

Answers In the Blood
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It took considerably longer than it should have to extricate the Prima from her duties and in the end, Artemio had resorted to slapping his writ from the kings into the face of her secretary and forcing his way into her office, and the presumably important meeting that she was inveigled in with the other lecturers. "Terribly sorry to interrupt you Prima, but I require an expert opinion on something."

The Prima did not look impressed, but for all that she was not impressed, she knew who Artemio represented, and why this son of a lesser house now dared to barge into her sanctum without her leave. A line appeared between her brows and she said, "Give me just a moment."

Then Artemio had stood in the corner awkwardly as his teachers and social superiors milled around, shaking hands and congratulating each other for another successful meeting of minds that would result in absolutely nothing changing. It was all that Artemio could do to contain his sneer. Once all of that was over and done with and the last of the Prima's visitors walked by scowling at him for his presumption, rudeness and low station.

Just when it seemed that the Prima was finally ready to depart, she walked away from the door and opened out a cupboard that turned out to contain a wardrobe. Casting a glance to the pattering on her window, she swept a waterproof cape around her shoulders and retrieved a waxed parasol from yet another cupboard, which she then proceeded to thrust into his arms. "My dear boy, am I to assume that you are taking me to the scene of a murder?"

His barely contained excitement threatened to bubble up and over. "That is correct, Prima."

"What a delight." She replied, flatly.

"It seems that the eldest son of Lord Sabbia has expired in rather an explosive fashion that is consistent with the assassinations that I am investigating." He offered her his arm, and they walked out of her office together. "It occurred to me that your keen insights might be best applied in determining whether there was some arcane workings afoot if I could get you in close proximity to the focal point of such a work sooner, rather than later."

She arched an eyebrow and glance askance. "You do not trust in your own ability?"

"I trust in your experience more, Prima." He flattered. It was barely flattery, mostly just the truth. He had no way of knowing when he might have another chance at a fresh assassination, if he'd had any other ideas to identify the method or the killers he'd have thrown all of them at it. As it stood, he had himself and the Prima, so that was what he used.

The Sabbia family were far from the wealthiest in Espher, and their estate within the city amounted to little more than a townhouse on the periphery of the south-quarter with a rather bedraggled looking olive tree growing in its equally cramped gardens. Terracotta and white stucco rather than stone, a newer construction. At least it was on one of the main thoroughfares so the Prima's coachman had no trouble getting them there swiftly.

Making it from the carriage to the house was another matter entirely. A murder was the closest thing that this stretch of the city had to entertainment at this time of night and it seemed to be drawing in bodies from all the surrounding neighbourhoods too. The crowd was packed in tight and for all of the power that she commanded, both political and arcane, the Prima was an older woman in no fit state to be elbowing through.

It seemed to Artemio that he'd had a good run so far, but the anonymity of his investigations to date were at an end. If he wanted in, he was going to be seen. It took him a moment to compose himself; to accept that he must face death head on now, instead of sneaking around the periphery and hoping to avoid the Last King's gaze.

Stepping down off the carriage he offered the Prima a hand so that she could get herself situated comfortably on very edge of the pavement where there was enough room for her to squeeze in before turning back to the crowd and clapping his hands. The merchants, peasants and assorted other hangers on ignored him completely. He tried again, clapping and shouting. "Out of the way!"

Still it elicited no response. The Prima was watching him. The flush of shame began creeping up his neck, heading for his cheeks. He could feel it prickling as it rose. Fine.

It took only a blink of the eyes for him to reach out to the forge spirit and draw it inside him. The next time that he clapped his hands, when they parted there was a ball of flame roiling between them. The back end of the crowd began to take notice, scattering in fear if they got a good look at the expression of pure rage on his face or gawking at him as another sideshow to the big event of the murder.

His fingers flexed and the fire snaked out. It would have been such a simple thing to burn a line straight through them all, right to the door. A clear, clean path. It cost him much more to send the streamer of fire along, squirming between the bodies, writhing all the way to the guardsmen at the door and then rippling out, sending the crowd scattering, screaming and tripping over one another to get away from the fire as it spread. Artemio released his shade and the flames leapt up for an instant before dying away. There was shocked silence from the crowd, none of them willing to step back into the place where impossible fire had appeared just a moment before. He offered the Prima his arm, flicked up the parasol to protect her from what was left of the rain, and they headed inside.

The guards would have parted before them even if Artemio hadn't waved his writ at them, they could recognise authority almost instinctively. The family of the deceased were gathered in the parlour, both men and women weeping openly, but with that same distant glazed look in their eyes that Artemio had come to associate with knowing nothing. "Did anyone see anything? Hear anything?"

Heads shook.

"My poor baby."

Tears fell.

"Not a sound. No clue it had happened until..."

Useless, every one of them.

A maidservant stood by the stairs, blood barely visible around the soles of her polished shoes. Artemio laid a hand on her shoulder. "Take me to the room where it happened."

