with me.”

“That’s what concerns me. I’m starting to think you and Lieutenant Ashekerra are getting a little too familiar with each other.”

“And what exactly is your problem with that, Vallas? Afraid I’ll make a friend?”

“If that friend is one of my lieutenants, yes.”

“I’ll take Ashekerra. Or I’ll just go home and wait to be arrested. I’m sure you’ll have no trouble catching this monster without my help.”

“You’ll take Wolfson.”

I could feel my disapproval covering my face. “Why? Because he hates me?”

“And what’s your problem with that, Doctor? Afraid you’ll make an enemy?”

“*Another* enemy. You know I have more than my share.”

“I’m trying to avoid any appearance of impropriety. This is for your sake as much as mine.”

“Do I have any say in this, captain?” A woman’s voice suddenly barged in on our less-than-friendly conversation.

Vallas and I turned to face the wide open front door that led outside.

There she stood. Ashekerra. One of the most talented and fierce wielders of the craft I’ve ever seen. And I’ve seen quite a lot. Half the sorcerers I’ve met over all my years could learn a great deal from Ashekerra . . . if they could put up with her or she with them.

She has a powerfully athletic build that fills out her uniform in all the right places. She has a pair of emerald green eyes that continue to fascinate me. Her head is shaved of all hair, perfectly bald with the exception of a pair of thin eyebrows dyed to match her eye color.

Tough as she is talented. Fierce as she is beautiful. My kind of woman.

“No, lieutenant, you don’t,” said Vallas.

She folded her arms and walked to the bottom step of the staircase. “Are you really that concerned with impropriety, captain?”

“Yes, I am.”

“And why would my involvement with his investigation create impropriety?”

“Because I suspect that—”

“Is it because I believe the same as you do, captain? That Doctor Madangel’s redemption sentence, quote: makes him a useful asset to the city guard and is therefore a fitting service of justice for his crimes.”

I couldn’t stop myself from interjecting. “Is that how you truly feel, Vallas? Why, I’m touched.”

With nothing more than a glance, Captain Vallas told me to shut up.

Lieutenant Ashekerra pressed on. “Do you really want someone who disagrees with you on that notion watching his back?”

“I want someone watching over and assisting Doctor Madangel who can remain detached and objective.” I could see that Ashekerra was about to reply, but Vallas stopped her with a raised hand. He then proceeded down the stairs and spent at least ten seconds saying something to her. Whatever he said was concealed from me by a clear whisper spell.

Not a surprising gesture. I’ve never been under the impression that I had earned Vallas’s trust

completely. And I'm not sure that such a thing is even possible in my case.

Vallas left the room. He left Ashekerra standing there, staring at me with those emerald eyes, holding all of her facial muscles as still as a mask.

Whatever words Vallas had hidden from me had left Ashekerra feeling it necessary to hide her emotions from me.

Again, not surprising. But in the case of Ashekerra, one of my only friends, it was certainly disconcerting.

"I am your security escort, Doctor Madangel. Please proceed with your investigation. We have a killer to catch."

* * *

The two of us walked out of the crime scene and into the night.

Once we were a comfortable distance from the house, I asked: "Are you going to tell me what he said?"

"He said that I had to make sure you didn't die."

"He always says that. But I can tell he said something else this time."

"He said he knows there is something between us and I'd better hope he never finds out what that something is." She took a deep breath. "Now let's just find this killer."

I hesitated long enough to gauge her reaction. The posture of her stride looked tighter than her clenched fists. "He still doesn't know how we first met, does he?"

"No." I watched her tensed shoulders relax as she answered.

"That's good."

"Where are we going, Doctor?" The way she called me "Doctor" in that moment conveyed a great deal of mixed emotion. It felt forced, like she had reluctantly performed a required courtesy. She wanted us to speak as friends but felt we couldn't. Perhaps she was concerned we'd be overheard.

