

## The Dead Travel Quickly

By VL Sheridan

It was impossible to make withdrawals from the blood bank now. Victor needed to have access to those deposits. How else would he pay Bram? Victor thought back to that night in the necropolis; he was removing an occupant from a tomb when a man had suddenly appeared. Victor froze; being caught robbing a grave was punishable by death. As he tried to collect his wits Victor realized what was standing in front of him. He had heard such beings existed but hoped never to encounter one. Victor stood motionless, the corpse slung over his shoulder. The Nosferatu regarded him, then leaned against the side of the tomb, crossing his arms in front of him, looking for all the world as if he were waiting for the bus.

“Working late?”

Victor struggled for his voice.

“I’m a student at the university.”

“I see. Someone you know?”

“Who? No, I don’t know him.”

“He doesn’t look familiar to me either, but then the dead all look alike, don’t they?”

The creature flashed a smile of vicious teeth.

“Yes, I suppose.”

Victor fought to remain calm.

“You’ll excuse me, I have to go.”

He turned to leave when the inanimate called back after him.

“Violating a grave is a capital offense. What will you do if you get caught?”

Victor grew anxious; this was taking too much time, he was running the risk of being caught.

“I’ll take my chances. He serves science now. That’s better than letting him rot.”

The preternatural being laughed cynically, throwing his arms up in mock jubilation.

“He serves science, how noble. I’m sure he’d be thrilled.”

It gave Victor a cold, calculating look.

“You need a partner who isn’t troubled by a death sentence.”

Victor looked at the brute suspiciously. What was it up to?

“Why help me? What’s in it for you?”

“You’re a medical student, with access to blood banks. I need blood. My proposition is simple: I’ll

supply you with study guides, and you supply me with a steady diet.”

Victor shifted the dead weight to his other shoulder. It made sense, in a crazy sort of way. He’d get what he needed without running the risks of getting caught. Getting the blood would be no problem; he had access to the bank. This arrangement wouldn’t last long; as soon as he received his degree, he would send this devil back to whatever Hell it had crawled out of.

“All right.”

Victor put down his burden and extended his hand.

“You won’t be disappointed, Victor. We’ll make a fine partnership.”

It clasped Victor’s hand with a vice like grip. Victor caught his breath; the hand wasn’t warm like a human’s, or cold like a corpse’s. Retrieving his homework, Victor realized the fiend had vanished. I wonder if it had a name, he thought, trudging back to school. Only later did he wonder how the creature knew his.

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It’d seemed so simple He’d use Bram’s services while a student, and then sever the relationship. Finances forced him to quit school and take a job as a procurement coordinator selling organs to the highest bidder. Only those who could afford to buy organs received them. Now more than ever, he was dependent on Bram to supply him with what he needed. He didn’t ask how Bram acquired his goods. A noxious stench brought him out of his reverie. Startled, he looked up to see Bram standing before him.

“Christ”, Victor hissed, “Must you always sneak up on people?”

Bram smiled.

“You know how we are, Victor. The element of surprise is our most important survival tactic. All this time and you haven’t gotten used to me.”

Victor ignored Bram and began to search for the file he’d received earlier. Sifting through the folders he spotted the one tagged, MARSHALL, FREDERICK, and passed it over to Bram, trying to avoid touching his skin or his long, dirt encrusted fingernails. Christ, did he claw his way out of the grave each night, Victor wondered contemptuously?

“Here it is Bram, the biggest request either of us will ever see. Frederick Marshall, one of the world’s wealthiest men, is in need of a new heart, one between the ages of twenty five and thirty five. Money is no object, and he’s willing to pay the finder’s fee directly to me in cash, in one lump sum.”

Victor desperately needed that money; it would allow him to quit this job and return to medical school. Bram leafed through the file. He wasn’t impressed with Marshall, or his millions, or his needs. The

arrogance of mortals, he thought, as if all the money in the world could buy eternal life. What good was that? If they only knew how long immortality was.

Bram sighed to himself; existence had become wearisome; after all these years he envied the living. They could die. Victor's babbling intruded on his thoughts.