The boy's bedchambers were at the very top of the townhouse, inaccessible from anywhere except this central stairwell and his dressing room, which was in turn, inaccessible from anywhere but the locked room ahead. A cursory search with those senses that normal people lacked revealed the influence of no shade upon the door or lock. Something that the Prima verified with her own study. She declared that she could sense no shades whatsoever in the building. That had the potential to be an issue.

Within the room things were much as Artemio had predicted from his observations in the other bloodstained bedchambers he had the joy of visiting over the past few weeks. The only difference was that it was not his mind's eye piecing together the parts of the body now, it was his actual eyes seeing it all. His nose, picking up the charnel notes of ruptured bowels, rich iron tinted blood, and the other essential salts that made up a man. There maids footprints were there, pressed down into the squelching carpet and clearly marking her course to discovering the fate of her master. Other servants footprints too, dithering in and out over the course of the day. Doing their duties, and disrupting the wet fragments of bone and flesh in entirely predictable patterns. Artemio accounted for them and crept in closer.

At the centre of it all lay the remains of this noble scion, his blood, organs and fluids spread out from the bed like a butterfly's spreading wings. Up the walls, from the bed's canopy, everywhere that the blood had splattered it now dripped down. Pattering to the wet coverlet in odd droplets still, even after so many hours. Completely chill when it touched Artemio's skin.

He closed his eyes and reached for the victim's shade. The body was found at dawn, that meant that they had until long after sundown before the spirit departed. Except, there was, as the Prima had already warned, no trace of the shade. No chance to capture whatever final loop of memory it was trapped in.

He spoke it aloud, though it pained him. "The shade is gone."

The Prima was barely in the door, but she had both of her hands up and clasped over her mouth. Artemio was so accustomed to her being in complete control of every situation that it had not crossed his mind that the sight of all the gore of a murder might trouble her. He closed the distance fast and slapped a hand over her eyes. "Breathe through your mouth. Slow and steady."

She was seething beneath his hand, hissing, "Unhand me at once," but he waited until he was certain that she was breathing steady once more before he stepped clear of her.

Her eyes were closed when his hand came away, and they remained closed as she carefully regulated her breathing and her tone. "I cannot sense the shade, nor any sign of shadework done here."

That was good, she was focusing on the things that she could control. Artemio tried to keep the conversation. "I could find no trace at the other sites myself, but I had taken that to be indicative of the time passed, rather than a sign that a shade was not employed. I mean... it seems unlikely that anyone could have brought a wild animal in here unnoticed to inflict this kind of damage."

"My dear boy, there are few animals in this world that could create such a mess of a man and I sincerely doubt any of them might fit through that doorway." She blinked her eyes open for a moment, then slammed them shut again. Puffing breaths out through her mouth. "Perhaps some sort of wyvern-beast?"

It was safe to give her a look of contemptuous disbelief with her eyes shut. "You really think that it could be an animal?"

"Come now Artemio, I know that you have taken the course of lectures on basic logic at the House." She peeked at him, then realising that by maintaining her gaze only on his face she could avoid the rest of the room, her undivided attention was a little unsettling. "You did rather well in it as I recall, there was some talk of making you teach it. Regardless, we have eliminated the influence of shades, so now you must eliminate all other alternatives until the truth is left to you."

"There are no scratches or claw marks. No feathers, scales or fur. It seems unlikely that any beast capable of this could focus its attentions so tightly. The mattress would be shredded. The carpets torn. The drapes at least. No, it is not an animal." He ticked each point off on his fingers as he paced the room. He could recall where the footprints were before he trampled them just fine. It wasn't as if they were giving him anything. Not with servants having thoroughly trampled the scene already, entering and opening the curtains. He paused by the windows to check for any sign that an assailant had breached them, but there was nothing.

As though she were losing patience with him, the Prima nudged him on. "So what options are left to us?"

"I had considered some sort of alchemical concoction, but they have distinct aromas, and once more the destruction would not be so contained." He paced back to the bed. To the desolation that had been left of a man there. He examined it inch by inch as he spoke. Finding one area where the blood had dried already in a perfect circle, exciting him for only a moment before he knocked on the brass bedwarmer where it was tucked under the covers, now chill to the touch. "There would be burns and stains if such a philtre had been unleashed, and there is nothing."

"Which leaves us with?"

"Something unknown. Which is of course why I turned to you, my Prima." He turned to her with as broad a smile as he could muster in the sight of such carnage. "You have a more expansive knowledge of foreign magic than I, or anyone else in Covotana. Who could do something like this?"

"Now, I know that you like to flatter me, my dear boy, but to say that I have a more expansive knowledge of foreign gifts is akin to saying that a white cape is brown simply because it has a speckle of mud upon its hem." She sighed. "That my studies into the subject constitute the greatest exploration of the subject is a testament to the limitations of our knowledge, not a proclamation of my grandeur."

It had been a slim hope to begin with, but Artemio pressed on with it nonetheless. "So you cannot think of any foreign power who might be capable of such a thing?"