"We're going . . . wherever the wind takes me." I began sniffing at the air every eight steps we took. After a couple of city blocks had passed, I lengthened that frequency to once every twenty-four steps as well as every time I felt the winds pick up or change direction.

Ashekerra could feel my sorcery pulsing through the air around me and, like Vallas, she knows me well enough to remain silent and allow me to work at my leisure.

Biomancy is the sorcery of life. Necromancy is the sorcery of death. To qualify as a licensed necromancer you have to be a master at both arts.

Most of biomancy has to do with mastering the human body, knowing its limits and unlocking its potential. Mastering biomancy is the reason I have the word "doctor" in front of my name. And it's why I have the ability to enhance any of my five senses beyond normal human limits.

Necromancy has a lot to do with taking all that you've learned in biomancy and applying it in the opposite direction. It's an exploration that must be undertaken carefully and with a competent guide beside you every step of the way. I had an excellent mentor. He taught me exactly where to look and what to avoid.

And in all those years of learning, I grew to know the scent of decay like an old friend. The smell is so familiar in my area of expertise, I haven't been disgusted by it in a long time. I can pluck that scent out of the air at almost a full kilometer of distance when my olfactory sense is properly attuned to ideal climate conditions.

Unfortunately, recent rainfall made the conditions less than ideal and my search more difficult and time-consuming than I desired.

I could Ashekerra's sense growing impatience in the rhythm of her breathing.

Two long hours later . . . we were more than three kilometers from where we'd started and had circled several areas of Prima Terra more than once. Every time I thought I caught the scent that I was

sniffing for, I either lost it to the rain or the wind or the mildew on the walls of some old building.

"Is there a reason we've passed this building four times now, Doctor?" Ashekerra was more observant than I could hope to be when I was so concentrated on my nose.

I stopped and looked at the building she was gesturing to. It smelled of mildew. And a breath predator would know it as a perfect hiding place. "I certainly hope so. But I suppose there's only one way to find out."

Her sorcery pulsed. Crackling lines of energy coated her hands like custom-fitted gloves as she sized up the building before us. "Three-story building. If it has a basement we'll start searching there and work our way up."

We proceeded inside and found our way to the basement.

The building was recently abandoned. A place like this, I would have expected to see homeless people making use of the shelter.

But there was nothing. Nothing but cold darkness, stone walls, stained floors and eery silence. No life in sight. None heard either. Not even rats.

Not a good sign.

"Basement's clear." I heard Ashekerra call to me from the darkness below.

I was waiting for her at the top of the staircase when I felt a pair of small hands try to push me down the stairs from behind.

The footsteps were fast, enhanced by sorceric speed. My senses warned me just in time and my cane propped me against the wall just enough to prevent me from tumbling.

I spun about to see my attacker, but even with my night vision aiding my sight, I only caught a glimpse of the shadow of a woman running from the stairwell.

"Ashe!" I shouted to my friend as I pursued my attacker up several dust-covered steps.

My speed and my sorcery matched my attacker's easily. I never lost sight or sound of her.

My attacker wasn't breathing hard . . . in fact, she wasn't breathing at all.

Not a good sign.

We reached the roof and my suspicions were confirmed: my attacker was a woman . . . with golden blonde hair . . . and a grace in her arms and legs that made me think she was once a dancer.

The amethyst light of the moon shone across her distressed face . . . I was staring at the same woman whose crime scene I had so recently attended. I was staring at Rhonda's twin . . . clothed in dark, dusty garments and rags.

She was a rare breed of undead predator. Everything about her had the appearance of normal, living flesh. She could have easily hidden in plain sight. Instead she chose to hide here. Curious.

I readied my cane in a defensive stance and we faced off.

"Please," she spoke like one about to cry while backing away towards the edge, "just leave me alone. I'm sorry about my sister—"

"Do you confess then? Because I have a city guard lieutenant right behind me and she would love to hear it."

"No. It was an accident, I swear. You have to believe me."

