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# Nekropolis

## Tim Waggoner

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Extract

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an excerpt from
NEKROPOLIS
Tim Waggoner

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Papa Chatha's shop was on the other side of the Sprawl from Skully's, and while navigating the maze of cramped streets was never easy, this time of year it was a nightmare, both figuratively and literally. It was the anniversary of the Descension, and the Sprawl, always party central for Nekropolis, had become a mix of Las Vegas and Disneyland (assuming the Haunted Mansion had exploded and taken over the entire park) during both Mardi Gras and New Year's Eve. Beings of every description – and quite a few who defied description – choked the streets, drinking, shouting, singing, groping, slapping, hitting, dancing, screwing… You name the verb, they were doing it. It was Halloween as scripted by Franz Kafka, with costumes and set design by Salvador Dali.

Umbriel, the shadowsun, hung motionless in the starless sky, fixed in the same position it holds day in, day out, its strange diffuse light maintaining the city's perpetual dusk. And directly below Umbriel, rising forth

from the ground like a gigantic obsidian talon, visible from anywhere in Nekropolis, rested the Nightspire, home to Father Dis, founder of Nekropolis and its absolute ruler. And in many ways, its God.

Over three hundred years ago, the Darkfolk, rather than deal with an increasingly populous, aggressive, and technologically advanced mankind, decided to leave Earth. Led by Father Dis and the five lesser Lords, they traveled to a distant dark dimension where Nekropolis was born. This leavetaking, which the Darkfolk call the Descension, is Nekropolis's most sacred holiday.

As far as I'm concerned, it's a gigantic pain in the ass.

The Sprawl was crowded at the best of times, but this was madness. Normally, the streets were filled with traffic, vehicles of every type and description – and many that defied description – racing this way and that, drivers searching impatiently for whatever pleasures they'd come to the Sprawl to find. But because of the Descension celebration, the Sprawl was presently closed to vehicular traffic, and masses of partiers thronged the streets, as if determined to take advantage of the one day during the year when Nekropolitans could stand in the middle of the street and not risk getting run down by cars… or devoured by things only *pretending* to be cars.

The sidewalks weren't much better, but I shoved my way through the crowds as best I could, past bars, clubs, restaurants, and establishments offering more esoteric – and often stomach-turning – entertainments. I'd have

kept one hand on the few darkgems I carried to prevent pickpockets from taking them, but I needed my good arm to carry my detached one.

I was passing by Sawney B's, a fast-food franchise established by descendents of the infamous Scottish cannibal, when a trio standing outside the restaurant's cave-entrance façade turned to look at me. A bald man with large spider legs growing out of his head held a container of lady fingers, while his friends – a being who looked like a lobster in a leisure suit and a well-built woman with pythons instead of arms – sipped a marrow shake and nibbled homunculus nuggets, respectively.

The bald man was about to pop a lady finger with cherry-red nail polish into his mouth when he stopped and pointed the finger at me. "Hey, check it out! The guy's been disarmed!"

The three gourmands laughed. I stopped walking and turned to scowl at them.

"I only need one arm to yank those legs off your head and shove them where Umbriel doesn't shine."

The laughter died in their throats and I continued on my way to Papa Chatha's.

The architecture in the Sprawl is a mad conglomeration of styles – Art Deco, Tudor, Baroque, Victorian, Post-Modern, Frank Lloyd Wright, and buildings which look like structures made from regurgitated insect resin. The whole place is like an M. C. Escher fever dream. But the Sprawl is Lady Varvara's Dominion, and zoning isn't exactly high on the Demon Queen's list of priorities.

After struggling through the drunken, drugged-up throngs for what could only have been an hour or so but which felt more like a handful of eternities, I saw the greenish tint against the sky which told me I was nearing the flaming river Phlegethon and the Bridge of Nine Sorrows. Papa Chatha's was close by – finally.

And then I felt a hand on my shoulder; or rather, I felt the pressure of a hand on my shoulder, as that was all the sensation my dead nerves were capable of conveying.

"Excuse me."

