

From My Cold Undead Hand

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There's an art to this. When a vamp de-korps, I only have a split second to guess where it's going to re-korp. This one's tricky, clever, powerful. As I just beaded my carbon-gat at it, it blew into a thousand-thousand little bits in front of me. Thought it could fool me, but that de-korp happened too quick to be the result of my bullet.

Where? Where? One-eighty behind me? Let's go for ninety to my right, slam my back against the wall and aim. Where? Where? *Oh you...* right where it de-korped! And in the time it takes me to re-aim it's off and half-running-half-flying in the dark between the bookshelves, and I'm after it, my Spring-heels drumming the old floor, dodging right and left more by what I can sense than by what I can feel. There's a graveyard stink in the air that a fleeing vamp can't hide, and that's what I'm following.

It leads me right back to where old Stoker's dying. He's bleeding out. The vamp got him and there's nothing I can do about it. I stop to reassure him, to say *Stay with me, Mr. Sweeney*, and that's almost a mistake.

The Word of God! he says, and as he says it the vamp re-korps right behind me. I feel the rush of air at my back, and that probably saves me, as the vamp's sword slashes at the air, missing me by a skin's thickness as I throw myself to my left. I crash heavily into a desk. The vamp is leaping towards me. I pick up the only object to hand, the book that's lying on the desk, and swing it round as hard

as I can. It catches the vamp square on its head, and down it goes onto all fours, groaning. I look at the book – it's a Gutenberg Bible – and bring it down on the vamp's coco again. Well that works! I've enough time to reach behind my back, pull out my katana, and slice the vamp's head off. That should be enough, and I really ought to get out of here, but I am not going to risk letting this vamp reassemble. I get some garlic out of my side-pack and stuff it right in between those impressive canines; then I dig into my pack again for a short stake, and drive it into the vamp's heart. The vamp dissolves into dust, but I'm still not finished. I pile up a few books on that dustpile, pull out my omni, and thumb the app for fire, touching it to page after page until they're alight.

Then I look at old Stoker. I don't know why we called him 'old'. Maybe forty-two just seems ancient to someone like me. It's more than twice my age, almost three times. I'm crying. He isn't forty-two any more, he isn't anything. He's dead. His last living act was to tell me to pick up a Bible to hit the vamp with. At least, having bled out, he can't be feasted on by other vamps.

Other vamps! They have a way of sensing when one of their number is docked. And they can smell blood. There'll be some converging on the University Club Library right now. I have to leave old Stoker and get out of here. I thumb my omni into life again, hit the settings for 'encrypted' and 'scrambled', switch to radio mode, and call the group. Can't be too careful using the cell system.

It's Chevonne. One docked, but they got Mr. Sweeney. He's dead. I'm coming in.

Copy that. A short and emotionless reply to a short and emotionless report. But I'm crying and I have to stop. It might be the difference between life and death. So I

breathe in hard, and now I'm taking the stairs two, three at a time, looking for the window I left unlocked. I make it, swing it open, and as I step out onto the ledge I hear the big doors downstairs crash open. Damn, they were quick, and yes! I can see some down on the street. Not many, but enough to be dangerous. I'm not crying any more.

No, I'm off on a straight and swift parkour, but upwards, not down, jumping from wall to wall, roof to roof, gaining height all the time, until I get where I want to be – a flat roof several blocks from the library. But, *Hell!* where's my parakite? I left it in a shadow here, not in sight but easy to grab.

Are you looking for this?

I spin round. There's a vamp – another one to its right – and it's holding my kite by the pack strap. *Meck!* They look like teens, all gang colors and handanas – must have been sired pretty young. And they're smiling. I hate it when they do that. I also hate it when they have gats. This one right in front of me has one of those neat little Saudi machine-pistols, and it's pointing right at me. Y'know, I've seen the old movies, read the old books, and nobody ever thinks to arm a storybook vampire. Hunters come armed with swords and stakes, vampires come armed with teeth. Real life, real life now outside the books and the old films, is different. In real life vampires carry guns. This is America, after all, and the vamp facing me is exercising a Constitutional right.

Then it makes a mistake. It turns its head to smile at the other vamp. The muzzle of the gat veers a degree or two away long enough for me to jump forward and kick at the vamp's gun-hand. I connect, the gat flails, bullets fly off into the night. Importantly, they're all wide of me!

That gives me the chance to make three center-line punches to the vamp's mouth. Vamps do not like that. They do not like having their precious teeth messed with. It staggers back into its buddy. My kite-pack goes up in an arc, the vamp lets go, and I make a leap for it. There's no time to fasten the harness, only to get my arms through the straps and the pack onto my shoulders, and then to leap off the roof, hoping the pack doesn't slip off.

