



THE
MYSTERIOUS
STUDY
OF DOCTOR SEX

TAMSYN MUIR

A LOCKED TOMB STORY

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“I count that as the first time we surprised them,” the Warden said whenever he was reminded of it. He was only a Scholar then. I was thirteen and nine months and he was thirteen and six. *Surprised them* was right. A gifted thirteen-year-old necromancer in the Library doesn’t muster interest. Every thirteen-year-old necromancer in the Sixth House is gifted. Even the presence of really smart ones is just the system working as designed. But in the Sixth, any necromancer—thirteen or otherwise—who can solve a problem with their own prefrontal cortex and nothing else is going to rouse comment.

He was wrong to say *we*, though. It was my shuck we were sitting in when it started. That’s all. I remember we were already getting too big for it, and he couldn’t sit up straight on the bed because his head kept grazing the ceiling of the shuck above. It was one meter by two meters and eighty centimeters high, one and a half bodies by Imperial mez, and he was already one meter sixty. He was going over his numbers and I was rereading a letter. I’ll reproduce as much of the letter as I care to:

To my dearest pals,

Writing this from PRISON. You were right that massaging the alveolar walls using the intercostal would help, but too little too late. This one’s my fault. I did pay attention to the diagrams BUT it took me a while to work out how to get the fluid into my pleural cavity and I may have made things worse. Sorry, Doc. Can’t teach an old dog new tricks. I am practising daily so do not chide me.

To cut a long story short, I didn’t win the argument and I’m at Pro and Mia’s and ALL my worst fears are realised. If their poor kids even breathe loudly they are taken out back and summarily beheaded. They play in whispers and go around on tiptoe. This is the opposite of what I want, as I desire noise. They all love me, which says less about my lovability and more about how little company they get this far out of Cypris. It’s beautiful here on the mountain but the scenery is

wasted on your old hag of a correspondent.

Their eldest is about yours and C's age and brings me flowers. He is a blessed creature and the only one with aptitude. This means he is unfortunately a shortarse and his siblings are all bigger than him or just about except for the three-year-old. Very trag.

Understandably I have adopted him as a younger brother and outwardly delight in all offerings, mostly roses or cups of tea. I do not have the heart to tell him that I wish he were bringing me anything else, maybe extramural magazines and cigarettes (THIS IS A JOKE).

I can reproduce the letter because I've still got it. I kept all of them. He didn't need to. Palamedes remembered everything he ever saw.

At some point he finished, and said, "One hundred and forty-one." And I said, "No. One hundred thirty-five."

"Cam, that can't be possible. Where am I getting six extra points from?"

When he passed me his module notes I found the problem fairly quickly. I'd familiarised myself with every restructure. I was already in the physical education stream and had no structures to think about. The Sixth House flowchart for swordsmen entering the Cohort is the one thing that never changes by committee, with no requirement for bloodline or promotion. Bloodline requirement in the Sixth would be a waste of time. Consanguinity tables get narrower year by year. I was born with four kids in my generation eligible to produce children with me. Palamedes had two.

Some context for why I had time to play with. At that point, only two things counted within Swordsman's Spire. The first was competency, and it was the less important of the two. It's not like that now. The Warden was the first Master Warden to interfere with the Spire in half a myriad. It says nothing that back at twelve years old I was one of the best in the Sixth, though nobody knew it but me. They'd only know I was the best at fifteen. Even then they'd have no idea.

The second thing, the more important one, was your genetic outreach potential. When I was a child all swordfighters got three unit categorisations, though if you're not Sixth you wouldn't be aware of them. Attractive and competent? You got put in the Alexandrites. They got Cohort

recommendations for out-of-system deployment. Competent? Epeids, and general referral. Just attractive? The Nireids, who always got offworld reserves. There's a lot of waiting around in the reserves. Lots of sulky necromancers with nothing to do. Lots of soldiers who didn't make the cut, doing a single tour for their family or because they thought it would be fun. Add Sixth House soldiers at the peak of physical performance whose last exam was to memorise erotic poetry. They say it's a massacre.

Don't think that it's not a big thing to get in the Nireids. It's a Sixth House honour. We don't care about swordplay, but we always care about diversifying the gene pool.

The Warden used to joke about losing me to the Alexandrites. This was him flattering himself. If I hadn't been his cavalier, I would have worked in data.

I said, "Here. You can't be a Fourth Ring moderand and do Telemetry simultaneously."

"Oh, God, what? That didn't used to be the case. Is this the last reshuffle?"

"Think so. They're moderated by the same examination board."

"Yes, and? Who cares?"

"Violates the new rubric on examiner conflict. I put you down for Telemetry, not Mods Four. You're six points down. Sorry, Scholar."

He took off his glasses. He was hell on spectacles. He used to bend the arms back and forth until they sat diagonally on his face. He said, "That's six points I can't afford. She doesn't have *time*, Camilla."

I was about to tell him that he'd have to drop Bone Morph Resonances, which would have led to an argument, but someone rapped on the shuck muffling. When we unlatched the curtain and peered out, we saw that it was Archivist Zeta, so we pulled the whole thing away immediately. Archivist Zeta didn't visit juvie dormitories.