The voice was soft, feminine, and nervous. But while I'd been in Nekropolis only a couple years, that was long enough to know that in this place appearances mean jack. So I stepped forward, and whirled about, body tensed, ready to fight, holding my detached arm out before me like a weapon.

The woman – the leather-clad blonde I'd seen at Skully's – took a step back, startled by my action. But then she regained her composure, or at least a good portion of it, and said, "I watched you handle that lyke in the bar. A most impressive performance, Mister Richter."

She was barely five feet tall, slim to the point of being model-thin, with pale porcelain skin. Her short hair was bright blonde, almost white. Her eyes were large and red, as if from crying. Or perhaps too much celebrating. "Yeah, well the next show isn't till midnight. Now if you'll pardon me, I have to go see a voodoo priest." I turned to go.

"Wait, please!"

The urgency in her voice, almost panic, made me hesitate. "Look, whatever it is, can't it wait? I'm no expert, but as I understand these things, if I don't get my arm reattached soon, I'll lose it for good."

"I… it's just…" She looked around, as if afraid someone might be listening, though how anyone could overhear us talking in the din of celebration, I didn't know. Hell, I could barely hear us. She leaned forward and mumbled something.

"I'm sorry, you'll have to speak up."

She looked around once more and then said, with exaggerated lip movements so I'd be sure not to miss it this time, "I need you."

I was flattered, and like I said earlier, she was very attractive. Still, I couldn't take advantage of her offer even if I wanted to. "Sorry, I don't go in for that kind of thing anymore. I'm dead. And I don't get off on fulfilling other people's necrophiliac fantasies. Enjoy the festival." This time I did go, forging a path through the partiers in the general direction of Papa Chatha's.

"You don't understand." Her words sounded in my ear, and although I couldn't feel her breath, I was sure it was cold, like a draft from an open grave.

"Vampire, right?" I said without turning around. "That's why I didn't hear you come up behind me just now."

"Please, we prefer the term Bloodborn."

"And I'd rather be referred to as Previously Living, but at the end of the day I'm still just a damned walking

corpse." I would've loved to shake her off my trail, but even if the street hadn't been so crowded, I probably couldn't. I'm not as fast as I used to be, and at my fastest, I'm still standing still compared to a vampire… excuse me, one of the Bloodborn.

So I just kept on slogging through the crowd toward Papa Chatha's, and hoped she'd get bored soon and go find another dead man to put the moves on. I'd used my handvox – Nekropolis's version of a cell phone – to call Papa earlier. He'd been out celebrating at his favorite hangout, the Bar Sinister, but when I told him I needed some serious repair work, he promised he'd be home when I got there. Papa's the best houngan a dead man could have.

"They say you're a detective."

That's when I realized the vampire wasn't warm for my undead form. I felt stupid, but I wasn't about to show it. "They say wrong. When I was alive, I was a cop, yes. But I'm not alive anymore." I wiggled my detached arm to emphasize my point.

"But you helped that woman, the one the lyke killed."

"Sometimes I do favors for people – for a fee. Preservative spells don't come cheap, you know."

"I am in desperate need of a favor. And I can pay. Please!"

She sounded as if she might burst into tears at any moment. But that wasn't what made me stop. I knew Papa Chatha would only give me so much for Honani's soul. And now thanks to that miserable lyke ripping off

my arm, I needed more work done than when I'd decided to help Lyra. More work than Honani's rotten spirit would pay for.

It wasn't her beauty, and it wasn't the threat of her tears. It was the money. Really.

I turned around. "All right, Miss…?"

"Devona," she supplied. "Devona Kanti."

"You can come along, Devona. We can talk after I see Papa. But I'm not promising anything," I cautioned.

"Of course." But she smiled in relief just the same.

I rotated my left arm and then flexed it a couple times.

"How's it feel?" Papa Chatha asked.

"A bit loose," I admitted.

Papa ran long, slender black fingers through his short gray hair, and then sighed. "That's what I was afraid of."

"I don't like the sound of that."

Papa Chatha was a dignified, handsome black man in his sixties, with a tattoo of a blue butterfly spread across his smooth-shaven face. The edges of the butterfly's wings seemed to ripple, but it was probably just my imagination.