". . . Important to me, Bram, to make this acquisition. Do you know what we'd be able to do with a finder's fee? We'd live like royalty."

"We don't use money, Victor. It holds no purpose for my kind."

Victor winced; he had been speaking about himself and his wife, Elizabeth.

"We haven't much time because Marshall's health is deteriorating rapidly. We need to find a heart as soon as possible."

"Since this is a rush job, and money is no object to Mr. Marshall, I can correctly assume that my salary will be higher than usual?"

Victor couldn't risk being caught making large, unauthorized withdrawals from the bank, not now. He decided to bluff his way out.

"No problem, I'll double your payment."

Bram looked warily at Victor. What was he up to, he was being too obsequious tonight?

"I'll get on this right away. By the way, how's Elizabeth?"

Victor couldn't keep the fear from his eyes.

"Not well. Everyday she's weaker. This acquisition is so important Bram; with the money I get from Marshall I'll be able to make Elizabeth well again."

Bram heard the desperation in Victor's voice, and felt sorry for him; as pathetic as Victor was, Bram knew he loved Elizabeth. She was the only thing Bram envied about Victor.

"It's hard, Victor, but a short life knowing love is better than an eternity without it."

Victor was incredulous. How could Bram be so cavalier? Victor struggled for his voice.

"You loathsome bastard, I'd rather die than lose her!"

Bram ignored Victor's outburst, placing the file back on the desk.

"I'll be in touch."

Victor looked away, then back to Bram, but he'd disappeared. He couldn't afford to alienate Bram now. A sense of doom began to envelope Victor.

"Bram", he yelled, "I'm sorry. Don't be mad at me."

The only reply was a roll of thunder.

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Victor thought of Elizabeth. Her health had begun to fail about a year ago; within six months she was completely disabled, drawing short, laboured breathes. The doctor said it was a strange aberration of a rare disease; eventually she would drown in her own body fluid. Her only hope was a lung transplant. Organ transplants were handled like any other major purchase; a person in need of an organ would contact the Corporation, and the Corporation would feed out the requests to a procurement coordinator. They in turn would use whatever means necessary to acquire the goods. Occasionally it got ugly; there was a story of a man who had sold his eyes for a large sum of money, later slashing his throat in a graveyard, inconsolable with his loss. Victor had learned not to question the moral implications of his job. At least he'd never resorted to Harvesters. Sometimes a donor, or his family, tried to renege on an agreement; a broker would send Organ Harvesters to retrieve the agreed upon donation. Their methods were brutal; the donor would be tranquilized into a coma and hooked up to life support. The Harvesters would take whatever organs they wanted, not just those agreed upon. The family didn't receive any more money for their loss. Only the Corporation profited.

Victor quickly walked to his apartment. Opening the door he shuddered at the sound of tortured breathing. Elizabeth was on a chaise, propped up with pillows. Looking up her eyes lit up, a small spark of life within a decaying shell.

"You're HHHHhome. HHHHHhow nice."

"Don't speak. Save your breath."

Victor put two fingers to her lips. Elizabeth frowned. She hated being an invalid. The anguish she felt in drawing a breath was nothing compared to the anger she felt when she thought of her life now. A year ago she had been healthy and independent; today she couldn't complete a sentence without gasping. Her fear of death was growing stronger, causing her deep anxiety attacks, forcing her to fight for air. It was like being buried alive. Victor gazed into her eyes.

"I love you. I'd die for you, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth drew his head into her lap.

"I know you would Victor," she croaked.

Weeks passed with no word from Bram. Victor was afraid he wouldn't hear from him again. Marshall's people were besieging the Corporation daily with inquiries about the acquisition. Dr. Seward,

Victor's supervisor, was making life unbearable for Victor. Elizabeth was fading every day. Where the hell was Bram?

Seward walked into Victor's office. Victor steeled himself for his daily inquisition.

"Shelly, last month you withdrew forty six units of whole blood. There's no receipt for the transaction. Where is it?"

Victor had to think quickly. There was no way he could admit his dealings with Bram, it would mean immediate dismissal from his job, possibly imprisonment. No finder's fee. No way to make Elizabeth well again. Seward loomed over him.