I leave it as long as I can before pulling the rip. I need just enough height and speed to give me the chance to get the kite where I want it to go. The jerk of the kite opening wrenches at my shoulders, and I swing away, pumping the height lines for all I'm worth. Bullets sing past me, one catching the metal buckle on my right boot. My teeth are chattering, my hands are cold even though I'm sweating, and the pain in my shoulders is getting worse every second.

Shoot for the canopy, dumb-ass! comes the angry voice of one of the vamps back on the roof, and *zip... zip... zip...* several shots rip through the kite's fabric. I bank, I zig, I zag, and I get to a distance where the spray of bullets from the machine pistol begin to lose bite. But the kite's damaged and I'm losing more height than I would like, pulling my knees up to avoid the solar panels angled on the roof of a building. I'm making for the ruins of St Joseph's Cathedral but I'm going to be about one hundred fifty meters short. Already I think I see a couple of vamp footsoldiers running through the streets to cut me off. I watch the ground, and when I begin to see a shadow of my kite cast by street lights I pump my legs so that I can be sure of forward motion when I land.

In fact the impact winds me, makes me stagger and almost fall, but my head-down momentum carries me

into a sprint. I can see the cathedral doors ahead – one hundred meters, ninety, eighty – but I can hear footsteps coming from behind and from my right. Fifty meters. Forty. Breath in my lungs like daggers. There is a whoosh past me on my left and a graveyard stink similar to that of the vamp I docked back at the library. Twenty yards to go, and a vamp korps right in front of me. It's grinning. Its arms are spread wide to catch me. It wants me to break my stride, to slow down, to get caught right here only a few yards from safety. Too bad, because I don't. I turn my shoulder and barge into it at full speed, and the two of us head straight towards the big wooden door.

At that moment it swings open, and the vamp and I hurtle through, landing hard on the ground. The door slams shut behind us. Instantly the vamp begins to howl and scream and writhe on the floor. I roll off and clap my hands to my ears, because I have never heard a vamp scream like that before.

No one invited it in, shouts someone.

This place is still consecrated, yells someone else.
Fer rice cakes, dock it! Dock it!

I grab a stake from the scattered pile on the ground and shove it hard into the vamp's chest. The writhing and the screaming stop. In the second or so before it dissolves into dust there is a look in its eyes that is almost human. For a moment it's no longer 'it', but 'she'. The eyes are almost grateful, I think, and then she's gone, even the dust. I'm leaning on a bare stake, nothing round me. I think that's the first time I have ever seen what they call the 'peace look'. That's rare. It reminds us that vamps didn't come from nowhere, and that no matter what they are now, they were human at one time. It doesn't do to think too much about that, though – you might start to

feel compassion.

There's a hand on my shoulder. I look up. It's Miureen, the Cell Leader.

Take it easy, Chevonne. She knows how I'm thinking and feeling right now. She has been where I am right now, I can tell. *Report.* She knows I need to do this to get my head straight.

Okay. Patrolling, right? I get a flip on my omni from Stoker, I mean Comrade Bram. To me he's always been 'Mr. Sweeney' the teacher at my school, or 'Old Stoker'. *The flip says he'd seen vamp activity at the University Club Library and he's going in and will I get to him quick. I get there, I get in through a window high up, I follow his omni signal and I find him dying.*

Cut? Bitten?

No – shot. Some of these vamps love their gats. I thought it was just some gun-happy footsoldier, and maybe old Stoker did too. I forgot not to use his nickname. But it looks like the vamp was a big deal. De-korp and re-korp. Fly-run. The whole thing. Must have jumped him. But the good thing is he bled out, wasn't bitten, wasn't food.

And the vamp?

Before old Stoker died he kinda told me to use a bible as a weapon, so I did. I thumped the vamp right on the coconut with it. Didn't kill it, but that put it down for long enough to slice its head off. That's new! I docked it – decapitation, stake, garlic, and fire. You got my call.

Uh-huh. Anything else?

Well I guess we won two-to-one tonight, but... I mean... Stoker...

Focus, Chevonne. Anything else?

I think hard. An unusual number of footsoldiers. And I was jumped by two on the roof where I'd hidden my kite. It's like there's more and more of them, too many for us to handle. I mean... Comrade Cell Leader... what's happening?

She frowns and looks at the ground. I don't know. Somehow they're second-guessing us a lot of the time, I guess. Okay, no more formality. Chevonne, you need some sleep. We've rigged up a swinger for you, and your school stuff's here for the morning. Turn in.

Okay Miureen, I say. Gouranga.

She manages a smile, which is more than I can do, though I do my best to look hard. I make it into the crypt, hoist myself into the swinger and let it sway too and fro. I might cry myself to sleep if exhaustion doesn't take over right away. That wouldn't be good. Crying isn't good. Well, this is life in the Resistance, and sometimes it really sucks. I can hear the others talking outside. She's just a kid – it's a lot to ask of her, someone's saying. I'd go argue about that if I wasn't falling asleep.