I scanned the shelves in Papa's workroom, taking in the multitude of materials that a professional voodoo practitioner needs to perform his art: wax-sealed vials filled with ground herbs and dried chemicals, jars containing desiccated bits of animals – rooster claws, lizard tails, raven wings – candles of all sizes and colors, varying lengths of rope tied in complicated patterns of

knots, small dolls made of corn shucks and horsehair, books and scrolls piled on tabletops next to rattles and tambourines of various sizes, along with pouches of tobacco, chocolate bars, and bottles of rum. Papa said he used the latter three substances to make offerings to the Loa, the voodoo spirits, and while I had no reason to doubt him, I've noticed that he tends to run out of rum before anything else.

Papa sat on the only chair in his workroom, a simple wooden stool, and smoothed his loose white pants which matched his pullover shirt. He then tapped his bare toes on the wooden floor.

I had the impression he was stalling.

"You're a self-willed zombie, Matt. Do you have any idea how rare that is?" He had a deep, resonant voice that was usually full of good humor. But he was somber today.

"From what you've told me, pretty damned rare."

He nodded. "Most zombies are merely reanimated corpses, bereft of souls, linked to the life-force of the sorcerer who raised them from the dead. It's this link, this sharing of a living being's life-force, which prevents their dead flesh from withering away. But you have no master." He frowned. "How did you become a zombie, anyway, Matt? You've never told me."

"Just too stubborn to die, I suppose."

Papa looked at me a long moment before going on. "Since you have no master–"

"I know," I interrupted. "I need you and your magic to keep my body in tip-top condition."

Papa gestured at the collection of odds and ends that cluttered the shelves and benches of his workroom. "My meager arts can only do so much, Matt. And I fear they've done all they can for you."

I don't feel emotions the same way I did when I was alive, but I felt an echo of fear at Papa Chatha's words. "What do you mean?"

"That this last application of preservative spells almost didn't take. And they may not last more than two, three days."

"You mean–"

"We've staved off the inevitable as long as we could, my friend. I'm sorry."

I felt like a man who'd just been told by his doctor that he only had a short time to live. And I suppose in a way, I was.

"Nothing personal, Papa, but is there anyone else who might be able to help me? After all, Nekropolis is lousy with all sorts of witches and magicians. Maybe one of them–"

Papa shook his head. "I'm afraid not. While it's true there are others more powerful than I, there is only so much power can do."

I thought for a moment. "Could my spirit be caught, like Honani's, and implanted into a second body?"

"Perhaps," Papa allowed. "If you are willing to steal another's form."

So much for that. After what he'd done to Lyra, Honani deserved to be evicted from his body. But I couldn't do that to someone else just to save my own

life. If I did, in effect I'd be a killer, no better than Honani.

I stood there, trying to come to terms with what Papa had told me. I wasn't going to die. I couldn't; I was already dead. But my body was going to… what? Collapse into a puddle of putrefaction? Or just flake away to dust? And when it was gone, what would happen to me? Would I end up wandering Nekropolis, a disembodied spirit like Lyra? Or would my soul depart for some manner of afterlife? Assuming, of course, that there was any beyond Nekropolis. Or would I just cease to be, my spirit rotting away to nothing along with my body?

As much as I hated my mockery of a life, it was the only mockery I had, and I didn't particularly want to lose it. There had to be a way for me to continue existing, a way that wouldn't result in my having to steal another's body. I'd just have to find it within the next couple days.

I shook Papa's hand. "I appreciate everything you've done for me." I reached into my pocket, intending to hand over the soul jar containing Honani's spirit to pay for Papa's services.

"Keep it, Matt." He smiled sadly. "This one's on the house, okay?"

I didn't know what I'd do with Honani's soul, but Papa refused to take it, so in the end I walked out with the jar still in my pocket. I had two souls now, when what I needed was another body. Life – and death – is full of little ironies, isn't it?

