

*It's an ugly one, sir. A little girl...can't be more than six, seven, maybe...* The words echoed in Vimes's ears. Constable Reg Shoe was gray and ashen under the best of circumstances, but Vimes would swear the zombie's skin also had a hint of a very different sort of green as he described the crime scene. *Gods, who wouldn't?* Vimes thought, staring at the sun-bleached wood of the old warehouse door, trying to steel himself enough to push it open. Constable Reg Shoe and Constable Hrolf Thighbiter had been first on the site, and had done little beyond cataloging the scene inside and sending back urgent word for the Commander and Forensics. Cheery had been in, collected evidence, was already back at Pseudopolis Yard. There hadn't been much to collect beyond the iconographs, probably, but the dwarf was awfully tender-hearted, and this case would be hard on her. Vimes put his hand up and pushed the protesting door open, letting it bang shut behind him. The lock was a joke even when it had been new, and it hadn't been new in some time. One good kick would have you inside even if you were an arthritic pensioner. The damp, rusty hinges and swollen wood probably did a more effective job of keeping people out.

Inside, the dust motes whirled and danced in the air, lit up by the sunlight streaming in the high windows, dulled only a little with the grime of the city and smears of dirt. The child was right in plain view after he took a few more steps from the door, sprawled on the cool dirt floor like a broken doll, tossed down carelessly, discarded and unheeded. Commander Sam Vimes felt the bile rise and swallowed hard. He tried to stay detached, unaffected, but that lasted all of perhaps twenty seconds. He settled for observant but angry as hell and getting angrier by the second.

She looked like a hundred other little girls that lived in Dolly Sisters, or on any of a dozen streets and corners in the middling parts of the city. The bits that weren't the Shades or on the verges, but not quite the middle class and upwardly mobile portion, either. Nondescript brown hair tucked behind ears that stuck out slightly because they were still being grown into, brown eyes wide and frozen, a sharp little chin. Not overly well-dressed, but clean enough, because the pink cheeks and white hands had a certain well-scrubbed look to them. The blouse and skirt had been washed until the pattern had mostly faded, the cotton was thinner than it was probably two or three older sisters ago, but she had the look of the well-tended and cared for, despite that. Three of the little carved wooden buttons had been pulled loose and had scattered not far from the body. The narrow, milky white chest was exposed, and a livid red mark stood out near one collarbone. The skirt was shoved up, her legs obscenely splayed. There were smears of blood. One foot was totally bare, on the other a soft, worn, brown shoe was loosed from the heel, barely hanging on at the narrow toes. The remnants of some of the cotton cloth, in tatters, ripped and cut away

from her, were scattered around her. The finger marks were plain in the purple bruises ringing her throat. They went with the giveaway redness in the eyes.

*No older than seven, surely*, he thought, swallowing against that acidic taste rising in his mouth. He dragged his eyes away and scouted around the mostly empty warehouse, among the empty crates and boxes, desperate for anything else to think about, coming up with nothing that drew much attention but a few discarded bottles of liquor, drained, and old, stale cigarette butts. The smell of booze was strongest around her. The other shoe was nowhere to be found. It must have been lost, possibly in a struggle, somewhere out in the alleyway, perhaps. He made a mental note to have eyes kept open for it. Sam Vimes squatted next to the body and gently closed the eyelids over the unblinking, wide eyes. After a moment's hesitation, he tugged the hem of the thin cotton skirt down to her knees in an effort to give the child back some decency.

The remaining shoe, barely hanging on, slipped to the floor and sounded too loud in the quiet. He realized he had been holding his breath. Vimes forced himself to breathe out, to look at the little twist of paper shoved into the toe of what was likely a hand-me-down shoe to make it fit. He tore his eyes away again and walked back into the street, slamming the door hard behind him. There were already sergeants and constables aplenty milling around out there, ready to be told what questions to ask and where to start asking them. Walking and talking would solve it, he was sure of it. Whatever Cheery collected would just help bolster the case. There would damned well be some answers given, if he had to beat on every damned door personally. First order of business would be to check on any missing child reports at the Dolly Sisters Watch House. And finding that damned missing shoe. It might tell them where whoever it was had found her, if they had grabbed her or talked her into coming along. The small bare foot bobbed accusingly in his memory.

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There was a sharp chill in the crisp air, right enough, but that wasn't what made Vimes shiver under his leather greatcoat as he made for home. The sun had already gone down hours before, the air was cold and clammy as always on late fall nights. There was a thick drift of soggy, slick leaves on the cobbles. Winter would be here soon enough. His face felt like it was on fire with rage, even against the clinging and clammy fog. Parents were always the worst. He had told his fair share of wives their husbands weren't coming home, and to be sure, that wasn't easy, especially not the last few years. Some had been officers, others victims. But nothing compared to the horror and shame of being the badge in the doorway when a mother opened up the door and knew as soon

as they looked at you. Worse yet, the occasions when they saw you and *hoped*. And then you had to cut down their hopes, first thing, because it was crueller to let them go on hoping. And it would almost have been better if they had cursed at you, spit at you, tried to hit you. Something besides just looking straight through you and not *quite* believing it.