Describing Juno Zeta as she was then would be stupid, because it's the same Zeta as she is now. Very tall, age anywhere from forty to sixty. Brunette at the front, but iron grey at the end lengths of the hair, twisted up with black pins at the base of the skull. Round-cheeked and sweet-eyed. Voluble. Cheerful as a child. The Warden always said that this was a deeply

sinister and inappropriate façade for her brain, which should have required thermal paste to keep from overheating.

She wasted no time, but handed a clipboard through to us. It had only one sheet of fresh blue flimsy pinned on it, still warm from the stamper. She said, “Scholar, you’ll need to sign and thumbprint. Aspirant, you only need a signature. I’m taking you as my attaché. Hurry up, both of you, I’m dying of excitement.”

The Warden was immediately entranced.

“You got *that* through committee quickly,” he remarked, and bloodied his thumb on the clipboard’s thumb spike. “Is this a House record?”

“I have been hanging around the Archaeology offices for more than an hour. I sleazed my way in past the secretaries,” said the Archivist. Her dark eyes were sparkling. She was so excited that her cheeks were flushed. “I wasn’t about to let anyone else steal it from my clutches. I had Caspar with me so that he could *sign* the damn thing the moment they gave me the stamp. He’s owed me ever since I covered his invigilation last quarter when he was rewriting his footnotes. Anyway, I just about ran here, and I’ve had this on my calendar for the last five years, and I’ve *got* to be the first one through that door.”

I said, “Unsealing?” Educated guess, because it was a blue form.

“Yes. I mean, it’s a very sad story actually—Archeo tried to extend their warrant before Collections swooped in. The room in question’s been closed for more than four hundred years. And it’s true that the Archies haven’t been able to do much with it. Master Scholar Marygold Shasta had it under her demesne and refused to pass it on because she wanted to examine it so much, but her eyes were bigger than her stomach—goodness knows she had enough to cover and couldn’t do much in her last years; brilliant mind to the end, but that kind of granular psychometry exhausted her. But they said *no* to Archeo transferring the warrant now that she’s been dead for ten years and the limitations have expired, because—oh, but for God’s sake don’t let me talk; if you haven’t signed by now I’ll go without you!”

But we’d both signed, and put on our outer robes and palynostatic covers on our shoes so that we didn’t mix up the thalergy prints on any dust. I remember that the hallways outside the dormitory were full that day. The

dorm halls always were busy, because Library guests inevitably got led there to admire the old view screens. When I was ten we were put on duty roster to clean them, and my admiration for the old view screens died quick. The Warden and I had allergic reactions to the panel cleaner. He didn't ask for a duty swap because he wanted to "study his contact dermatitis."

The hallways were full that day because there was something to look at other than space rock impacts or the scarps. A lot of children were spending their break watching the adepts do routine maintenance. I used to watch it myself. They attach umbilicals to skeleton servitors and send them outside the hatches. You can't do it when the wind's high off Dominicus, so it has to be when the temperature is dropping. The constructs are covered in brightly-coloured thermal paste. Sixth thermal paste is organic—thermalose, from rendered fat and plex—so adepts can manipulate it through the cord. The younger children like to watch them doing cleanup in the hope that the lines will get tangled and they all end up in a neon knot. That's Sixth House entertainment. The Warden said the whole cleaning system needed modernization, beginning with getting an expert out from the Ninth House. He never got far with that one in Oversight Body.

Archivist Zeta was impatient getting through the crowd. She elbowed a seven-year-old aside and said, "As I was saying—the study was Scholar Shasta's—my old tutor wanted it, because *his* tutor's tutor had been a student of the man in question—passion project—we're meeting Caspar and the others there, and you've always said you wanted to be privy to an opening, and you've made Scholar so I don't see why you shouldn't. You too, Aspirant, you've passed the qualification. Oh—how's your father?"

This wasn't to me. Palamedes said, "Enjoying parenting. Enjoying the parenting buyout, I should say. He's only doing dissertation supervision—and half a year of Immediate History, of course—but he's got his own projects on the go."

"King Undying knows how he does it. Every time I say I'm going to apply for sabbatical, someone in my department dies with their affairs completely out of order. It's always necromancers who get all startled about dying. You'd think that they of anyone would have half a brain about their own mortality ... I told you we actually had to get in a spirit-talker to ask

Carolus where he'd left his marking? I did? It was in the zip-up compartment of his documents bag. Anyway, do give your dad my regards. Camilla, I see yours all the time, so I won't ask after them and act like I'm surprised..."

I said, "Archivist, where are we going?"

She clasped her hands together and said, "We're going downstairs—to the study of Doctor Sex!"

The Warden looked at me. I looked at the Warden. I recall that we decided not to.

Zeta explained, "Donald Sex—Doctor Donald Sex—you haven't heard of him? *Long* before your time. He was hallowed in the Copper Garden for his work on post-Resurrection psychometry. When he died the Emperor sent a letter of condolence; it used to be on a plinth by his coffin. We had to move it out of the light. Some people complained that he should have moved to the Mithraeum in the first instance, but for goodness' sake, God never met the man. In any case, he never finished his final project, which has reached mythological status in some quarters ... not just in our House, either. We didn't even open up his study for a Fifth ambassador two centuries back. He was hot on the trail of some theorem he'd codged up from Sex's miscellanea. In the end all he was allowed to do was go to the coffin and try to ask the ghost some questions, but Donald was too smart to come back ... Too right. I think you ought to leave a person well enough alone after they've been interred for more than a couple of decades. I get *sick* thinking about some idiot trying to wheedle insight on my apparatus criticus from my ghost long after I've forgotten what it was. But just think—Doctor Sex's study is ours!"

