

TIM WAGGONER



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an excerpt from  
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A MATT RICHTER NOVEL  
Tim Waggoner

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## CHAPTER ONE

That night, working security at Sinsation, I learned something new. Just because you're dead doesn't mean you can't hurt.

I'm not talking physical pain. I hadn't experienced any of that since the day I died and was resurrected – through means I still don't quite understand – as a self-willed zombie. And I'm not talking mental and emotional pain. My body may be dead, but my brain is still very much alive – or at least functional – so I still experience those kinds of pain on an all-too-frequent basis. I'm talking about an entirely different sort of pain, one that up to this point I hadn't given very much thought to: aesthetic pain.

I was making my way through the thrashing, gyrating crowd that choked Sinsation's dance floor, doing my best to shut out the noise blasting from the stage, but it was impossible. Kakophonie was simply too damned loud. The band's lead singer went by the sobriquet of *Scream Queen*, and considering that she was a banshee, the name fit. She looked like an emaciated

human woman in her early twenties, with long, stringy black hair, a bone white complexion, eyes set in dark hollows, lips snail belly gray, and a stylish touch of grave mold at her temples and the nape of her neck. She wore a tattered white shroud made from sheer fabric that left little about her too-skinny body to the imagination. Her nails were black, overlong, and sharp, and I wondered if they were fashion statements or weapons. Both, I decided. In Nekropolis almost everything – and *everyone* – is a weapon in one way or another.

The rest of the band's lineup was an eclectic mix of Darkfolk. A lean male vampire with cyberimplants played guitar, his technological enhancements allowing him to act as his own amplifier. A short boar-faced, beetle-bodied demon, gender unknown and perhaps inapplicable, played bass, while a huge werebear with a truly impressive set of shaggy dreads pounded away on drums that had been specially reinforced with titanium to stand up to whatever punishment the lyke could dish out. I wasn't sure how he managed to hold on to the drumsticks with those paws of his, though. It's hard to describe the sort of music Kakophonie played, mostly because it was so deafeningly loud that it sounded more like a solid wall of noise than anything else. Darkfolk's senses are different than humans', and I suppose it's possible that to the assembled vampires, werebeasts, demons, and assorted other creatures, the band's music was pleasing, even soothing, but to my zombie ears, it sounded like a dozen vehicles colliding

head-on at a hundred miles an hour... over and over and over.

But as bad as the band was, the lead singer was worse. There was a reason she called herself Scream Queen and it wasn't an ironic reference to the term for a horror movie starlet, or at least not only. The Queen's idea of singing was to open her mouth as wide as she possibly could – which, given that she wasn't human, was disturbingly wide indeed – and shriek at the top of her lungs for the entire length of a song without ever pausing for an intake of breath. To be fair, her tone did vary, rising higher, falling lower and with a vague sense that there was some sort of rhythm to the sounds she produced. But there was no way anyone even remotely in their right mind would consider what the Scream Queen did as singing.

I was starting to consider tearing off my own ears and destroying my eardrums with a couple well-placed finger jabs – I could always get my ears repaired later – when a man on the far side of the dance floor signaled to me. He was tall and handsome, with rusty-red hair and a beard that contained enough gray to be considered distinguished. He dressed entirely in black – black jacket over a black T-shirt, black slacks, black shoes – the only variance in the color scheme being the golden medallion he wore around his neck. I'd seen the medallion close up many times, and its face was emblazoned by a circular series of runes that I couldn't translate, but which looked appropriately grim and mysterious. The hand signal meant *All clear on my end*, and I nodded to

the warlock and tried to keep from scowling as I returned the message.