He hadn't been able to put that job off on anyone else. He had gone to the house himself, and slipped out awkwardly and quietly once the truth had sunk in and the wailing had started in earnest. The house had been packed to the brim with relatives and neighbors already. There were only so many times you could say you were sorry and promise to do all you could. To see that they were arrested and brought in, fair and square, so there could be a trial and at least an imitation of justice. Which seemed like pitifully little. Finding them and stringing them up by their entrails still alive didn't seem like enough.

He had eaten part of a hurried sandwich at the Watch House earlier in the evening, and now bed was beckoning hard. The Night Watch had, if there was any doubt in their minds, been told in no uncertain terms and at a thoroughly unmistakable volume and tone that following up the leads already gathered was top priority. This case was top priority. Mistakes were not to be tolerated. Some monsters should not walk under the living sky. These two were definitely on that list. Animals who could do that to a little girl were going to swing if he had anything to do with it. The warehouse and alleyway had been scoured, then nearby streets, and the shoe was still missing. What hadn't been missing were people who had seen the little girl with two men. Two men who were going to be identified and hunted to the edges of the Disc if necessary.

Vimes put his hand in his pocket for the keyring floating among the bits of flotsam that usually inhabit coat pockets and automatically worked the house key in the lock, not really seeing it. His head throbbed and his jaw felt tight. It was late enough that even a butler as thorough as Willikins couldn't be faulted for being in bed, and Vimes was a little thankful for it. He didn't think he could take anything like a cheerful greeting. The bottom story was dark. He stripped off his armor and locked the door behind him, leaving his coat on the hook in the front hall. Last, he pulled off his boots and crept up the stairs as quietly as possible, pausing just long enough to put his uniform in the laundry basket in his dressing room. He was only slightly surprised to push the bedroom door open and find that the weak light of the fireplace was accompanied by a guttering lamp not too far from the bed. A little moonlight straggled in through the window. It was just enough light to see that Sybil was curled up on the bed, on top of the covers, her dressing gown still tied over the nightgown, as though she hadn't meant to fall asleep. Her feet were bare and pale in the half light. His insides

gave a crazed, sick lurch and he tried to block it out.

Vimes ran his hand through his hair and tried to will some of the tension out of his shoulders. Gods, he hated cases like this one. Maybe it was being a married man that did it. Not that cases with kids or women had ever been easy, but... it was times like these he sincerely wanted a drink worse than usual. Something to drown out the wondering about what possessed people to do things like this. And he couldn't have a drink. One drink was one too many and even ten wouldn't be enough, and the details would just come back the instant you sobered up anyway. Along with everything else. The things you saw as a watchman. It was part of the reason why Captain Sam Vimes had once spent very little time sober.

Worse, he hated the details of cases like this one getting back to Sybil. She wouldn't ask him about it. She wouldn't *need* to ask him about it, he would know when she knew. She would be just that little extra bit encouraging and supportive, and watch him like a man on a ledge, wondering where to put the portable safety net. And this one *would* get back to her. It would be one of those tales that carried unchecked, as gossip in the wild. It wouldn't even need mouths and ears. He padded over to the lamp and blew it out before slipping into bed, pulling the extra blanket folded neatly at the foot of the mattress over the both of them. He felt ever so slightly grateful and a touch guilty for doing so when Sybil continued sleeping soundly anyway. There were some late nights or early mornings that he would be, he had to admit, even if it was only in the complete privacy of his own head, a touch noisy on purpose and grateful for even a few minutes of usually unimportant things to talk about. Just for the company and the comfort it offered, the assurance that there were still some normal and sane things in the world. Something to treat like an anchor. But the last thing he wanted right now was sympathetic ears or trusting eyes or anything comforting. Just now, what he *really* wanted was someone pounding on the front door before sunup, telling him they had names and had tracked the bastards down.

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Vimes got his wish. Or at least half of it. There was a thin, streaky gray pre-dawn light barely making it through the window when the pounding came at the door. Names. They had names. And solid leads on where they might be staying. He staggered through getting dressed hurriedly, half-asleep but still careful not to make too much noise, mindful of the fact that after a weak, mumbled query, Sybil had gone straight back to snoring softly. She had seemed unusually tired these last few weeks. He had even worried a couple of mornings ago that she might be coming down with something, since she had barely picked at her

breakfast. He would get some coffee at Pseudopolis Yard if there was time. Breakfast could wait this morning.

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“Detritus... the door...” Vimes growled, looking at the little ramshackle rented house as though willing himself to see through the walls. *Be there, you bastards. Be there.* The door was matchsticks in seconds under the troll’s bunched fist and the two of them, still nursing nasty hangovers and barely awake, put up a fight. Vimes took a perverse pleasure in the fact that the first one he had latched onto foolishly tried to punch him. A well-placed elbow and knee had him balled up on the floor, winded, in short order. There was still some scuffling while the cuffs were put on, but neither of them would be getting away, not with Detritus so effectively blocking the opening where the door had been. They weren’t armed, save for their fists. And there it might have ended, a very neat arrest, an end to an ugly case, as close to justice as you were going to get.