We still decided not to. The Warden said, "It's just a study? I thought it would be a laboratory, at least."

"No, that old thing was opened up when I was still a child. Incunabula still have their grubby mitts on it because it was in a very old wing of the Library. I've seen it. Horrid little grim place. His study was much more modern, apparently. Watch out—stairs down."

There were a lot of stairs down. Doctor Donald Sex's sealed up study proved to be only one floor above the Library base. I was fine. The Warden was a little out of breath. Archivist Zeta's credentials got us through one of the auto-doors, and then it was just featureless corridors all the way to the

study. The hallways were so narrow we walked in single file. This close to the base of the Library the walls were very thick. Tectonic rumbles from the volcano that the Emperor Undying raised from death during the Resurrection would still reach this place. When the Warden asked after it, Archivist Zeta merely said, “That’s one of the reasons the Archies got to extend their warrant so long in the first place. Nobody wants the space, you see. I wouldn’t exchange my lovely cool Ossuary office for this one ... Oh, good, everyone’s here.”

The Archivist’s four-scholar team were stationed at a door, waiting beneath a nameplate saying D. SEX. They looked as delighted at the prospect as their leader, and they all issued each other congratulatory handshakes. Nobody seemed surprised that the Warden and I were there. They knew who Palamedes Sextus was. One of them said, “They finished sweeping for wards. We’re clear. Juno, do you want the honours?” and she said, “*Do I,*” and she sliced the ARCHAEOLOGY DEPARTMENT tape seal, and she fitted the key within the lock.

“Key fits, door responds—put that down on the record,” said Archivist Zeta, and opened the door wide.

Everyone filed in. It was a smaller space than a modern Library office, owing to the thick walls and the fact that each available wall was crammed high with bookshelves. Shadowy floor-to-ceiling rows of books cramped the already-tight space. The air in the room must have been suctioned at some point in the last four centuries during base maintenance, but it was still thick with dust. Somebody said, “Should still be wired. I’m turning on the light, Archivist,” and an overhead bulb lit up the scene.

Apart from bookshelves, the study had a solid desk—flimsy veneer to look like wood—big and old-fashioned, with an electronic keypad on top instead of a keyhole for the drawers. There were a few grey mounds that were probably a sofa and a couple of chairs, covered to keep off the dust. Archivist Zeta said, “Walking and breathing is fine. We’re not masking up; leave thalergy signatures all you like. But we’re not cleared to touch anything until we get this examination signed off.”

The Warden had stopped at the threshold. He had a look on his face I knew well. He said, “Archivist, did the Doctor keep observational bones?”

“What? No; he did softs. Not much of a bone adept, apparently. Ty, any bones on the manifest?”

“Inlay on some of the books and bookcases,” said a team member.

“Then I submit for record: two hand skeletons on the desk,” said the Warden politely.

This caused immediate consternation. Everyone moved forward to look. Six people crowding together, trying not to touch anything, was a lot to fit. I kept out of it, but I got a good initial examination.

The Warden had been right. The desk wasn't cluttered by Sixth House standards, but it hadn't been tidied. Donald Sex had put his tools down one day and never returned to get things organised. There was a pile of flimsy documentation in a tin tray, and a heavy penholder, and a blotter for stamping. These had all been left at angles to each other. One of the drawers gaped open, empty except for a nest of crumpled tissue paper. On the blotter sat a jointed brown sphere, perfectly circular except for one long segment ready to snap in and join its brethren. In the light it looked a lot like wood. Beside the sphere and the penholder there were, as my necromancer had pointed out, two skeletonised hands.

There was no trace of fat or muscle. The bones of the fingers, palms, and wrists were still intact down to the carpal segments, where they ended suddenly: to my eyes, unevenly. At least not cleanly. They were spread out on the desk, supplicating upwards to the ceiling, the palmar bones lying heavy. The ivory had a dull orange cast to it in the lamplight.

The Archivist said, “Caspar, Ty, up front. Move to the back, please, everyone else. Put down on the record that we've found remains,” and someone else was saying, “Someone check for more bone presence in the room.”

“Half these books are inlaid; good luck without gear.”

“If the room's been vacuumed, the remnant thalergy should've gone with it, surely?”

“That's not always the case. It's not deep space exposure—”

Archivist Zeta said, with an edged cheerfulness, “The King Undying resurrected us with eyeballs for a *reason*, children.”

I'd searched the room already. I hadn't seen any other bones, but as we

didn't have clearance to look under the chair covers, it wasn't exactly a thorough sweep. The Warden made a cursory scan but kept staring at the hands, then the floor, and then the ceiling. I left him alone. The team were debating whether or not they were allowed to lift up the rug when the Archivist said, "That's enough. Make a note of no other immediately visible remains. Julia, psychometry on the hands, please."