I decided to check on the rest of the team, each of whom was stationed at a different position in the club. Scorch was on the opposite side of the dance floor from Bogdan, and she was dancing wildly to Kakophonie's music, though how anyone could find enough rhythm in the bizarre sounds the band produced to inspire any movement other than severe convulsions was beyond me. Scorch appeared to be a young woman just entering her teens and she wore her blonde hair in a long ponytail that fell down to the middle of her back. She usually dressed in a riot of color, in counterpoint to Bogdan's more severe style, and tonight was no exception. Her sleeveless blouse had been sewn together from patches of bright colors and though her skirt was denim, her knee-high socks were rainbow striped. Though Scorch appeared to be just another fan of Kakophonie's out to have a good time, her gaze was focused and intense, taking in everything around her. I caught her eye and she gave me the all-clear signal, accompanied by a wink and a grin to let me know that just because she was working didn't mean she couldn't have fun too.

Tavi was hanging out by the bar, nursing a mug of aqua sanguis and grimacing whenever he took a sip. The synthetic blood substitute might taste like the real thing – or close to it – but it provides little nourishment. It's kind of like Nekropolis's version of non-alcoholic beer. It's cheaper than the real stuff and easier to come by, and any number of the city's Darkfolk drink it –

vampires, demons and lykes, especially. Tavi was one of the latter, though he usually chose to go about in his human form. Many lykes never bothered to don their human shapes in Nekropolis as they saw no reason to hide their true natures here. After all, if you live in a city of monsters and you *are* a monster, you might as well look the part twenty-four seven. But others still availed themselves of the camouflage of appearing human whenever they wished and Tavi was one of them. Right now he appeared to be a middle-aged man of East Indian descent, lean and wiry, with short black hair, wearing a tan Nehru jacket and matching pants. I once asked him if the jacket wasn't something of an ethnic cliché. In reply, Tavi asked me if my gray suit was any less of a cliché, considering it was the same sort of outfit I'd worn when I was alive back on Earth.

*Your suit screams "cop,"* he'd said.

I couldn't deny it. *At least I don't wear a trenchcoat,* I had replied.

Tavi gave me the all-clear sign, I returned it, and I then trained my attention on the last member of our team. Even if I hadn't known where she'd be, I wouldn't have had any trouble finding her. Devona and I shared a psychic bond that had gotten stronger over the months we'd been together and we could sense each other's presence within a thousand-foot radius or so. A slender, petite blonde who wore her hair short, Devona wore a wonderfully form-fitting black leather outfit that, given the temperature in the club, would've caused her to suffer heat prostration if she'd been

human. But she was only half-human, on her mother's side. Her father was a vampire – one of the city's five Darklords, in fact – and while she physically appeared to be in her late twenties, chronologically, she was in her seventies. What can I say? I always did have a thing for older women.

Devona stood at the edge of the stage, gazing up at Scream Queen as if she were the banshee's biggest fan, when in truth she couldn't stand the woman's so-called singing anymore than I could. In reality, Devona was telepathically scanning the area surrounding the stage for any strong negative thoughts or emotions that might indicate someone wished Scream Queen harm. Vampires have a great many abilities, but half-vampires tend to be more psychically gifted than their full-blooded brothers and sisters, which is one of the reasons why vampires mate with humans from time to time: to add those psychic abilities to the sum total of power in their clan. For the first seven decades of her life Devona had used her powers to help safeguard her father's collection of mystic artifacts, but she and Lord Galm had experienced a recent falling out, resulting in her being cast out of the Darklord's home. I was sorry for that, especially since I'd helped cause that falling out, but considering that Devona had moved in with me soon after, I wasn't too sorry.

Devona must've sensed my watching her, for she turned to look at me and smiled, and I felt the feather-gentle touch of her thoughts brushing my mind.

*All's well so far, love.*

I smiled back, nodded, and we both refocused our attention on our work.

Sinsation's own security was pretty lax, consisting primarily of a single bouncer, though I had to admit he looked appropriately intimidating. A hulking man in a black pullover sweater and gray pants, he stood just inside the club's entrance, leaning against the wall, tree trunk-thick arms crossed over his massive chest, glowering at everyone from beneath a prominent Neanderthal brow. His skin was greenish-gray and his bald head had a line of scar tissue around the circumference, showing he'd had brainwork done.