"An accident . . ." I studied her. She wasn't breathing which meant she'd given up the habit of breathing. For most people converted to an undead existence it takes a year to give up that habit. She intrigued me . . . and sparked my memory. I smiled at her. "We've met before, haven't we?"

She nodded. "Yes. My name is Rhinda. My sister, Rhonda, was afraid to meet you. She avoided you all the time. Just looking at you made her nervous. She was watching when I met you outside her house. I did that to show her that undead people could be trusted."

Behind me, I could hear Ashekerra joining us on the roof. Feeling her sorceric pulse against my back was comforting.

"She trusted *you*, didn't she?"

"Only because we're twins. What happened to me could just as easily have happened to her and

she knew it. My sister always felt sorry for me. So she's been letting me feed on her for a year.”

Which explains why she always left a window open. “Small feedings, I’m assuming. Just enough to prevent necrotic starvation while minimizing the risk of harming her.”

Rhinda nodded. “Nobody else knew about it. Everyone else in my family thinks I’m dead or that I’ve fled into the wilds and become a beast.”

“If you’ve fed on your sister before, what went wrong this time?” As I asked the question, I sensed Ashekerra moving to my left. She was making sure I was out of her line of fire. “Were you a little too hungry for a small feeding to satisfy you?”

“I don’t know.” Her voice filled with sobbing. “It just . . . she . . . I really don’t know. I wish I did. But I didn’t mean to kill her. You have to believe me.”

“Young lady, don’t waste my time with any tearful pleas or apologies.” I stared her down. “I know you better than you think. I know the undead are incapable of tears.”

“But not sorrow.” She backed away, her voice trembling. “Not regret.”

No. I thought to myself. Though the heart stops beating, it still feels. “True. But my opinion of your guilt does not matter.” I waved Ashekerra forward. “Hers does.”

“It’s a non-issue,” Ashekerra explained. “Under the law, undead are not recognized as human. Therefore, no matter who you were in life, you are no longer afforded the same rights as a civilian. You don’t have the right to plead your case in a court of law. And because necromancy is illegal, your very presence in Prima Terra is a crime punishable by eradication or banishment.”

“What?” Rhinda’s eyes opened wide and she stopped backing away. Her body grew tense. “But I was *cursed* into becoming this. I never knew a thing about necromancy until I was kidnapped and raped by a necromancer. He held me captive and turned me into this so that I’d appear young forever. What I am is not my fault.”

Ashekerra raised her energized hands. “The law doesn’t care. You are a necromantic creature. Your existence, by definition, is illegal. And as a member of the city guard, it is within my power to banish or destroy you.”

“What about him?” She pointed at me.

“I’m an exception to many rules.” I held out my skeletal hand. The light of the nightstone passed between the metacarpals. “Legally speaking, only my hand is undead. The rest of me still qualifies as human.”

“Murder is also punishable by banishment or life in prison or, in severe cases, death. And if you played any part in your sister’s death, then murder is also your crime.” Ashekerra still had energy coating her hands. “Do you confess to being responsible for your sister’s murder or not?”

“No,” Rhinda insisted. “I don’t know what happened. But I know I did not deliberately kill her.”

“Then tell us how she died,” I offered.

“I didn’t kill her,” Rhinda shouted.

“You were there.” I matched her volume. “The first thing you said to me was that you were sorry about your sister. The crime scene has been surrounded by guardsmen. How else would you know that your sister had been murdered unless you saw it happen?”

Her graceful body bent inward, crumpling upon her stomach as her arms clutched her abdomen. “I was hungry. I’d been hungry for days. I try to feed on my sister only once a week. I often feed on stray animals in the meantime. But it’s been getting harder to survive on small animals . . . they just don’t provide enough life for me to inhale. I thought I could deal with the hunger . . . and the pain. But I just couldn’t. I just . . . ran out of resistance. I had to go to my sister, even if it was two days earlier than we planned. I entered her house. Rhonda came out of the shower. She saw how much pain I was in . . . and took pity on me.”