"What, *me*? Archivist, I'm not as good as you."

"You're better than I am on organics, my child, and I want accuracy."

The team member eased off their left-hand glove, shook their hand loose, and reached out to the left-hand set of bones. I wasn't close enough to see what bone was grasped between thumb and forefinger. It was something above the metacarpals.

Eventually, they said, "Has anyone got any gel? This can't be right."

The Archivist said, "Don't pass judgment. Tell me the reading."

"It's two hundred years," said Julia.

Another of them said, "Can't be. The room's been locked up for four hundred and sixty."

"I'm really getting two hundred. I wish I had a conductive, but I didn't bring any."

"Did the vacuum ... I don't know, impair the thalergy degradation?"

Juno said, "That wouldn't have messed with the cortex measurement. Bone layers can obscure a reading, but we're talking single-digit discrepancies, not in the hundreds. This is why I can't stand bones; they're filthy beasts."

The Warden said, "Here," and proffered a little tub of sensory gel from the breast pocket of his robes. He always was organised, even then. Archivist Zeta said approvingly, "Bless the boy," and the hapless Julia immediately applied the gel to thumb and forefinger. They grasped again, and after a moment, removed their fingers—the bone was shiny and whitish where they had touched it, as though cleaned from contact—and said:

"I was right. What? Two hundred and ten, *max*."

Everyone talked at once, except for the Warden, and except for me:

"What's that, *red* form? I didn't bring a red form; did you?"

"It's not the red form anymore. Incidental bones can file under the

greens.”

“*Incidental bones—*”

“No, it’s back to red. Green flimsy uses more stamper ink.”

“This is ridiculous. It’s going to turn out that he kept his nephew’s unregistered bones on the desk, or something, and they weren’t listed on the manifest: That’s always how it ends up.”

“His nephew, born *two hundred years after he died*? Think for half a second, will you?”

“This was so much nicer when you used the white form for everything and attached a coloured bit at the bottom when you handed it in,” said one of the team, but someone else said, “Not for the admin staff, which I do understand.”

“Sod admin, honestly—”

“Come on, that’s not very—”

Archivist Zeta said, “Shut *up*, you lot; this is not a Third House debutant party.” And everyone shut up.

In the resulting quiet she said, “Yes it’s the red form. Yes, we’ll need some villain from Archeo to sign off on this, so someone go fetch one. Please try not to get anyone who’s doing work on ersatz Sixth burial: I don’t want to see my lovely study come under a foreign power again. It’s ours. We won it fair and square. I’ll stay here to keep an eye out while you get the forms, and also a couple of hot drinks, please, because this will be a long one.”

Someone else said, “Juno, you don’t have to be the one who stays,” but the Archivist said bracingly: “Captain goes down with the shuttle, you know. Besides, I’ve got Palamedes and Camilla to keep me company. Bring a stack of red forms, please—no, I know you don’t have to do them in triplicate, but I still don’t know how to fill red out properly, and I’m sure to do something wrong.”

When the Collection team had cleared out of the study, leaving the door open, Archivist Zeta said, “You two don’t really have to keep me company. It’s not in breach of the release form if you go and do your prep., or take a dinner break.”

I didn’t have to answer. The Warden said, “No. Cam and I want to stay. This is interesting. Archivist, may I have a look around?”

“With my blessing,” she said. “I’ll finish off the initial report. You know not to touch anything, but be careful not to trip. This rug looks lethal.”

The Archivist stationed herself in the doorway so that she could have somewhere to lean safely and write. The Warden, as I had expected, drew me into a corner.

“Cam,” he said, “this is *seriously* bizarre. The state of that desk bewilders me. Did you get a good look at those hands?”

I said, “Yes. Wrist bones are uneven.”

“And there’s a lot more material on the radius on the right. I’d say it snapped, but I need another look. Did you see the pins?”

“Pins?”

“The weight in the hands was at the palms, Cam. That’s not a normal centre of gravity. The radius was pulling down to the capitate bone. I bet you my entire treat allowance that it’s been pinned.”

His eyes were shining. I demurred from betting. I said, “The bones are discoloured.”

“Yes, I noticed that. Orange. Dyed?”

I said, “It came off when touched.”

The Warden looked genuinely startled. “I didn’t notice that. I was too busy looking at—well, let’s investigate again, shall we?”

We investigated again. I had started keeping a pocket torch a few years back. We crouched down at the end of the table—this close I could see that the rightmost radius was very jagged at the end, same as the ulna—and Palamedes shone the torch from one end of the bones. The gap between bones and desk wasn’t significant, but the beam picked out a metal gleam in among the lumps. Even, round and regular, about the size of my thumbnail. The head of a pin. Clear evidence of construct pinning.

When we straightened up, I said, “But that means…”

“Yes,” said the Warden. “Let’s get more evidence. What about that discolouration?”

In the light of the torch beam, the discolouration on the finger bones was more pronounced. They were seriously orange, deeper in hue where there were divots in the bone. The greatest concentration was in the knuckles and creeks that ran between the palm bones. Where the bone had touched the

desk, the veneer was also streaked with faint orange, like a reflection. The only place that was normal bone colour was where the team member called Julia had pinched the thumb phalange. It was still greasy with gel.