If it hadn’t been for the shoe.

Vimes spotted the shoe lying on the table next to one bed, like a godsdamned hunting trophy. He picked it up and turned it over in his hands. It was a small, brown slipper, with the paper still in the toe. A little girl’s shoe. A pale foot filled his vision. “Hey, that’s mine! Give it back! We didn’t do nothin’!” the nearest one of them shouted, still too drunk to show good sense. And then he was stupid enough to make a ham-fisted grab for the shoe. The handcuffs and drink made him clumsy, and the best he could manage was catching Vimes’s arm with thick fingers sporting dirty fingernails, pawing and shoving like a schoolboy in a playground fight. One very bad at fighting. One that was used to people backing off because he was bigger. *He put his filthy hands on that child, violated her like that. He did it, and then took the little girl’s shoe. Took her shoe. Her shoe. Her. Shoe.*

The world went a vivid red for Vimes. His blood was roaring and boiling in his ears and he had the bastard shoved up against the wall, lifting him, his feet dangling even though he was a couple of inches taller and a couple of stone heavier, screaming at him, slamming him against the wood. The words seemed to be coming from elsewhere. There was just the Beast. Maybe they weren’t even words. He thought he heard Detritus shout at the watchmen stationed outside. There were a few confused moments, or maybe an eternity, before Detritus finally wrenched him back bodily with as little force as possible for a troll, slow like a glacier and just about as irresistible, and the big troll’s voice cut through the evil buzzing in his ears. “Mister Vimes! We got dem! Dey ain’t gettin’

away!” There was a pause and the sergeant put his massive hand on Sam’s shoulder and rested it there. “We got dem. Dey ain’t resistin’ arrest or assaultin’ a Watch officer no more. You can put der weapon away,” he added more quietly, turning him around. There was a gentle note of warning to his tone.

Sam looked mutely at the sword in his hand, the white knuckled grip he had on it, for several seconds before sheathing it. The other watchmen, called in by Detritus, gave him a slightly sidelong look as they hustled the subdued men out of the room. Detritus hustled them out a little faster by barking an order, leaving the man alone with the troll, who gave the Commander a pretty good approximation of the studying Look-with-a-capital-L his wife sometimes gave him. Sam swallowed and tried to find words again. “You don’t understand. Her shoe. They stole her shoe, Detritus. They did *that* to her and stole... her *shoe*...like a... a *trophy*... She was just a little slip of a thing...” His own voice sounded unaccountably far away. He stared at the seemingly harmless lump of brown leather on the floor. *She was hardly more than a baby, and they took a souvenir. Said it was theirs.*

“I know dat, sir. I know. Maybe you should just go home after we get dem booked,” Detritus rumbled. The big, knobbly hand was practically holding him up, now. His legs felt like rubber, his head like lead, most of the rest of him felt like a spring in a clock that had been wound too tight and then left to spin wildly when the gears had been stripped. He hadn’t really slept last night, he had just done a fair imitation of it while his mind had churned the scene over and over again. There hadn’t been time for breakfast or even coffee once they had an address.

“We got enough on duty to take dem to der Tanty. Dis’ll be a Tanty offense. Lance Constable Bluejohn can come, too. Dey won’t be goin’ anywhere but der Tanty, I’ll make sure of dat,” Detritus said. “Get some sleep. Her Ladyship wouldn’t like us lettin’ you go dead on yer feet. Go home, Mister Vimes.”

Something peculiar about the tone and choice of words finally cut through the last of the mental haze. Sam gave the big troll an appraising look. “I just might,” Vimes allowed.

“It would be a good idea, sir,” Detritus pronounced solemnly, removing the heavy hand and lowering it to the floor, the knuckles making a solid *thunk* noise. “Done all we can do, sir. And after dat, you go home and enjoy what you have got at home and are grateful for it.”

Vimes squinted up into the big troll’s steady gaze, a mild suspicion forming at

the back of his mind. Detritus was one of his best officers, all things considered. And he could be as over-protective as a mother hen and strangely insightful about certain things, sometimes. Vimes nodded slowly, pictured Ruby and wondered briefly if there were cases Detritus wished didn't get around, too. "I'll do that," Vimes said, finally breaking eye contact and heading for the door. As he made his way away from the poky little room, he wondered if maybe the sergeant understood a little better than he had given him credit for after all.

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Sybil pinched the bridge of her nose. Most of her would not have considered Sam Vimes guilty of murder, actual *murder*, even on the evidence of three gods and a message written on the sky. But... stories did get back to her, in a roundabout way. Sam got wound up about things. Sometimes he unwound all at once. There had been that... bad business with that little girl and those men over at Dolly Sisters, and when Sam had broken in to the men's lodging he found one of them had stolen one of her shoes, and she'd heard Detritus say that if he hadn't been there, only Sam would have walked out of the room alive... - The Fifth Elephant