

Sneak Peek of DEMON ON DECK

Spa visits were fifty percent less relaxing with a murder in the building. Even spas as painstakingly detailed and chic as Thermae, where no expense had been spared to re-create ancient Roman baths.

The corpse had been fished out of the tepidarium, the largest of four caves at Thermae, each one designed to immerse visitors in an authentic experience.

I looked up at the ceiling arching over the warm pool. The knotted-up tension in my neck and shoulders had eased thanks to the hint of lavender in the air and the soothing instrumental music piped in through speakers hidden in the rough-hewn rocks forming the walls and ceiling. Both were highly appreciated to tone down my amped excitement and nerves on my first solo lead case, even though I was still a level two operative.

Gently glowing pot lights and pillar candles in heavy glass containers painted the ripples golden. It looked heavenly. However, as tempted as I was to book a treatment, a dead person's bathwater was not a selling point.

That said, this was far nicer than a normal crime scene.

Slipping on a pair of latex gloves, I crouched down next to the victim, careful not to slide on the damp pool deck pavers made of sumptuous blue stone, and winced at the soreness in my muscles. My glutes resented split squats with a fiery passion.

Mason Trinh, my fellow Maccabee operative, swiped beneath the woman's thumbnail with a thin, moistened swab. "Three guesses as to cause of death and the first two don't count. Or does that fall under higher critical thinking and knock you out of the running?"

A heart attack or drowning would have been reasonable assumptions, were it not for the fat wooden stake jammed through the woman's heart.

"Oh, you're in fine form today, you cranky old stump," I said cheerfully.

His mouth kicked up in a half-smile, his bushy mustache twitching in amusement.

"Nice heft and girth, classic lines." I nodded in approval. "This stake is a beauty for killing vamps, but it's an odd choice of murder weapon for an Eisei Kodesh." I hadn't yet confirmed that our victim was a human with magic abilities, but it was a solid assumption. Had she been a vampire, all that would have been left of her was a clump of ashes, and stakes didn't work on demons.

Ask me how I knew.

Mason sealed up the swab as evidence. His careworn expression deepened, the bags under his eyes seeming to develop new bags. “Forty years as an operative, I thought I’d seen it all, but staking someone?” He gestured to a hank of his graying hair with a latex-gloved hand, shooting me an accusing glare. “I’ve aged before my time. Idiots. What is wrong with people?”

I stood up and smoothed out my navy pinstriped trousers. “Don’t look at me. I’m neither stupid nor depraved.”

“True. I’ve got six or seven different adjectives for your list.”

“That’s still fourteen shorter than my selection for you,” I said sweetly. This was regular banter for us. Actually, I was one of the few people who looked forward to our interactions, and this was how he spoke to operatives he half respected and tolerated.

Come to think of it, I’d never met anyone who’d earned his outright admiration.

Other than Director Michael Fleischer, that is.

Mason was a legend in Maccabee circles for single-handedly solving several high-profile cases that had baffled the organization. However, the Vietnamese Canadian operative had moved from investigations to forensics about twenty years ago with a very public declaration that he’d rather spend the rest of his working days with corpses than the incompetent living.

Some days I didn’t blame him.

I returned my attention to the dead woman, whom I judged to be in her early forties. The top of her navy bathing suit was soaked in blood, one of the straps hanging off a shoulder. Funny how being stabbed ruined perfectly good swimwear. Less expected was that although her hazel eyes were wide open and her lips were parted in a slight gasp of surprise, other than that, there were no signs of tension like clenched fists, or any indication that she’d struggled with her attacker at all.

“This feels personal,” I said.

“Really?” Mason said scathingly enough to flay a person. “You don’t think someone happened to be carrying a stake, looked in at reception, and thought, I could book a facial, but that’s more of a Tuesday move.”

“Aw, there’s the tone of voice that makes newbs cry.”

He chuckled. “Worked on you more than once.”

“I’m older and deader inside now.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“Are you done with the sarcasm?”

He shrugged. “Eh. But please. Continue.”

“This wasn’t random,” I said, “and I’d also rule out a contract killing, unless the murderer had instructions to send a message. Off the top of my head, that narrows the possibilities to a vamp or demon compulsion to render her motionless.”

“White flame magic is also a contender,” he said.