I said, “Looks younger than two hundred.”

“Yes. Something retarded the oxidation process,” said the Warden. He had on his thinking expression.

“They said the room was deoxygenated.”

“That’s a few hours at a time over centuries.”

“If the bones were pinned to hold together, stands to reason they would have been treated too.”

“They have.” He flashed the torch to the very tips of the finger bones. In the light, they threw more shiny orange reflection than the rest of the phalanx extensions. “See those distals? They always get more coats, because they’re fragile. What else do you notice about them?”

The Warden loved to teach. Always did. I was an early experiment. I took the flashlight and braced myself against him so that I could lean down without touching the desk: He held my shoulders so that I could examine the distal fingertips. The beam picked out the gloss coating where they had once been given extra coats of preservative. But it wasn’t evenly done. It was thinner at the tops, where the fingers pointed towards the ceiling, and there were dull patches like callouses where the sealant had worn down. Down the middle phalange, honeycomb patches in the bone had developed in spots. Didn’t look like disease fragility. It looked like something had eaten through the bone. When I said that, he pulled me back up by the shoulders, and he stared at me.

I said, “I need to start carrying around a microscope.”

“Yes, sure, but—‘eaten through’? That’s suggestive of...” He shook my shoulders. “Cam, you’ve made a breakthrough. I was going about this the wrong way.”

“Have I?”

“You’re absolutely *brilliant*.”

“Great.”

“You are a genius.”

“Okay. Why?”

“All will be revealed in time,” he said, and took the flashlight from me again. “But we need an entry point. The door was sealed. But there had to have been another aperture if they suctioned it...”

The Warden directed the torch beam directly above us. Neatly camouflaged in one of the ceiling tiles was a grille. It looked like an old-model air conditioning vent. He raised his voice and said, “Archivist!”

“Yes?”

“Is there a service tunnel above the room?”

Archivist Zeta, to her credit, didn’t blink, or ask why we wanted to know. “Hang on. I brought a map of this level, just in case. The Archie ones are rubbish and never show you anything.” (“Of course you did,” murmured the Warden.) “Come and have a look.”

We stepped out into the hallway with her. The map above the study showed an interconnected network of tunnels for air compressors and dryers. “Yes, right here,” said the Archivist, tapping her finger on the map. “They put an accessway in a hundred years back when they started updating the basement. There’s a door next to the stairs, but you’ll need a maintenance code. Don’t worry—I memorised all the codes beforehand.” (“Of course you did,” murmured the Warden.) “We just have to make sure it’s safe to traverse.”

I said, “Is there atmosphere?”

“Not always. We’d need to check the panel,” she said, and the Warden said, “Right, because if I’m reading this map correctly, there’s a connector exhaust outside the Library?”

“Right on,” said the Archivist. “Context for the questions now, please; I’m in charge here.”

The Warden said, “Archivist, we want access to the tunnel right above the study.”

“Do we?”

“Yes,” he said. “Because I am fairly sure that if we go there, we’ll find more bones.”

Archivist Zeta looked at him, and her gaze took on a steely cast.

“Palamedes,” she said, “this will all go in the written report. I can’t crack a maintenance door without filing it, and the review panel will want to know

my reasons. You may be only thirteen, but you're wearing the Scholar's robe. I'm obliged to ask: Are you certain? Because if not, this is your reputation *and* mine on the line, despite your age."

He didn't hesitate. "I'm certain."

"Is this all above board and within regulations?"

"Utterly."

The steely look disappeared. "Right, then," said the Archivist cheerfully. "We'll have to be quick. Let's have a look on the panel. We may want to wear masks if it shows the air quality's bad. There won't be a hell of a lot of conductive thalergy or thanergy up there, so be judicious..."

But the maintenance panel light was green, and nobody needed masks. The door opened up to a ladder, and the ladder led to a small square room with a number of waist-high hatches leading from it. Archivist Zeta looked on the map to see which hatch corresponded to Donald Sex's study, flipped aside the safety latch, and tugged it open. A puff of stale air came out.

"I can't do this one. Claustrophobia," said the Archivist. "There's only room for one in there, anyway."

I said, "I'll go."

The Warden said, "Cam," but I said, "It's dusty. You'll sneeze."

"Genetic allergy. You're lucky you missed out on it," said the Archivist.

The Warden didn't want me to, but in the end he agreed. I wasn't sure if he was nervous about me or if he just wanted to observe whatever was in the tunnel. He wasn't prone to anxiety when it came to the big things. It all came out in bursts over the little struggles. I went in headfirst, and the last thing I heard was Zeta say, "Remember, Aspirant, if you do discover anything, don't make contact if you can possibly avoid it."

The tunnel was square and dark. I could have squatted and walked forward like that, but it was quicker to go on my elbows and knees. I'd told the Warden it was going to be dusty, but it wasn't. The air smelled like old pressure units and steel. The only light was from a green luminescent strip set into the corners, so I didn't have much visibility.

Zeta had said that I had about forty meters to go, with one corner, to the grille over the top of the study. Once I rounded that corner, I saw what the Warden had wanted me to find. The light from the study below shone up

through the bars of the grille. Set on the other side of the grille, facing towards me, was a skull.