"I'm waiting for an answer."

"I must have forgotten to submit one."

"Accounting has no record of payment made for this withdrawal. How do you explain that?"

"I'd suggest an audit in accounting, sir. If they can't keep track of fees paid, then someone isn't doing their job."

"Have that receipt in by end of business day. Until this mess is cleared up your privileges for the blood bank are suspended."

Seward stalked out of the office.

Victor breathed a sigh of relief. He'd bought some time; he'd forge a receipt, collect his fee and pay for the blood. Closing his eyes, he didn't notice a tiny bat clinging to the window. Stretching its leathery wings, it flew into the approaching night.

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Walking home that evening Victor sensed something stalking him. An unbearable stench enveloped him just as he reached the safety of his door. A hand wrapped itself around his throat. It was Bram.

"So you'll double my salary for my services, will you?"

Bram snarled as he tightened his grip and pulled Victor off the ground.

"Bram! I . . ."

"No more lies! You no longer have access to the blood bank. Did you think you could cheat me?"

Victor struggled to keep conscious. How had Bram found out? Bram released his grip and threw Victor to the ground.

"Why I don't kill you eludes me", Bram said, disgust in his voice. "This is how you repay me? I thought you were my friend Victor."

A cold, smug sneer appeared on Victor's face as he stood up, leaning against the door for support.

"Your friend? You can't be serious?"

Victor felt fear rising in him, fear of being caught, of losing Elizabeth, of not getting that money. He looked Bram square in the eye.

"You provide a service, nothing more. Your only purpose is to give me the things I need. You mean nothing to me. I'd rather give myself to Harvesters than be friends with a Hell bound cadaver like you!"

Bram watched Victor's face contort into an apparition of horror. Fool, he thought.

"I've always despised your type Victor."

"Don't be jealous, Bram. We can't all be lucky and die."

"You're a pompous ass, Victor. I don't mean the living. I mean hypocrites."

He spat out the words, and quickly vanished.

Victor staggered into the apartment. Elizabeth was frightened by his appearance and started to speak; he held up his hand to silence her and went into the bathroom to clean up. A mist rose against the window behind her.

A clock struck one; Elizabeth was awake on the chaise. She always slept there; lying flat on her back caused her agonizing pain. She was losing hope. Victor wouldn't be able to pay for an operation. Death was coming. Thoughts whirled feverishly in her brain. It's not fair! Why me? Why do I have to die? Elizabeth felt her chest tighten. The weight grew heavier; she felt her throat closing. Frantically she sought a way to wake Victor. Not now, not me!

A shadow stepped into the room. Victor! She reached for him and began to calm down; looking into his eyes, she was startled to see they had a yellowish glow. He drew nearer to her into the moonlight. This wasn't Victor! Elizabeth felt the panic rise again, and tried to scream.

Bram put two fingers to her lips.

"It's all right. Calm yourself."

Elizabeth tried to pull away. Who is this? How had he gotten into the house?

"Don't be afraid" he whispered.

He slowly massaged her diaphragm, never taking his eyes off hers.

"It's such a strain, not getting any better, always having to struggle, so dependent on Victor."

Elizabeth nodded. She tried to avert her gaze but couldn't. She felt her lungs loosen. It was wonderful! She could almost take a normal breath.

"I'm here to make you well. To make you live."

Bram pulled her closer to him. Elizabeth eagerly leaned forward, her breathing easier with every second.

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Victor awoke with a start. Was that a noise? He strained to hear better; silence answered. Why was it so quiet? He couldn't hear Elizabeth breathing! He ran to the living room. Elizabeth was sitting up reading. She looked surprised at his sudden appearance.

"What are you doing up? It's nearly three."

Victor felt a wave of relief. He went and put his arms around her.

"I woke up and didn't hear you, I got scared and thought . . ."

"You worry too much."

"I love you Elizabeth. I'd die you."

"I know Victor. I know you will."