* * *

Devona was waiting for me outside, leaning up against the wooden wall of Papa's shack, arms crossed, surveying the Descension Day celebrants in the street with a wary, nervous gaze. The crowd was thinner this far from the center of the Sprawl, but there were still a lot of loud, drunken monsters about, and they bore watching.

Devona's leather outfit clung to her like a second skin, and even though I no longer had any libido to speak of, I couldn't help appreciating how good she looked in it.

I had my own problem now, and no time for hers. But I thought I could at least hear her out. Maybe her problem would turn out to be something simple. And I could use the darkgems; I would need them if I was going to find someone else – someone more powerful than Papa – to extend my unlife.

"All done. I'm ready to talk." I didn't feel a need to mention the bad news I'd received. After all, Devona and I had just met.

"Not here. We need someplace private."

Like I'd told her, I wasn't a detective, no matter what she'd heard from them, whoever the hell they were, and I didn't have an office. But my apartment wasn't far from Papa Chatha's.

"How about my place?"

She nodded.

A few more blocks of negotiating our way through the chaotic riot of partiers – which for Devona meant slapping more than a few males of various species and

states of life and death who decided to grab her shapely leather-clad posterior – and we were there.

My neighborhood is actually one of the more mundane sections of the Sprawl, a street of urban townhouses, which, except for the fact that the bricks appear to be made of gristle, looks perfectly ordinary.

We went up the front steps, inside, and up more steps to my apartment. I had unlocked the door and was just about to grip the knob when a voice behind us said, "Hey, Matt!"

"Hell," I muttered, and turned around to greet my neighbor. "Hi, Carl," I said without enthusiasm. "What's up?"

Carl was a grizzled old fart in a rumpled seersucker suit which had probably once been white but was now mostly yellow.

He grabbed a sheet of paper from the stack under his arm and thrust it into my hand.

"Just finished printing out the latest edition of the *Night Stalker News*. I'm breaking a major story this week."

I glanced at the headline: WATCHERS FROM OUTSIDE PLOT CITY'S DESTRUCTION.

"Sounds ominous, Carl. I'll be sure to read it."

I quickly opened the door and gestured for Devona to go in; she did and I hurried after her.

Carl scowled. "Don't you humor me now, Matt. It's true! None of the other media will have anything to do with the story. It's too hot for the *Tome*, and even that rag the *Daily Atrocity* won't touch it. If we don't do something about it soon, we'll all be–"

I closed the door in Carl's rapidly reddening face, cutting him off.

"Just you wait!" came his muffled voice from the other side of the door. "You'll be singing a different tune when the Watchers come!"

He shouted a bit more before finally moving off, grumbling to himself about idiot zombie cops.

"Who was that?" Devona asked.

"Just some nut who lives upstairs. Used to be some sort of tabloid reporter back on Earth, but he can't find work on any of the papers in the city. The stories he comes up with are too crazy even for Nekropolis. Don't worry; he won't bother us anymore. He'll no doubt head out into the street to harangue the festival-goers with his latest paranoid expose." I crumpled Carl's so-called "paper" into a wad and tossed it into an empty corner while Devona surveyed the room.

"It's better than a tomb, even if it does have about as much personality," I said, feeling only a little self-conscious. A threadbare couch, a single wooden chair – with one leg shorter than the others – and a Mind's Eye set sitting atop a wooden stand comprised the sole contents of the living room. No pictures, no rugs, not even curtains. No toilet facilities, either, but then I don't need them. One of the perks of being dead.

Nekropolis doesn't have television. Instead we have Mind's Eye Theatre. Mind's Eye is exactly what it sounds like: psychic transmissions are received by your set and then relayed straight into your brain. The process is kind of hit and miss for me, probably because

my zombie brain doesn't get good reception, so I tend not to watch too often. I read instead, hence the reason for the piles of books stacked in the corners of the room. Right now the set was off, the large eye closed, its lashes crusted with yellowish crud, probably because it had been so long since I'd turned it on. I wondered if the set had some kind of infection, and I told myself to remember to call a repairman.

"Do you have a bed?" Devona asked.

"I told you: I don't do those kinds of favors."