I spent some time contorting myself so that I could get the flashlight out of my pocket. When I flicked it on, I saw much more than a skull. There was a whole skeleton crumpled in the knees-and-elbows posture I'd had to adopt. The right arm had been wedged in the grille, tucked underneath the otherwise-collapsed skeleton. It was at an angle, so we never would have seen it from the room below. The wrist matched the right skeleton hand, the one with the ugly, ragged end. I cast my beam over the rest of the bones. Securing pins glittered in the shoulders and all down the vertebrae. I couldn't go further to make it out, but I was ninety percent certain that at the back of the skull there would be carved an identifying construct number and a list of dates of maintenance awled into the surface.

I didn't see the number, but there was a perfectly round mark on the frontal bone. Like a sucker mark, or from a round cutter. It wasn't deep. In the flashlight beam it was gleaming white where the rest of the skull shone the same orange cast that the hands did, down on the desk below.

I didn't have a measuring tape. (I always carried measuring tape after that.) Instead I did a basic assessment using my hands, testing the space between the bars of the grille. Then I began to wriggle those forty meters backwards, which wasn't hard, except for the corner.

Once Palamedes and the Archivist pulled me out by the feet, I took the flashlight out of my mouth and turned it off. I said, "Skeleton servitor, missing its arms from below the olecranal point. Matches description of the bones on the desk."

"We're going to need so many forms," said the Archivist.

"That's not all," I said.

Zeta exclaimed as I relayed everything I had seen to them, in detail. Palamedes was very still when I described the position of the arm, stuck in the grille.

"Levering posture," he murmured.

But when I described the white circle on the skeleton's forehead he went dead silent and put on his thinking face. The Archivist said, perplexed, "What in the River could have happened?" but the Warden said, "Can we go back

down to the study, please?”

“Of course—this mystery is going to take a team of adepts and plenty of time in the archives. The rest of our lot ought to be back with the new Sex form shortly, anyway,” said the Archivist.

The Warden and I again decided not to.

The team hadn't returned to the study. Palamedes made a beeline for the desk. He looked up at the grille where the servitor skeleton lay in the tunnels above, then back at the desk. He said, “Cam, the grille—”

I said, “Easily big enough for the arms to fit through.”

“But not the shoulders.”

His gaze fell upon the desk again. I thought he was looking at the penholder. The Warden was a fiend for stealing pens. But I'd misapprehended the angle. He wasn't looking at the penholder at all.

When the Archivist's team came back, they had forms and two members of the Archaeology department with them. These were bewildered, then horrified. I think they had only half believed Data Collections' story. They went with Zeta to look at the desk as we hung back.

“No, it was sealed,” one of them said. “Sex was famously cagey about passcodes and keys. Shasta inherited the only key, and we never got clearance to cut another. Anyway, the door's on the central system. It opened today, and it opened four hundred and sixty years ago—when they went in to put slipcovers over the furniture and sign off on the manifest, a few days after the Doctor died. Apparently he wanted to be moved back into the study after he'd had his fall, but he was dead within days. That's it. This is really bizarre.”

“There's more, I'm afraid,” said Zeta, and told them what we had found in the service tunnel. Everyone talked a lot. They pulled out more forms.

“There goes my break-in theory,” said one of the Collections team. “Damn. I love a heist.”

One of the Archaeology duo said to the Warden, “You didn't touch anything, did you?” He didn't know who the Warden was, not by sight anyway.

“Not at all,” said the Warden. “But I know what happened now.”

It took a few seconds for people to realise what he'd said. When they did,

everyone turned to look at him and me. I said, “I don’t.”

“Don’t you, Cam?” said the Warden.

I demurred, “Well, not the *why*.”

One of the Archaeology people said, “What is this? Student presentations?” and someone from the team shushed him, but another one from our team said, “Scholar Sextus, it’ll be hell to pay if you’ve used psychometry,” and the Warden said, “It’s obvious, if you think.”

“Nobody likes a smug child, Scholar; pony up,” said the Archivist.

Palamedes took off his spectacles, cleaned them on the front of his robe, and said:

“It was Doctor Sex himself, of course.”

In the puzzled silence that followed, he added, “Look. Add the different pieces together. Here are the hands of a servitor skeleton; the rest of it is up in the tunnel above. It’s had two very interesting jobs, and those interesting jobs let us know how it got here. The *last* job it had was doing external maintenance. The job before that was common area maintenance—specifically the Copper Garden. That’s how it met the Doctor—so to speak.”

He slid his glasses back on to his face.

“Archivist Zeta, you told us that a Fifth scholar tried to call back the Doctor’s spirit for research purposes, and didn’t get anywhere. I think he *did* get somewhere, just not quite far enough. He must have created enough of a connection for the Doctor’s ghost to establish itself as a revenant in its own body—but, of course, it couldn’t get out of its copperwork. So it jumped across a thanergetic link to one of the cleaning servitors. Sixth bloodlines probably helped, presuming the corpus was a distant relative, although either way his success implies copper is more thanergetically permeable than we thought, which might have applications.”