Those Eisei Kodesh dealt in burning passions. They amped up people’s emotions, and a powerful one could magically flood someone with calm to the point of remaining practically comatose if attacked. Handy for them, but a pain in the butt to deal with as the operative bringing them in. I hated having my emotions toyed with, for more than one reason.

“True,” I said. “Still, an Eisei Kodesh would require a lot of upper-body strength to jam that stake through skin, muscle, and bone.”

Say what you would about vampires, the same magic that enhanced their speed, hearing, smell, and strength made them vulnerable to a simple wooden stake. That still didn’t make it easy to use one. I regularly did punishing weight training sessions and went on long runs to maintain my strength and stamina, and I didn’t expect to fight many vampires in my line of work. I mostly policed Eisei Kodesh crimes.

All of which brought me back to how it would be much harder to use a stake on a human. Especially for the average person with a desk job and perilously little in the way of shoulder strength.

Ooh, this case was going to prove fun to puzzle out. Not that I wished death on anyone, but I’d spent the last two days helping out on an embezzlement case involving a fried chicken chain, where I’d combed through reams of mind-numbing files that reeked of grease.

“What else do you read from the body?” Mason liked to lob pop quizzes at operatives that had only two grades: begrudging pass or withering contempt.

The woman sported gel polish—intact and recently touched up—on all her nails and her makeup was tastefully applied.

“She came here before work,” I said. “A business owner, maybe a CEO?”

Her shoulder-length strawberry-blond hair fanned out on the deck around her head like a peacock’s tail, though her cool undercut on one side was in need of a touch-up.

“Not any field too conservative,” I added, “given her hairstyle.”

“The spa owner said our vic ran a private consulting firm,” Mason said. “Emily Astor. Red Flame. There’s a number and address in her file. She’s been coming to Thermae every six months or so for a few years now.”

He grunted, removed a pair of scissors from his bag, and cut open Emily’s bathing suit. The stake had been jammed in with so much force that it was splintered at the entry point.

An elaborate tattoo of vines and flowers tattoo covered her torso. It was misshapen from the swelling and bruising on her chest, with one very odd detail.

A perfect two-inch circle of the tattoo was missing around the wound.

“You know,” I heard myself saying, “somehow I don’t think she got herself tattooed specifically with a big stake-me-here piece missing. That’s...huh.”

“Emily Astor,” Mason said slowly, “said she was a Red Flame.”

I gestured to the perfect circle. “This is not normal—”

Mason held up a hand. “Say she lied. Say she was a Yellow Flame, the kind with inherent healing magic.” He sighed. “That would explain the tattoo removal, but it would have kicked in while her killer was staking her, and also fixed her ribs. Any guesses as to how many of those are still broken?”

I scowled. “I’m going to guess it’s not the answer it should be for a Yellow Flame healer, which would be zero.”

“Two.”

“Then what’s going on here?” I threw my hands up. “Is this another teachable moment?”

“No.” His seriousness alarmed me. The most experienced forensics expert on Maccabee staff was honestly perplexed about something?

“The gap definitely isn’t on purpose. It’s not part of the design.” I narrowed my eyes, comparing the ink-free area with the rest of the tattoo. “It’s as if the stake broke the magic anchoring the ink in place and that much of her skin healed before she died. Except humans don’t require magic to prevent automatic tattoo healing.” A chill came over me. “Only vampires do.”

Vamps’ fast-acting healing abilities meant they couldn’t keep a tattoo on their body without Eishet Kodosh magic pinning it to their skin. Without the assistance of this human magic, or in a case where that magic pinning was broken, say with a stake, a vamp’s tattoo would start to disappear.

Except, there was one enormous problem with that line of thinking.

“Vamps don’t leave a body behind when they’re killed.” Mason muttered under his breath about clusterfucks happening three months away from his retirement.

I barely registered his comment over my heartbeat thudding against my chest like a car careening into a concrete barrier. In a world where 99.99% of all vamps were turned humans, supernatural beings who thoughtfully vanished without a trace when staked, there existed a legendary rarity.

Born vampires, also known as Primes.

I steeled my shoulders, a sick feeling in my gut, because there was only one way to quickly verify my theory.

How exactly did one ask an ex if you could stake him, then sit back and admire your handiwork?