She gave me a look which said I was being less than amusing. "I'm just curious. Do zombies sleep? I've never thought about it before. But then, I've never been to a zombie's apartment, either."

"I have a bed." Though it was just a lumpy mattress sitting on the floor, no sheets, no covers. "I don't sleep, exactly, but sometimes I feel a need to… rest. To relax."

"And so you just lie there and stare at the ceiling?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I close my eyes. So tell me, what's it like to sleep in a coffin? Ever feel like a sardine?"

"Bloodborn don't sleep in coffins," she said disdainfully.

"Even when they're half human?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. "How did you know?"

I shrugged, the gesture a bit lopsided thanks to the bite Honani had taken out of my shoulder, which Papa hadn't been able to repair completely. "Little things. You don't move as gracefully as other vampires. Your pallor isn't as white. And whatever your problem is, it's got you tied up in knots inside. I've never seen a full-

blooded vampire afraid. It doesn't seem to be an emotion they're capable of."

I went into the bedroom, and she followed. Aside from my mattress, the only other items in the room were my laptop computer, the desk it sat on, and the chair I sat on when I used it. In Nekropolis, the computers are organic, fashioned from bone, cartilage, muscle, sinew, and specialized organs. The machines breathe, gurgle, and moan – especially when doing difficult tasks – and have even been known to burst blood vessels if asked to perform too many functions at the same time. The damned things literally get sick when they catch a virus and become all mopey and lazy, refusing to do any work until they get better. The spoiled things are worse than pampered cats.

My computer made a soft humming sound to catch my attention, and I grudgingly went over and scratched the top of its casing. In response, it let out a moist, phlegmy purr.

"You use your bedroom as your office too?" Devona asked.

"I don't have an *office* because I don't have a *business*," I said. "I mostly use the computer to play DVDs – it works better for me than the Mind's Eye – and to hop on the Aethernet from time to time." The Aethernet is Nekropolis's answer to the Internet back on Earth. Information is swiftly transported through the system by data-ghosts: the spirits of executed criminals sentenced to spend their afterlives ferrying bytes back and forth for the rest of us.

"So you can check out zombie porn?" Devona asked with a wry grin.

"You ever see one of those sites? No? Well, if you get curious, take my advice and don't eat for a week or two before logging on."

I removed the soul jar from my pocket, and placed it on the desk next to my computer. I then walked over to the closet and removed my torn jacket, tie, and shirt. I opened the closet door, dropped my ruined garments on the floor next to my footlocker, and scanned my pitifully small collection of clothes for replacements. If Devona felt any disgust upon seeing so much of my bare zombie skin with its slight grayish cast revealed, she showed no sign.

"You said you don't think vampires experience fear," Devona said, picking up the thread of our earlier conversation. "But they do. They just don't like to show it. But you were right about me; I'm only half Bloodborn. My mother was human."

From my closet's meager offerings, I chose a brown shirt, yellow paisley tie, and a brown jacket. I could wear whatever I want, I suppose. I'm not a cop anymore, and besides, I'm dead. Who cares how I dress? But old habits – and old cops like me – die hard, I guess. And besides, wearing the sort of clothes I wore in life makes me feel more… well, human.

I dressed and stood before the cracked mirror hanging on the wall and adjusted my tie. Thanks to Papa Chatha's latest round of spells, I didn't look too much different than I had in life, grayish skin aside. Black

hair, brown eyes, features on the ordinary side of handsome (or so I'd been told by my ex-wife; I'm no judge of such things). Face a bit thinner than when I'd been alive. Death is a great diet plan.

I put the soul jar in the pocket of my new jacket. I'm not really sure why; it just didn't seem like the sort of thing a person should leave lying around, and then I turned to face my guest. "And who's your father?"

She hesitated a moment before answering. "Lord Galm."

If my heart had been functional, it would've skipped a beat or two right then.

"I think you'd better leave now," I said.

Confusion spread across her face. "Why?"

"It's nothing personal; I just make it a policy never to get involved with Darklords if I can avoid it. And that includes getting involved with their relatives."