No one asked him about the applications. He looked momentarily crestfallen, and then said, “Anyway, the Doctor takes himself down to his study—but the door’s been mechanically sealed. So what does he do? Makes his way to external maintenance and brazenly goes out with the other servitors. The staff would have assumed that he was assigned there, and suited him up accordingly. When he didn’t return, they never would have noticed, because he wasn’t on the outside manifest in the first place. You’ll

find that a skeleton assigned for external maintenance went missing two hundred years ago, when you cross-check that. Once he got *extra muros*, the Doctor climbed around to an outside exhaust, and crawled through. The hatch would have been locked, but we never change the exhaust codes, so I bet he still knew what they were. The final hurdle was the grille. No way he'd fit through. But he only needed his hands, and the bars had space for those—Camilla checked—so he broke off the left, cleanly, and levered off the right, not so cleanly. I don't think I'd do a better job if I was trying to snap off my remaining hand with a grille.”

One of the Collections team found their voice and said, “Scholar Sextus, this is all conjecture. Unless you've used psychometry, in which case it's a breach.”

I was pleased they'd called him *Scholar Sextus*. He said crisply, “Nonsense. Using necromancy for everything makes you soft. I can prove all of it, and you can double-prove it with thanergy signatures once it's cleared the Oversight Body—which will be what, next year?”

Zeta said, “Less of the sass, please. You can make jokes about the Oversight Body once you've served on it. How can you *definitively* show that the bones are from a cleaning servitor?”

“They're pinned,” I said. I started putting my weight on one foot, rolling my centre of gravity forward, then on the other. Helps me think.

“Yes, Aspirant, but we pin skeletons for any number of reasons. You learnt anatomy on a pinned skeleton.”

The Warden said, “The only way into the study is through the door, or through the outside exhaust vent.” One of the Archaeologists interrupted, “Or the accessway,” but Palamedes said, “It hadn't been built at the time. This was two-hundred-plus years ago. So there's the door—which he couldn't breach, as there was only one key—and going through the outside—and the Library doesn't let you climb outside willy-nilly. Then look at the bones. They were covered in orange thermalose, and it degraded over time.”

I said, “You can't definitively say it's thermal paste.” I said it before anyone else could say it.

“No, but the fact that it's all over the skeleton is suggestive. That by itself would just be conjecture, I agree, if not for the umbilicus mark on the

forehead. That plus the fact that there is literally no way into the study otherwise adds up to external-maintenance construct. Test the powder all you want.”

Someone else said, “The Copper Garden part is guesswork.”

“No,” I said. “Examine the fingertips. There’s light to medium acid damage.”

“For any heavy chemical job they would have gloved the servitor,” added the Warden, looking at me warmly. “But there’s one menial job where they wouldn’t have bothered, and where the cleanser is acid, not bio—cleaning big breadths of copper.”

The first speaker said, “Come on,” but another replied, a little unwillingly, “That adds up.”

The man called Caspar said, “All right, it’s a cleaning servitor. But why *Donald*? Why would he have come back to his study? What was so important that he made himself a *revenant*, which does not exactly happen every day? Much more likely someone went full Ninth and puppeted the servitor to gain unauthorised access.”

“The Fifth researcher came to try to raise the Doctor around the time the skeleton was dated,” said Palamedes simply. “If you prise open his copper coffin, I bet you’ll find something to confirm my conclusion. In any case, the Doctor was the only one who could have opened that drawer.”

Everyone turned to look at the open drawer. The Warden added, “This office was locked up. They covered the furniture. The drawers would have been shut. And as you just said—the Doctor was cagey. Who else would have known his passcodes?”

The tension in the room changed. They were looking at him with a different kind of suspicion: the terrible suspicion that he was right.

Archivist Zeta burst out with, “But *why*? Revenants come back out of passion, Sextus! It must have been his final theory—his final project, but there’s nothing that looks like that here.”

I said, “What was his final project about?”

One of the Collections team said, “It was post-Resurrection thalergy fluctuations, wasn’t it? Wasn’t his crackpot theory that there was greater thalergy and thanergy saturation right after the Resurrection?”

“He was doing archaeological forensic thalergy,” said someone else. “Destroying the Archeo budget grinding up paper.”

And another person said, “Lots of object requests.”

“I’ve got a theory,” said the Warden, and this time, they looked at him the way they would have looked at a colleague. He said, “But it’ll involve touching something—just the one thing. Isn’t there provision to do that in the handbook, if I’m gloved, and it’s in service of retrieving more important material? May I?”

Archivist Zeta said, “You’re pushing it,” but the man called Caspar said, “It’s a gamble, Scholar. Still—quick vote in favour? Show of hands?”

The hands went up, at varying speeds. There was a brief argument between two of them regarding best practice and policy. But that’s the Sixth. Their hands went up too in the end. And so, last of all, did Archivist Zeta’s. I assume she felt she had to be extra careful. I raised my hand with her as her attaché.

“Thank you for the opportunity,” said the Warden.

They gave him thick plastic gloves, pure oil derivative, no organic material. He surprised me by not reaching for the bones. He reached past them to the sphere, and when he nodded at me, I held the flashlight beam to it. I had never seen wood close up before. Later on they would confirm that it was real. He weighed it between his gloved hands, and said quietly, “This must have been a bastard to solve. Thank you, Doctor.” Then he put the tip of one gloved finger on the extended bar of wood, and pushed.