Upon saying this, Rhinda reached out her arm with exactly the same arc to her elbow as was demonstrated by her sister’s corpse. I surmised this was the way they touched during feedings. Identical hands touching identical faces in a reaching, fragile embrace . . . mirroring their love for one

another.

"She said I could . . . and I started . . . but I couldn't stop . . . I just couldn't. I tried so hard to stop. I saw the fear in Rhonda's eyes begging me to stop. She must have seen the fear in mine, trying to stop but not stopping. It was so horrible. Feeling myself inhale all of her. Filling myself with my sister's life force . . . that much life should have energized and invigorated me. Instead it made me sick. So sick that I screamed as her lifeless body fell from my hand." I watched Rhinda's hand twitch into a desperate grab as she finished speaking.

Silence followed. Silence that should have been filled with tears.

Being undead, Rhinda was neither breathing nor crying the entire time she spoke. The absence of both of these made her appear inhuman as she ended her testimony.

Reading her expression, I could easily imagine all that was going through Rhinda's mind in that moment. I could even empathize. No matter how much she wanted to cry, she couldn't.

I glanced at my friend. With a single nod, Ashekerra told me that she also empathized with Rhinda. But, sadly, now was not the time for such a thing. We had a job to do.

"What happened after she died? After you screamed?" I worded my question carefully. I had both suspicions and assumptions about what happened next but I would not allow either to be spoken.

"I just stared at her . . . probably for a few minutes. The more I stared the more I felt sick in a way that a living person cannot understand. My stomach no longer feels anything, it wasn't that kind of nausea. But her life . . . I could feel my sister's life drifting in my lungs. Every millimeter of my flesh and the core of my mind felt her caress. She was thrumming inside my very bones. And that vibration felt like the most disturbing music—like a song stuck in your head—except this was stuck in my entire body and prickling at the edges of all my senses. I couldn't look at her one second longer. So I ran here, my favorite hiding place." Which explained why she hid here and not in plain sight . . . she was hiding out of shame.

"And Stephall?" Once more I worded my question carefully.

"What about him?"

"Did you know Stephall?" Ashekerra asked . . . which meant she and I had the same suspicion.

"I knew of him. My sister had several regular lovers. At least three that I knew about. She didn't believe in monogamy."

"Was he at your sister's tonight when she died?" I asked.

Rhinda shrugged. "I didn't see him. When I entered through the window on the second floor I heard the shower running. Less than a minute later it stopped and my sister came out. I never went downstairs. I suppose he may have been down there and I never noticed." Her shrugging posture and empty visage slowly shifted. A spark of awareness had touched her mind. "Was he there?"

I nodded. "He was. He called the city guard after you left."

"If he was there he would've heard me scream. He . . . he would've seen me standing over my sister's body."

I nodded again. "He told us that he heard Rhonda's dying scream and *ran* up the stairs. I know your senses are attuned to any stimulus betraying sudden movement, it's one of the benefits to being a predator."

"But you're telling us that you didn't even notice Stephall." Ashekerra shared my conclusion.

I could see Rhinda searching her memory. "No. I didn't."

Ashekerra nodded. "This would imply that he was moving quietly and carefully in response to your scream. Since he did not make a sound before or after your scream."

"But . . . why?" Rhinda's eyes searched our faces for an answer.

"A very good question." I turned to Ashekerra, while reaching into one of my vest pockets.

"Perhaps we should ask him." Upon finding the object I needed, I produced it for both women to see: a simple necklace made of braided leather threads with a ruby hanging at its center. I then turned to Rhinda. "Care to assist us in catching your sister's killer?"

* * *

Ashekerra walked into the crime scene with me close at her side. Between both of our sorceric efforts, I was cloaked in a near-perfect veil that muffled all sound I made and removed all sight of me . . . provided I never raised my voice and remained close enough to be in her shadow. A difficult illusion, to be sure. This is why it requires complete cooperation between two well-trained sorcerers.