The bouncer was a Frankenstein monster, constructed to be massively strong and near impossible to kill. His kind were common in Nekropolis, created by Victor Baron – the original Frankenstein monster – to fill those jobs that required brute force and plenty of it. And there was no shortage of such positions that needed to be filled in Nekropolis. Baron creates all sorts of fleshtech for the city, but these monsters – often referred to as the “repurposed dead” – weren't objects to be owned. They were individuals in their own right, hired to perform a task and paid for it like anyone else. The difference was that they were created to perform specific functions and that bothered me. I wondered how much choice they really had about what they do. Could someone like Sinsation's bouncer wake up one morning and suddenly say to himself, “You know, I'm tired of crushing skulls for a living. I think I'll take up waterpainting landscapes instead.”

But the Frankenstein monsters I'd encountered seemed content enough with their lot, so who was I to judge?

Kakophonie was one of the most popular bands in Nekropolis and their fans packed the club that night. Sinsation's theme was based on the classic seven deadly sins: greed, sloth, gluttony, hate, lust, envy, and pride. Greed was represented by the precious metals and gems worked into the floors, walls, ceiling, and furniture. Cheap imitations, most likely, since none of the club's patrons seemed especially interested in absconding with a platinum coated chair or prying off a diamond studded wall panel to take home as a souvenir. The servers brought you copious amounts of whatever food or drink you ordered – gluttony in action – and diners reclined on couches in the style of the ancient Romans as a nod to sloth. Lust was represented by several private rooms in the back of the club where any patron could retire to do anything with and to anyone who was willing, and as for hate... well, it wasn't uncommon for several good sized brawls to break out in the club during the course of an evening. Pride and envy were easily taken care of, for Sinsation was one of *the* places to be seen in the city and not just anyone was granted admittance. I recognized a number of Nekropolis's more notable citizens. Fade, gossip columnist for the *Daily Atrocity*, was there, of course. The reality-challenged woman is always on the scene of any happening where she can be seen by a sizeable crowd who can help keep her existence reinforced. Darius the Sideways

Man was in attendance, which was a bit surprising since he travels between alternate versions of Nekropolis, and I hadn't seen him in our dimension for a while. And the Jade Enigma stood at the back of the crowd, hidden within his, her, or its voluminous green robes and looking appropriately enigmatic.

The only reason the owners of Sinsation would allow the likes of me to shamble across their threshold was because I was with the band – or more specifically, with *Scream Queen*.

After leaving her father's employ, Devona had helped me on a few cases, but she'd soon become restless. She'd spent all of her life living in her father's shadow, most of it residing inside the Cathedral, Lord Galm's stronghold. She wanted to do more than work at my side as an unofficial private investigator. She wanted to explore her newfound independence and make her own way in the world. I understood. After all, I've always been something of an independent sort myself. So Devona decided to use her knowledge of security systems and procedures, both mystic and mundane, that she'd gained working for her father to start her own security business. Being the daughter of a Darklord – even a half-human, banished daughter – had helped her quickly establish a reputation and her business had gotten off to a good start and was doing quite well. So well, in fact, that she'd been able to bring Bogdan, Scorch and Tavi onto the staff, and I helped out when I wasn't busy with my own work. Which meant that this night Devona was my boss. When I was a kid back on

Earth I had a folksy uncle who was fond of saying, "Life sure is a funny old possum sometimes, ain't she?" I know just what he meant.

Scream Queen had hired Devona because during Kakophonie's last two gigs someone had attempted to abduct the singer. Her own security – a pair of two-headed mansters – had managed to foil both attempts, but only barely, and not without a significant amount of injury on their part. Among other indignities they'd suffered they were now a pair of one-headed mansters. Both had quit before their service to Scream Queen could prove fatal. Left without security the Queen had turned to Devona. The details of the two abduction attempts we'd gotten were a bit sketchy, but then mansters aren't exactly Mensa material. Each attempt had occurred at a different time – one before a gig, one after – and the assailant had been cloaked by an illusion spell that faltered when he, she, or it was attacked, revealing a masked figure encased in black body armor which concealed not only the gender but also the species of the kidnapper. One thing the mansters agreed on was that whoever it was knew how to fight and use weapons, both the standard fare – knives, guns, swords – and those of a more esoteric variety – spells, charms, enchanted objects – which meant we were probably looking for a professional hired to do a job as opposed to an obsessed fan who wanted to take home more than just a T-shirt with Scream Queen's face on the front, but otherwise, as we say in the private detecting business, we didn't have a goddamned clue.

