

An Excerpt from “The Necromancer”

I buried myself in work at the library which, thankfully, was busy enough to occupy more hours than a day provided. An alumnus of the university had died a few years ago and left a valuable bequest to the rare books department. The deceased benefactor had been an eccentric man, with an interest in the more arcane and bizarre aspects of ancient history.

Unfortunately, a private collector claimed that he had been personally promised some of the extremely rare Persian manuscripts in the bequest, and the university fought tooth and nail for three years before the library could take possession of them. It was only then that my boss and I were able to turn our translating abilities to their contents, and we learned these tomes dealt with witchcraft and black arts.

The university had second thoughts, and wondered whether burying the books on the dustiest back corner of the restricted stacks would be for the best.

Unfortunately, we already had a reader anxious to get his hands on them. He showed up the first day we had the collection, *demanding* access—that mummy of a man with discolored, crooked teeth and an odor of the bizarre

He was a strange one, shrunken and shriveled, gliding eerily up to our door in his fancy motorized wheelchair. It caused quite a bit of mayhem when he arrived. There was an elevator to our floor, of course, but a small step up to the door of the Rare Books Reading Room and the glass doors themselves presented a problem. The university administrators paid lip service to handicapped accessibility without actually applying any money to the problem. Our graduate students, Katherine and Stan, earned their work scholarships that day by wrestling the chair up that one step and through the heavy double glass doors. All the while those two kids struggled, the visitor leered at them; not with anger or embarrassment, but with some less-definable and somehow disturbing emotion.

It was all for nothing, however, because he could not view the materials he sought.

“They haven’t been cataloged yet,” I explained. “Two weeks, or three, and we’ll have the first set ready for readers.”

He smacked his lips together and then curled them back, as if settling dentures back into place, although I could not imagine that those horrible stubs were anything other than his own. “Please,” he said with a strange smile. “I can help you. I may be of service to you in this catalog process.” His hand trembling with palsy, he reached hesitatingly into a breast pocket to produce a card.

I could not place his accent, and the card was no help. *Rakhoum*, it said—just that single name with no degrees or titles. Underneath the name was a line of spidery script: *Assyrian Studies, Babylonian Thaumaturgy, Persian Antiquities*.

“Thank you for your kind offer,” I said. “But we have the appropriate personnel for the task, and we do not provide readers access to undocumented materials. You will just have to give us time to do our job.” I folded my arms and looked down on him, expecting the conversation to end there. I knew that women did not always command respect in the academic world, especially among the older generation, but I was fully as tall as any man in my department and entirely confident that my word was law.

However, this gentleman was not finished with me. “Time,” he said, with a hiss of breath, “is a thing in short supply to me.”

The graduate students looked at each other, and Katherine raised her eyebrows wryly. I gave them the stink-eye for which I was well-known, cautioning them not to dare snicker. “You have my sympathies,” I told our visitor. I turned the card over and then back again, noting the distinct lack of information. “If you were to leave a number where I might reach you, I could call you when the first set of materials are ready and save you another unnecessary trip.”

Rakhoum’s eyes glittered balefully at me from beneath sagging, veined lids. “I have already waited a very long time to see these manuscripts.”

“Ah.” I nodded and smiled grimly, realizing suddenly that this must be the man who had held up our legal acquisition of the Persian collection for three years. Now there was no way I would allow him access until we had documented and accounted for each item. “I *am* sorry,” I said, meaning the exact opposite. “My students will assist you on your way out.”

Again, he slyly observed them as they held the glass doors open with their hips and outstretched legs in order to wrestle his heavy and awkward chair down the step. The way he looked at their arms and hands, the boy and the girl both—it was more than lecherous. It was avaricious.

Frankly, it was just the sort of unsavory attention the university had feared would be attracted by these rare and ancient manuscripts on magic and sorcery.