The bar slid home, leaving a perfect and unbroken wooden sphere. There was a *click*.

“He must only have worked out how to do it after his death,” said the Warden.

“That’s so Sixth that I might be ill,” said Zeta. “But why did he leave it with one move to go?”

The *click* had heralded part of the top of the sphere coming loose. There was a seam in it now, like a lid. The Warden opened the lid, and he stared at something within, fragile and white.

When the others saw what it was they immediately pulled us back. The Sixth House machine sprang to life. One of the Archaeologists shrieked. We

got hustled outside, and half of them rushed off for barrier tape and a containment team with tweezers and a lithograph maker. They immediately turned off all the lights to avoid hurting the box's cargo. Everyone was slapping each other on the back. "Oh, thank God it's us," they kept saying. "If this had gone to the Repository they might have never opened it at all." Everyone was as pleased as though they had just been invited to a party. Archivist Zeta's Collections team kept hugging like they were back at their matriculation ceremonies. Everyone was happy, and talking over each other, and kept shaking my hand and the Warden's, even if they had already shaken them twice.

At some point they remembered that the Warden and I were thirteen. We got sent off late to dinner hour with a note of apology while they started preparations. I was pretty hungry. The Warden was too busy scribbling on a piece of flimsy and it was a pain getting him to eat. By the time we were finished the dining hall was abandoned except for the wait staff and the servitors on dish duty.

Archivist Zeta showed up when I was done and the Warden was mostly done. "Well, you were bang on right," she said. "We bagged up the hallway skeleton, and found an ancient AWOL tag on it from two hundred years ago. It went missing from—guess—Copper Garden duty. Worse, the committee gave us on-the-spot permission to exhume Doctor Sex—they do move quick when you use the *R* word—and would you believe it? His *finger bones were worn down!* He'd tried to open that thing from the inside. *Ghoulish*. Sex was one intense revenant."

The Warden said, "That's been nagging at me. If he was that intense, why did he stop at the last leg? Why not open the box all the way?"

The Archivist fiddled with one of the hairpins at the back of her bun, eyes distant. Then she said, "His study had been sealed. He knew that the Archies might not get to him for years and years and years. What's inside that sphere is paper ... real, delicate paper ... and even if he didn't know precisely what it was, he may have had a good idea. Opening the sphere would have meant exposing it to the elements. He preferred to defer the satisfaction of solving the puzzle fully so that someone in the future could benefit from his final deduction."

“That’s conjecture,” said the Warden.

“Oh, entirely,” said Zeta. “But it’s what I hope to God I’d do in his position. Maybe the last burst of spirit energy left him after he destroyed part of his host body, and he was just too exhausted to continue. Who knows?”

We all fell silent for a moment. Then the Warden said, more brightly: “Any hope of extracurricular points, if I do a Scholar’s report? I’ve got the right to submit one.”

“You’ll have to submit it to the committee. I won’t pull strings. They *might* give you one point, considering,” said the Archivist.

“*One?*”

“Greedy! I would have been overjoyed to receive a full extra grade point when I was your age,” said the Archivist. “What *is* your ambition, Palamedes? Wait—don’t tell me. I don’t want to know, and I won’t let myself influence you. Don’t expire in a fit of hubris.”

“I don’t think I should take that from someone who made Scholar at fifteen,” he said.

Archivist Zeta reached forward and, in a rare moment of affection, ruffled his hair. “Like mother, like son, eh?” she said.

“Dad likes to say so,” admitted Palamedes.

“Tell the man Juno Zeta never scared the local wildlife as *you* just did—or at least, I waited a whole seven years longer. You’re going to have to present this to the Oversight Body, you know, you poor young fool. The biscuits they’ve been serving in the break are really awful. Good luck—and I’d like that report within six study days, please. You know where my pigeonhole is.”

When she had safely left, we looked at each other. Then we gave each other a ringing high five.

“A whole *extra* bloody *grade* point,” he said. “God, we’re good. Cam, you’re brilliant. The greatest future cavalier. My favourite second cousin in a very wide field that you nonetheless dominate.”

“Palamedes,” I began.

“Yes, Camilla?” he said.

I looked at him. He looked at me.

We burst out laughing. We laughed so hard that every time one of us

stopped, the other one started us going again, just with a look, to the point where we were in real physical pain. The kitchen staff kicked us out, but the Warden was still wheezing—

“Doctor Sex!”

★ ★ ★

They took the paper in the puzzle box away from the Warden before he could see the full page. But the Warden remembers everything he ever read. He only saw a scrap of it, and that would have been more than enough. Over the years, he always maintained it was a love letter.

He should know. He wrote a lot of them, and never got any back.

Darling girl,

Tomorrow you will become a Lyctor and finally go where I can't follow. I want you to keep this letter when you are far away and think of me and want me and can't have me, and know that no matter how far you travel, nor how long the years feel, the one thing that never stays entombed is

I don't have a copy any more. He and I burned the transcript to keep from getting caught with it. He didn't need one anyway. Nor did I. Palamedes remembers everything: That was his problem.

I always remember him. That's mine.

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