Lord Galm is an ancient, powerful vampire, ruler of the Bloodborn, and of Gothtown, the Dominion where the vampires live, or rather, exist. And like any Darklord, he's dangerous as hell. I'd rather run up to a Mafia don in his favorite restaurant, dump his spaghetti marinara in his lap, and accuse him of diddling his grandchildren than I would mess with a Darklord.

"Please, at least let me–"

I held up a hand to cut her off. "I'm sorry. Really, I am. But getting involved with a Darklord is what got me killed and resurrected as a zombie. I hate to think what might happen to me the next time. Being dead

isn't all that much fun, but I've lived in Nekropolis long enough to know it could be worse. A lot worse."

She cocked her head to one side and looked at me as if seeing me for the first time. "Which Darklord was it?"

"I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind. And I don't want to talk about your problem either, not if it involves Lord Galm."

She crossed her arms and gave me a calculating look. It didn't appear as if she were in a hurry to leave.

"I don't know a lot about zombies, but I know they need to have preservative spells regularly applied to keep them from rotting." She smiled. "And as I've seen, they occasionally need limbs reattached. Spells like that cost money."

"I can get darkgems somewhere else," I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. And besides, I wasn't worried about mere preservative spells now. I needed to find a way to keep my body from rotting away to nothing. I imagined I could already feel the slight itch of decay – one of the few sensations I can feel.

"One hundred? Two? Three hundred?" she countered. "Three hundred darkgems would pay for quite a lot of spells."

"They would at that," I was forced to admit. That would be roughly the equivalent of several thousand dollars back home in Cleveland. But would even three hundred darkgems be enough to buy the kind of magic I would need to keep my body intact?

And then it hit me. I needed the kind of power few beings in Nekropolis possessed: the power of a Dark-

lord. If I helped Devona, perhaps she would intercede with her father on my behalf – and Lord Galm could use his magic to "cure" me.

I cautioned myself not too get excited, that it was a long shot, that even if Devona asked, Lord Galm might not help me. But right then it looked like the best – and only – shot I had. Besides, if I did have only a few days left in my existence, I'd rather spend them working than sitting around my place staring at the walls.

"All right, Devona, tell me about your problem."

"I'm seventy-three years old," she said. "Surprised?"

"Not really," I said. "Seventy-three is young for a vampire."

We were sitting in the living room. Devona was on the couch, and I'd taken the chair. The sounds of the Descension celebration out in the street – blaring music, laughter, shouting, and the occasional scream – served as a muted background to our conversation.

"Although," I added, "you're the best looking seventy-three year-old I've ever seen."

She blushed slightly. Another sign that she was half human. A full-blooded vampire can't blush.

"Lord Galm didn't exactly love my mother. But he came as close to it as a being like him can, and when I was born, he brought me from Earth to Nekropolis."

"And your mother?"

"Died delivering me," she said softly. "Human women usually do when giving birth to a half-Bloodborn child."

She looked down at her lap, where the thin, fine fingers of her delicate hands played nervously with each other. "We have our teeth early, you see, and we're born hungry…"

The resultant images in my mind might've nauseated me if I still had a working digestive system. "I understand. Go on."

"I was raised in the Cathedral. I didn't see my father very often – he was usually busy ruling Gothtown or engaging in power struggles with the other Lords. I was cared for and taught by Father's staff, and I grew and learned."

"I thought vampires didn't age."

"Those that were originally human and transformed into Bloodborn do not. But those like me, who are half human, do age, only very, very slowly."

"So you'll die one day?"

She nodded. "And afterward, I may rise as one completely Bloodborn. Or I may not. No one can say."

"Could your father transform you, make you a full vampire?"

"He could try. But there's no guarantee I would survive the process and be reborn. At this point, I'd rather wait and take my chances."

"I don't blame you."

"When I reached my forty-fifth birthday, Father called me in to his study and told me that he wished me to join the staff of the Cathedral and serve him. It was a great honor, and I accepted thankfully."

"What did he want you to do?"

"I was given charge of his Collection, and I have taken care of it for the last twenty-eight years."