Two nights later Dr. Seward was working late in his office. Time was running out; that morning Marshall had been admitted to the hospital. If a donation didn't appear within forty-eight hours Marshall would die and the Corporation wouldn't collect its fee. Shelly was useless. Seward was frustrated. If only he could . . . he began to choke as a disgusting aroma filled his office.

"Dr. Seward?"

Seward looked up to see something at his door. He failed to recognize his visitor when he suddenly realized what was standing before him. Jesus Christ! How did it get in here? Seward froze in his seat.

"Please don't be alarmed, I mean you no harm. May I come in?"

It waited for Seward's invitation, then walked into the room and sat opposite him.

"What do you want?"

Seward squeaked out the question, his fingers turning white as he gripped the arms of his chair.

"I have information you may be interested in."

Seward tried to relax.

"What might that be?"

Bram smiled.

"You won't be disappointed."

Victor was devastated; Bram was gone for good. Good riddance. He'd use other methods, legal ones, to find the Marshall heart. At least Elizabeth seemed healthier; her breathing wasn't as laboured and she was sleeping better; there was even some colour to her cheeks. Someone knocked at his office door. Looking up he saw Marshall's lawyer, the one handling the arrangements.

"Mr. Shelly?"

"Mr. Burke, what can I do for you?"

Victor tried to keep calm.

"I'm here to pay the finder's fee. Dr. Seward telephoned last night and said a donor had been found. I'm here to complete the transaction."

Victor was speechless. Was he dreaming? He sat looking stupidly at the man, finally finding his voice.

"I hope everything has developed to your satisfaction?"

"Yes, we take possession tonight."

"Wonderful. My best wishes to Mr. Marshall for continued good health."

Victor shook the man's hand vigorously. Burke placed a brief case on the desk and left. Victor opened the case and gazed at the money within. Now he would be able to put this life behind him! Elizabeth would be well again, he'd pay for the blood he'd stolen. He'd gotten away with it! His future was his again!

Victor held tight to the brief case. A childish impulse to show their new wealth to Elizabeth had overtaken him. He walked quickly home, alert to any rapid footsteps behind him. He opened the door and raced into the apartment, shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Elizabeth! Our prayers are answered! Look at . . ."

Victor's blood turned to ice; the chaise was empty. He felt his knees buckle under him.

"Victor!"

Elizabeth appeared in the bedroom door. She was the picture of health, with a creamy complexion and rosy cheeks. She came towards him, her arms extended, breathing at a normal pace. Victor was shocked. He felt the strength in her arms as she embraced him.

"My God, what is this? You look so well."

She kissed him, passionately. He tried to kiss her back, but the foulness of her breath sickened him. Victor heard a man clear his throat. Disengaging himself from Elizabeth, Victor saw Dr. Seward standing in

the doorway.

“Dr. Seward, please come in.”

Seward looked at Victor, than stiffly entered.

“Are you sure this is the correct address?”

Victor looked at him with a quizzical look.

“Correct address? For what, Dr Seward?”

A voice dipped in venom rose from behind him.

“A healthy heart, my dear friend.”

Victor jumped; wheeling around, he saw Bram reclining on the chaise, casually surveying the scene.

He looked over towards the door.

“Yes, doctor, this is the correct address. Show your men in.”

Victor watched in horror as Harvesters entered. What the hell was going on?

“What’s the meaning of this?”

Seward ignored him, and walked over to Bram. Bram handed him the brief case; Seward briefly checked the contents, then started for the door.

“Our agreement stands, Mr. Bram. I’ve established an open account at the blood bank for you and your wife, in exchange for one healthy heart.”

“Thank you Dr. Seward. You’ve made life much easier for us.”

Victor stood in disbelief as Elizabeth sat down next to Bram.

“Elizabeth, for God’s sake, gets away from that creature! You don’t know what he is!”

Elizabeth smiled at Victor, exposing sharp, pointed teeth.

“Yes, I do Victor. He’s life. I love you Victor, but I love life more. You always said you’d die for me.

Now you can.”

The last thing Victor was conscious of before the Harvesters tranquilized him was the sight of Bram’s lips on Elizabeth’s neck.