Having friends that are both talented and brilliant is a priceless treasure.

I silently walked with Ashekerra and closely watched Stephall take notice of her. Obviously he'd been paying attention when we left together.

I kept my eyes on Stephall. He was sitting on the couch by the fireplace, silently dabbing tears from his eyes as he stared mournfully at nothing in particular.

Ashekerra stood at attention and reported to Vallas. "Captain, I'm here to report that this murder has been solved. The case is closed and the victim can rest in peace."

Vallas straightened up and folded his arms. "I'm assuming, then, that someone has been arrested or executed."

"Executed, sir."

"Who?"

"Doctor Madangel," Ashekerra answered. "He confessed and he tried to kill me. In the ensuing combat that followed, I overcame his power and destroyed him. The Doctor had succumbed to his partial transformation and had become fully undead over a week ago. He thought he could keep this a secret from the guard. But his appetite for the living quickly grew beyond his control. He killed his neighbor, Rhonda, because her proximity to him made her convenient prey. After realizing he was a suspect and would eventually be found out, he turned on me. But he also underestimated me."

Bravo, my friend. A brilliant performance. Ashekerra may have missed her calling in life.

"So, before Wolfson ever led him to this crime scene, he was manipulating us." Vallas frowned.

"Yes, sir. Myself included. He had hoped to keep on manipulating the guard so that his secret would never be discovered."

"I see." Vallas continued frowning as he nodded, then gave a long sigh. "Well, we gave the Doctor more than a fair chance at redemption . . . and he certainly was useful to us while he lasted. Very well then, lieutenant, start spreading the word to wrap up the investigation. We're done here."

"Done?" Stephall carelessly blurted.

"Yes. We'll be vacating these premises and turning this house over to its rightful owner." Vallas explained to Stephall. "I've already sent a runner to Rhonda's next of kin. Her parents should be on their way to take possession of the house and her body."

"But, wait, you're *sure* that he confessed?" Stephall looked nervous, like he wasn't sure about what he was hearing. This was the first step to throwing him off balance.

"Doctor Madangel confessed. He tried to kill me. I destroyed him. This case is closed." The way Ashekerra repeated herself was perfect. She was practically daring Stephall to call her a liar.

"You're free to go home, Stephall," Vallas added.

"Well . . . actually, no." Stephall smiled nervously. "I know this is an odd time to mention this but, Rhonda signed me on as a co-owner of the house. So now that she's dead, I own this place."

Vallas could not be more skeptical. "Is that so? I thought you two weren't married."

"We weren't. But . . . we talked about getting married."

"You *talked* about getting married?" Vallas made the quick leap from skeptical to suspicious. "You expect me to believe she signed you on as a co-owner to a house this valuable because you *talked* about getting married?"

"Well, I don't care what you believe." Stephall stood to his full height and backed away from the captain. "This house is mine and I have the paperwork to prove it."

And this was the exact moment that Ashekerra was waiting for. "Well then, I guess this is quite a day for you. You got a free house. And even though you reek of motive for Rhonda's murder, you're clear of all charges. You've got nothing to worry about. We'll all just walk away now, leaving you undefended at the scene of the crime. And I recommend that you close that window on the second floor. You never know what might come around in the dead of night and sneak its way into this place with no one watching and everyone asleep."

"Wait. No. This isn't right. You have to . . ." Stephall stammered with an open mouth for several seconds before fixing a stare of pure hatred at Ashekerra. "You have to protect me."

"From what?" Ashekerra dared him again with daggers in her stare. "Madangel is dead."

"But wait a minute." Stephall tried to calm down and conceal a steadily growing panic. "You mean, that's it? You're just going to stop investigating? What if he was lying?"