Enemies? According to *Scream Queen*, she didn't have any.

"Everyone loves the Queen, darlings," she'd said when we'd asked.

Did she owe anyone money? "Certainly not! I have more darkgems than I can ever possibly spend"

What about the band members? "If they had any enemies, I'd know about it, and if they needed darkgems, they could always come to me. We're one happy family, darlings."

We'd questioned the individual band members, of course, but they'd told us the same thing. So our strategy tonight was a simple one: never take our eyes off *Scream Queen* and keep watch for anyone suspicious in attendance. Unfortunately, this being *Nekropolis*, everyone looked suspicious.

Vermen servers scuttled back and forth through the club, taking orders and delivering food and drink with characteristic speed. The humanoid rodents moved swiftly, constantly shaking with a nervous energy that most people found annoying. That, coupled with a musky body odor reminiscent of wet skunk, made their species one of the lowest regarded in the city. But there was no denying their speed and efficiency, at least when it came to completing simple tasks, so vermen were widely employed as servants throughout *Nekropolis*. The sight of them always made me uncomfortable, though. Their position in the city's social order struck me as a sort of racism – or maybe the right term would be species-ism – and I had to remind myself that

this wasn't Earth and while the vermen resembled humans to a point, they weren't human. So I told myself to take a "When in Rome" attitude and tried not to think about the situation, but I never felt very good about doing so.

As a rule, vermen tend to be short – between four and five feet tall – with rat heads, lean bodies covered with brown, black, or gray fur, and long hairless tails. They tend to walk hunched over with a shuffling gait, though they can move damned fast when they wish to. The creatures avoid clothing for the most part, though sometimes they'll wear vests, mostly just to have pockets to carry things. The vermen employed at Sinsation, male and female, wore black vests with gold buttons and matching bow ties. I suppose the club's management was hoping the vests would make the vermen look classy and formal, but the overall effect struck me as rather silly.

"Pardon me, sir. Can I get you anything?"

I barely heard the voice over the music and I turned to see a verman server quivering before me. When I first came to Nekropolis I thought vermen trembled like that because they were always afraid. I'd soon learned that they shook due to their rapid metabolic rate. Standing still must've been torturous for the creature, but he did so, looking up at me with wet glossy-black eyes.

He was a bit leaner than the average verman – evidently the club owners didn't feed their employees as well as their guests – and he was missing half of his left ear. He didn't carry an order pad because vermen didn't

need to write things down. They never forgot the details of an order.

I shook my head and the verman bowed his head before shuffling off in search of someone else to serve. I headed toward the bar to check in with Tavi when I felt a hand on my shoulder. At first I thought the verman had returned for some reason and was trying to get my attention, but his kind never came in physical contact with the clientele where they worked, perhaps because they knew how revolting their touch was to most people. So since I didn't know who had laid a hand on me, I reached into one of my pants pockets as I turned. Nekropolis is a dangerous place at the best of times, and along with a 9mm loaded with blessed silver bullets currently resting in a shoulder holster concealed beneath my jacket and a squirt gun filled with a blend of holy water and garlic juice tucked into my jacket pocket, I always carry a number of useful trinkets with me in case I run into any unpleasantness. I had my fingers on one such item, ready to pull it out and activate it, as I turned to see who wanted my attention. In the back of my mind I was thinking that *Scream Queen's* would-be kidnapper had gotten wind that Devona and the rest of us were on the job and for whatever reason had decided to confront me. But when I saw who was standing before me, I knew that wasn't the case.

"Matthew Richter! I'm so glad to finally catch up with you!"