"Why is it that you are so intent on this being the work of foreign magic?" The Prima stroked at her chin, mocking his pose and making him drop his hands to his sides.

"Quite simply Prima, I am seeking those who would most benefit from the chaos that these killings are fomenting."

Swallowing hard, she looked around the room once more. He kept his eyes on her, more interested in the reactions she did not mean to share than what she was looking at specifically. She swallowed hard,

then said, "I cannot think of anything from my studies that could compare to this, but that does not mean that it was not simply outside of those translations that I have mustered. You would be best to discuss it with those who practice such arts."

He looked at her speculatively, "Someone like the Arazi in the king's dungeons?"

"Do you think many would object if you were to put the imprisoned spy to the question?"

Artemio froze in his renewed pacing and almost toppled, he felt so off balance. There was so much that he did not know. So many pieces to this puzzle that remained outside of his reach. Hidden from his view. "How is it exactly that you all know about that, while I did not?"

She would have tittered if her eyes were not locked now on a piece of flesh that had been flung almost the full distance of the chamber to lie by the edge of the rugs. There was the shiny inner curve of a skull on Artemio's side of the piece, so he dreaded to think what was on hers. "Because people speak to me, my dear boy. Because I am a well-known face in the courts, and it is equally well known that my favour can be won with information of this very sort."

He began to pace the room again, taking in all of the pieces, working them back to their source, which was of course the bed. Overlaying the room with his mental image of the arches that the gruesome remnants had taken. Some intersected, suggesting either that the victim had not been destroyed in a single burst, but rather split apart in phases. That or the angles were severely skewed by mid-air deflections. The latter made no sense to Artemio's carefully ordered mind, so he discounted it for now. Mid-air collisions would also have suggested something other than a single burst. "Perhaps his majesty should have laid this task at your feet rather than mine."

The Prima managed a thin lipped smile. "Alas, with all of my many duties, I would have been forced to decline and pass along a suggestion of one of my more able students with a mind for this sort of puzzle-solving."

That put his pacing to a halt. He had been wondering about his own involvement in all of this, and now it lined up. "So I have you to thank?"

"My dear boy, I could not stand the thought of you withering away to nothing in some backwater the way that your father has." She came closer and cupped his face in her hands. It was profoundly unsettling. The humanity of that contact. It made Artemio's skin crawl. "To think that I would never see your mother again, simply because she made the wrong choice of husband, it was quite intolerable, and now with her passing... let me just say that it is my hope that you can leverage this position to your lasting advancement once more, and that your good works might bring the Volpe family back in from the cold. You are from such a promising line, it would be such a waste to see your natural gifts squandered away over mere politicking."

"I suppose that I should thank you," He tried to smile as he pulled his head back from the cradle of her palms. "But it is difficult to see this task of mine as anything but a punishment when it seems that it is an endless labour."

"I am quite certain that we shall see you succeed in time. And when you do, both of us shall find ourselves squarely in the kings' favour." She glanced away from Artemio to take in the blood and sighed.

“Unlike certain other students of mine who shall now amount to nothing more than a footnote in the histories written of your feat.”

Another piece, clicking into place. “Wait, what? He was a student?”

“You didn’t know? He departed a few years before you began your studies but I had hoped that you might familiarise yourself with the working shade-binders in the city when there are such a limited pool of us.”

The first of them to have been killed in all of these assassinations, Artemio couldn’t help but feel that it was personal. A trial run to ensure that shade-binders could die as readily as anyone else to this... method. With a dry mouth, Artemio asked, “If he were a shade-binder and he tried to call upon his shades as he died, might that explain his spirit being consumed? Could we call upon them and learn what they observed?”

The Prima tutted. “My dear boy, I have already told you that there were no shades called within this room. At least not within the last few days. Whatever struck him down, did so before he could so much as think of defending himself.”

Turning back to the room Artemio let out a long held sigh. “Every day I seek answers and I’m left with more and more questions.”

“Such a shame that it was him.” The Prima pretended that she had not heard Artemio’s bellyaching. “I’d heard he’d arranged a good marriage into the Aquilla family that might have seen his family’s standing in the courts much restored.”

Another piece of the puzzle snapped together and Artemio began frantically searching through the pieces for the rest of the skull. Crying back over his shoulder, “He was engaged to Rosina Aquilla?”

“The very same!” The Prima answered, a line forming between her brows as she tried to work out what he was doing, scurrying around the room. “Do you know her well?”

It was as though Artemio had not heard the question. So intent was he upon his task. In the end, he found what he was looking for down between the bed and a side cabinet, the front-piece to match the hair that had lain before the Prima. Not the whole of the man’s face, but enough of it that it was recognisable to him. The fiancé from the Spring Ball. He let it fall from his numb and bloody fingers before turning back to the Prima with an edge of hysteria in his voice, “Well that is just glorious. I’ve become my own best suspect.”