"Doctor Madangel had ample means, motive and opportunity. His confession fits with the most plausible theory of this crime. What more is there to investigate?" Vallas watched Stephall growing more and more rattled by the perfectly logical explanation. "Unless perhaps there were some alternate theory to the crime explaining who else might have killed Rhonda and why Doctor Madangel would confess to a murder he did not commit."

"But this . . . it doesn't make . . . he . . ." After a moment, Stephall lashed out at Ashekerra. "Look, I know it sounds crazy but this bitch is lying."

Ashekerra, in her icy calm, was as intimidating as ever. "Call me a bitch one more time and see what happens, little man."

Stephall appealed to Vallas. "I know she's lying because I saw who killed Rhonda."

And this was the exact moment that Rhinda was waiting for. "Did she look anything like me, Stephall?"

Rhinda came down the stairs with a slow stride and a murderous look in her eyes.

"Shit!" Stephall shouted to everyone in a panic. "Stop her! Shoot her! She's undead."

"And how do you know that, sir?" Vallas asked, calm as ever. By now, the captain was on to my little scheme. Gambling on his intelligence is always a safe bet. "She looks human to me."

"She . . . she . . ." Stephall looked so comical as he stuttered in the faces of two highly-skilled guardsmen. I had to stifle a laugh to maintain the illusion that concealed me. "What the fuck is going on here?"

"Tell them what you did." Rhinda nearly growled her demand with a hungry stare.

"I didn't do anything. You killed her." Stephall started to look relieved. I took this to mean that he was relieved of the effort it took to lie to the city guard. Now he was simply relying on his version of the truth to proclaim his innocence. "You did it. You couldn't stop."

"Couldn't stop what?" Ashekerra asked. Stephall was completely off his game and she knew it. He would answer any question to make himself appear less guilty, and my friend pounced on that moment of weakness.

"She couldn't stop feeding on her. That's right. I knew all about you two. How Rhonda let you feed on her because she took pity on you. I learned all about your little secret when I . . . I . . ." Stephall felt himself blunder again. He also took the time to realize that the entire house and every guardsman on the scene was aware of and bearing witness to the confrontation at hand. He was surrounded.

There was no way out for Stephall or Rhinda and they both knew it.

But I knew all Rhinda wanted was to see her sister's killer punished.

"My sister never told anyone about my arrangement with her. We knew the world thought I was dead and we wanted it kept that way. She would have *never* told you *anything* about me." Rhinda's voice shouted then quieted. Her varying emotion kept Stephall on edge, right where I wanted him to be. "But she told me about you. You were nothing more than good sex to her. She would've never signed this house over to you. Unless you'd used psychomancy to manipulate her mind."

"Something easily accomplished in the throes of passion." Ashekerra filled in the blanks. "The mind is more susceptible to psychomantic invasion during orgasm."

"Rhonda told me every time you made love it felt like dreaming about music too beautiful to be real. And that days later she had dreams about doing other things with you that she could not remember. Neither of us ever learned sorcery. Neither of us knew what the dreams meant. And if she talked about the dreams for too long, she'd get headaches."

"Mental after-shocks. Both the dreams and headaches; they were symptoms of recent psychic invasion." Ashekerra further explained, if only to apply further pressure to Stephall's panicked state of mind. "Incidentally, the crime of mind rape carries a minimum sentence of ten years imprisonment."

Stephall's eyes went wild for a moment, searching the room and finding no help, no allies, no escape, no lie that would explain it all away. Then his head twitched and a new look relaxed his entire face and body.

Stephall began to laugh. "You've got nothing. You're trying to scare a confession out of me because you've got nothing." Though he kept a safe distance from Rhinda, he smiled right at her face. "The undead aren't recognized as human so they can't legally testify in court. So everything you think you know can't be used against me. And since Rhonda's dead, she can't accuse me of mind rape so I can't even be charged. And since I didn't kill her . . . you've got nothing." He stood up straight and lifted his head as if to look down on Rhinda. "Captain Vallas, arrest this woman. I want her executed for killing my beloved Rhonda."