She wore a white floor-length gown that resembled a toga, bodice cut low to display an impressive amount of

cleavage. She wasn't fat, but she was, shall we say, Rubenesque, and I wondered if she used some sort of spell to keep from spilling out of her dress. She wore a pair of dark wrap-around goggles to hide her eyes, something for which I was exceedingly grateful, considering she was a gorgon. Since I was a zombie, I had no idea whether her direct gaze could turn me into stone, but I didn't want to find out. Her hair, as you might imagine, was a nest of green serpents, although instead of heads, miniature video cameras sprouted from the snakes' necks. It's not uncommon for the denizens of Nekropolis to sport cybernetic or genetic enhancements, for their inhuman physiognomy is able to adapt to such drastic changes in ways that merely human bodies can't, but this was one of the stranger body modifications I'd seen since taking up residence in the city. Although, technically, this wasn't the first time I'd seen the woman's cyberserpents, just the first time up close and in person and I wasn't thrilled about it.

"I'm too busy to talk right now, Acantha!" I had to shout to make myself heard over the band.

The gorgon smiled, revealing a mouthful of slightly pointed pearl-white teeth. "No need to raise your voice, sweetie. My little pets can filter out any background noise, even when it's as loud as this. Just speak normally." Her smile widened. "And by the way, just so you know, we're on live right now."

I grimaced. *On the Scene with Acantha* was one of the most popular Mind's Eye programs in Nekropolis. Devona and I watched it now and again, more as a

guilty pleasure than anything else. Acantha specialized in live, on-the-spot tabloid-style interviews with the city's famous and infamous, the up-and-comers and the downward-sliders. She came across as all sweetness and light at first, but it never took long for her true nature to reveal itself. She could be more vicious than a lyke suffering from a bad case of intestinal parasites and those who were unfortunate enough to get cornered by her rarely came across well during the interview, to put it mildly. I joked with Devona that the gorgon's program should be re-titled *Verbal Evisceration with Acantha*, so as you might imagine, I was eager to get away from the woman as fast as possible. Besides, I couldn't afford to be distracted while I was supposed to be watching for another abduction attempt on Scream Queen.

Before I could protest any further Acantha launched into her first question. "Are you on the job right now, Matthew? Trying to track down some nefarious villain, no doubt. I'm sure you can't tell us the whole story – detective/client confidentiality and all that – but perhaps you can give us one or two juicy tidbits to satisfy our curiosity?"

To be honest, I was a bit flattered. The dead aren't held in high regard by other Darkfolk and zombies are considered to be on the lowest rung of that particular ladder. I was used to people turning up their noses at me – especially when I'd gone a bit too long between applications of preservative spells to keep me from rotting – so the fact that Acantha at least appeared to be

happy to see me was a nice change. And it occurred to me that doing an interview with Acantha might garner some good publicity for Devona's business. But I was working, and as tempting as it was to do the interview, the job came first.

"I'm afraid I don't have any tidbits to offer, juicy or otherwise. Like I said, I really don't have the time for this right now."

Muted light flashed behind the gorgon's dark goggles and her lips stretched into a hard, thin line. Translation: *Acantha Is Not Pleased.*

"I've wanted to get you on the show ever since you saved the city last Descension Day, but for some reason my calls to you weren't returned." Before I could respond she reached out and grabbed hold of my left hand and turned it palm up. "So the rumors are true!" she said, her tone triumphant, as if she'd caught me with my pants down and my undead zombie dick exposed for all the world to see.

I had no doubt that her serpentcameras were focusing on a close-up of my hand and the pattern of puckered scar tissue there that formed the letter *E*.

"You *are* a servant of Lord Edrigu!" the gorgon crowed.

Edrigu, Master of the Dead, is one of the five Darklords who rule Nekropolis.

I yanked my hand free of Acantha's grip. "One of Edrigu's servants did a favor for me and now I owe Edrigu a favor in return. That's the extent of our relationship."