I noticed a black spot on the far wall – a spot which hadn't been there when we'd started talking. It was a roach-like insect. Gregor, or rather one of his little informants. I nearly waved hello, but I didn't want Devona to think I wasn't listening to her. Besides, the bug didn't care if I acknowledged its presence or not. All it wanted to do was observe.

"His… Collection?" I said, returning to the conversation.

"Father is incredibly ancient; how old, even he isn't certain. Thousands and thousands of years, at least. And in all that time, he has acquired quite a number of items. Some are merely mementos of lives lived, countries and cities long dead; others are trophies: of triumphs, conquests, battles won, enemies defeated. Still others are tokens of magic, mystical objects of great power – any of which the other Darklords would dearly love to get their hands on in order to increase their own strength.

"As I said, I have watched over, cared for, and guarded the Collection for nearly three decades. And I have never had any problems," she said proudly. But then she lowered her head. "Until yesterday."

"Let me guess. You went to check on the Collection and found something missing."

"How did – of course, you're a detective."

I almost protested that I wasn't, that I was just an ex-cop – and ex-human – who did favors for people, but I decided to let it lie.

"Yes, something was missing. And I want you to help me get it back."

I thought for a moment. "Why come to me? Why not go to Lord Galm? He's a Darklord. With the powers at his command, I should think he'd be able to locate the object easily."

"Perhaps. But I cannot go to my father. Lord Galm is not especially… understanding of failure. Or forgiving. My only hope is to recover the object on my own, or at least discover what has happened to it. If I am unable to do either…" she trailed off, shuddering.

"But you're his daughter."

"Yes, but the Bloodborn have a different set of values when it comes to determining family relationships. Those who are chosen for transformation are considered true children, and are closest to their sires' hearts. Half-human get like me… well, I suppose the closest human equivalent would be children born out of wedlock. Our sires still care for us, just not as deeply.

"Most of Lord Galm's staff are children of his, whether fully Bloodborn or partially. And there is a great deal of competition among us for our father's favor."

"And so you can't turn to any of them, either."

She nodded. "That's why I need your help. You have a reputation for not only getting the job done, but for keeping quiet about it as well."

"I didn't know I had a reputation. I don't suppose you heard anything about my sparkling personality or my dazzling wit?"

She smiled. "Unfortunately not."

She had a beautiful smile, the effect spoiled only slightly by her revealed canine teeth.

"Tell me about the object."

"It's a crystal a little larger than my fist called the Dawnstone. What it does precisely, I'm not certain. While I tend his Collection, Father doesn't entrust me with complete knowledge of it, and the Dawnstone is one of those items whose secrets he wishes to keep to himself."

I thought it ironic a vampire would own an artifact called a "Dawnstone."

"But you know it's powerful," I said.

"Of course. Why else would Father be so secretive about it? And the wardspells which protect it are among the most potent in the Cathedral."

"Yet someone got past those spells."

"Yes."

"How do you know Lord Galm didn't just take the Dawnstone himself and forgot to tell you?"

"Father is a stickler for procedure. In twenty-eight years he has never failed to inform me when he removed an item from the Collection."

"Still, there's always a first time," I pointed out.

"I suppose. But I can hardly go up and ask him, can I? If he hasn't removed the Dawnstone, my asking after it would alert him to its disappearance."

"And buy you a world of trouble."

"Yes."

She definitely needed help – and I needed the aid of

a Darklord if I was to survive. I stood. "I have more questions, but I can ask them on the way."

"The way to where?"

"The Cathedral, of course. One of the first steps in any investigation is to examine the scene of the crime."

I looked over at the spot on the wall where the bug had been, but it was gone now. Gregor's tiny minion had probably heard enough and moved on to find something more interesting to observe.

Devona stood. She smiled, took my hand, and gave it a squeeze. "Thank you, Mr. Richter."

I could only feel the pressure of her hand, but I could imagine how smooth and soft her skin was. "Call me Matthew."

Detective or not, I was on the job once more – and this time, I was working not only to help my "client," but to save my own life.

Talk about incentive.

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