And this was the exact moment that *I* was waiting for.

I already had my spell in place. I had asked Rhinda to place the ruby necklace around her dead sister's neck before making her entrance. Rhonda's corpse was now a puppet at my mental command.

"But I'm not dead, my beloved." Rhonda came down the stairs, wearing a bathrobe and looking as alive as ever. "I'm alive. All I want is to hold you in my arms and have you make love to me once more." I embellished just a little and turned Rhonda's last word into a long, loud exhale . . . and her breath filled the room with the smell of decomposition.

It was that combination—the sight, sound and smell of his dead lover's return—that made Stephall finally snap. "No! Living hell! You're dead! She drained every last bit of life from you. I made sure she did."

I took a long step out of Ashekerra's shadow and revealed myself to the room. Because I happened to be within arm's reach of Stephall, I clapped my skeletal hand down on his shoulder, letting him feel my sharpened finger tips lightly press into his flesh.

"Made sure she drained every last bit, did you?" My eyes held his in a deadly gaze. I wondered if Stephall's mind or heart could take much more in the way of intimidating surprises. I wondered, but I didn't care. "There's only one way that you could make sure of such a thing and that's if you were controlling Rhinda as she fed. And I can verify that Rhinda is undead. Which means only necromancy could control her because undead are not susceptible to psychomancy."

"Which means you just confessed, in a room full of guardsmen, to the crime of necromancy." I could hear the subtle smile in Ashekerra's voice.

"And I don't believe you're licensed for that." Personally, I couldn't resist saying those words to Stephall's pale face. I felt like a hunter confirming the kill.

Additionally, I showed off when I gestured with my skeletal hand at the necklace placed around Rhonda's neck. It flew off of her and I snatched it out of the air. Rhonda fell, dead . . . as she should be.

"No. No. Wait a minute." Stephall could feel all the stares in the room wanting to burn him to ash. "No, you can't do this to me. They tricked me."

"Citizen Stephall, you're under arrest for necromancy." Vallas proclaimed as his sorceric pulse filled the room. "And seeing as how your use of necromancy resulted in the intentional death of another citizen, I will be seeking the death penalty at your trial. Lieutenant Wolfson, take this man into custody. You're authorized to use lethal force at the first sign of resistance."

“Yes, sir.” Wolfson cuffed Stephall’s hands and marched him outside. And I couldn’t help noticing how Wolfson wouldn’t look me in the eye. Then, in the wake of victory, came the wash of tragic reality.

Rhinda’s secret was exposed. Captain Vallas knew she was undead and her hunger for life had resulted in killing one of the citizens under his protection. Being undead was enough to get her banished. Being undead and dangerous was enough to warrant execution.

Everyone in that room knew exactly what had to happen to Rhinda, including Rhinda herself. But I certainly did not care to stay and watch it happen.

Ashekerra knew how I felt. Our eyes met and not a word of conversation was needed.

“You may return home, Doctor Madangel.” Vallas could see I wanted a way out and he gave it to me. “Your assistance this night is greatly appreciated.”

I’m an exception to many rules. I’m allowed to go home. Rhinda never would.

I did not want to be there a second longer. But no matter how hard I tried, I could not avoid Rhinda’s gaze . . . even as I took my first steps to leave.

She moved herself directly in front of me, forcing me to see the sadness in her tearless eyes and the smile on her resolved face.

She reached and touched my face in same way she once touched her sister.

“Thank you, Doctor Madangel. For helping my sister rest in peace and ensuring her killer was brought to justice. Thank you.”

I returned the gesture. And—not caring what anyone thought of me—placed a gentle kiss on the cold flesh of her delicate cheek.

Letting out a long sigh, I told her, “You have no idea how seldom it is that I hear anyone thank me. I will remember you, Rhinda. I’ll even dream of you. I promise.”

And if nothing else, I’m a man who keeps his promises.

There was nothing more I could say or do.

I walked home . . . and I left her to die.

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