That was true enough as far as it went, but I had no real idea just how much I owed Edrighu for the help Silent Jack had given my friends and me. I tried not to think about it too much. It's never a good idea to owe a Darklord anything and if I'd had any other choice at the time... Well, I hadn't and I'd made the deal with Silent Jack and one day I would have to pay for it. I just hoped that day was a while in coming.

I wasn't really paying much attention to Acantha at this point. I'd returned to scanning the crowd, keeping an eye out for anything or anyone that seemed out of the ordinary. Well, more out of the ordinary than usual for Nekropolis. While I knew that Scream Queen's would-be abductor had cloaked his or her true appearance with illusion spells during the two previous attempts to kidnap the singer, that didn't help much. Scream Queen's former guards had been able to describe the illusions well enough: a male vampire covered with synthticks, cybernetic insects that constantly filter and recycle their wearer's blood supply, adding various drug cocktails to it in the process, and a female demon who resembled a bipedal shark, complete with water-breathing apparatus and, according to the guards, a truly impressive pair of shark-skin-covered breasts. But it didn't matter what the abductor had looked like before. Assuming he or she stuck to the same MO a new illusion would be used next time and there was no way to predict what sort it might be.

Acantha spoke then, a sharp edge of impatience in her voice. It seemed she wasn't used to being ignored

and the experience wasn't sitting well with her. "If you could try to *focus* here, Matthew. I only need a few minutes—"

I spun to face the gorgon. "I don't have a few minutes! I told you – I'm busy! And why are you even bothering to talk to me? I'm nobody special. I'm just a guy doing my job. There are dozens of people in here who are far more interesting than I am. Go pester some of them and let me get on with my work."

Acantha gritted her teeth and the light blazing behind her goggles was so intense now, I imagined that my normally stiff limbs felt a touch more rigid and heavy. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to irritate a gorgon, I thought. Still, she went doggedly on, speaking through her gritted teeth.

"Rumor has it that someone has tried to kidnap Scream Queen twice now. Is that the case you're working on?"

Back when I was alive, I'd worked as a homicide detective on Earth – in Cleveland, to be precise – and I'd had to deal with aggressive journalists on more than one occasion. But those reporters had been like playful little puppies compared to the pit bull that Acantha was. She'd sunk her teeth into me, metaphorically speaking, and I knew there was nothing I could say or do to get her to give up. She wouldn't be satisfied until she got what she wanted out of me and the sooner I delivered the sooner she'd move on and let me do my job. But by this point I'd begun to get irritated, too. I'm not exactly the go-along-with-the-program type. As my

mother used to tell me, if you let people push you around they'll never stop, and in Nekropolis the last thing you need is a reputation as a push-over. Not if you plan to keep on living.

I still had my hand inside my pants pocket, my fingers wrapped around the object I'd planned to use to defend myself in case of attack. I withdrew the object, a small ball of white silk, and tossed it toward Acantha's face. It expanded rapidly upon contact with the air and by the time it struck the gorgon it had become a sticky white mass large enough to engulf her entire head, videoserpents included.

"Have a piece of Anansi's Web," I told her.

Out of reflex Acantha reached up to tear the webbing away from her face with her long black nails, but when her fingers came in contact with the sticky mess she realized her mistake. Anansi isn't just any arachnid: he's an African trickster god and his webbing is far stronger and more adhesive than simple spider silk. Acantha's fingers became stuck fast in the white mass covering her face and though she frantically tried to tear her hands free there was nothing she could do.

"Pretty nifty, huh?" I said. "Some clients pay with darkgems, while others prefer to pay in barter. I pick up all kinds of interesting toys that way. Don't worry about the webbing. It'll dissolve after an hour or so. In the meantime, I'd remain as still as possible if I were you. It can't be easy to breathe through that stuff and you don't want to asphyxiate while you're on the air, do you?"

I felt an admittedly petty sense of satisfaction as I turned away from the gorgon, who was now emitting muffled cries of indignation that I imagined were peppered with rather colorful language. I walked away, knowing I would end up paying for this one way or another, but at least now I could return my attention to where it belonged – keeping an eye out for Scream Queen’s abductor.

Good thing, too, for at that moment I felt Devona’s mind reaching out to mine.

*Look stage left.*

“Stage left” meant Scream Queen’s left and the audience’s right. I directed my gaze where Devona indicated and saw a female ghoul waving an autograph book in hope of getting the singer’s attention. Ghouls are basically humanoid, hairless and ivory-fleshed, with thick reptilian lips and double rows of sharp teeth. They’re voracious gluttons, but while the males tend to be obese, the females tend to be thin to the point of emaciation, though they eat just as much as their opposite gender. Different metabolisms, I guess. Neither male nor female ghouls were particularly pleasant to look at, especially considering they never wore a stitch of clothing.

Kakophonie’s song built toward its climax and ended on a series of thunderous notes that made the floor vibrate dangerously. I wondered if Sinsation’s architecture could stand up to the punishment or if the band would literally bring down the house before their set was over. Scream Queen shrieked one last time as the final note

sounded and then she bowed to wild applause and cheers from the audience. The ghoul jumped up and down and thrust her autograph book toward the banshee singer, but I was already moving, as was Devona and the rest of the team. There was nothing about the ghoul's appearance to rouse suspicion, but I was certain Devona had gotten a psychic "hit" off the woman, marking her as a likely suspect, and we had to intercept her before she could make her move.

Which was far easier said than done, given how crowded the club was that night. I'd moved close to the bar, which meant that everyone on the dance floor was between me and the stage. I started shoving my way through the crowd, making liberal use of my elbows and shouting, "Security! Let me through!" but neither tactic helped me make much headway. Tavi had been sitting at the bar, so he had the crowd to contend with too, and while Scorch and Bogdan had been stationed on the dance floor, neither was all that close to the stage. Only Devona was near enough to reach the ghoul before she could get to *Scream Queen* and she headed toward the bald, naked autograph seeker, pushing people out of her way with surprising strength. Devona may only be half-vampire – and a petite half-vampire at that – but she's still plenty strong. And while she doesn't possess any telekinetic abilities, she was able to employ her telepathic powers to mentally urge the concert-goers to move aside and while many of them didn't get the message – or if they did, chose to ignore it – a good number did make room for her to

pass, bewildered looks on their faces as if they weren't quite sure why they'd done so. I was impressed anew by how much Devona's psychic skills had improved since we'd first met. She'd worked hard to develop her powers over the last few months, and the results were paying off now.

But before Devona had gotten halfway to the ghoul, *Scream Queen* noticed the woman waving her autograph book and, gracious star that she was, reached down to take it and quickly scrawl a signature before the next song started. She handed the book back with a smile and then gave a nod for the band to launch into the next number. The ghoul gave a strange smile, almost as if she were enjoying some private joke, before turning and beginning to head away from the stage. That struck me as strange. If you were a big enough fan to want an autograph, why would you leave after getting it, especially when you'd only gotten to hear one song? But *Scream Queen* looked unharmed as the band started in on another tune that had more in common with a ten car pile up than music and I began to wonder if Devona had been wrong about the ghoul. After all, she was heading away from *Scream Queen*, who was most decidedly *not* abducted, so she appeared to be no threat. Maybe her real interest in the autograph lay in its monetary value and she was eager to get on with the business of finding a buyer. As I said before, ghouls are gluttons and all the food they shovel down their gullets doesn't come free. But then *Scream Queen* opened her mouth to sing and I – along with everyone else in the

club – realized that something was seriously wrong when no sound came out of her mouth.

Her fellow band members realized it too. They stopped playing and stared at Scream Queen with expressions of puzzlement that were rapidly edging toward outright alarm. The patrons in attendance were equally confused and shocked and the entire club fell quiet as everyone waited to see what would happen next.

Scream Queen drew in another breath and then opened her mouth once more. She squeezed her eyes shut and her neck muscles grew taut. She was clearly attempting to release a note with some real power behind it, but just as before, there was only silence. It seemed the Scream Queen had lost her voice. But that was OK: I knew where it had gone.

I started heading toward the ghoul.

