

W°NDER CITY ST°RIES

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BY JUDE MCLAUGHLIN

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COLLATERAL DAMAGE

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COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Megan was trying to decide whether to call over to Death's place to see if Diarmid needed a hand with anything when there was a polite, very recognizable knock on her door. She opened it and looked down at her long-absent landlord, astonished.

"You're home?" she said.

"Indeed," Zoltan said with a smile that didn't quite reach the rest of his face.

Megan thought he looked paler and thinner and older than he had a few weeks ago, when he'd introduced her to his family and left her at their mansion for safekeeping. "Well, welcome back," she said as a precursor to her inquiries about his health.

He intercepted her verbally with a, "Thank you. I need your able assistance, if I may, with some entirely legal breaking and entering."

She blinked. "Legal...?"

"Yes," he said, stepping back from the door and gesturing toward the stairs up. "If you wouldn't mind?"

Megan followed him up the stairs to the second floor. She glanced at Simon's door out of (old) habit (that she was still pleased to find had not been deleted), but knew he was out job-hunting today. Zoltan paused in front of the other door on that landing.

"No one has seen Lizzie for several days," Zoltan explained in a low voice. "And she lost her job last week."

"How do you know that?" Megan asked, also in a low voice.

"I have sources," he said with a dismissive wave. "While I have a key to her apartment and have attempted to use it, she appears to have barricaded the door in some way."

"And you want me to get the door open."

"S'il vous plaît," he said with a bow.

"It's unlocked now?" she said, putting a hand on the door.

"Yes," he said.

She turned the knob carefully and then pushed against the opening side of the door. There was some stubborn resistance, but she increased the pressure and the door started to move, accompanied by a scraping sound from inside. As gently as possible, she pushed the door open enough for Zoltan to slide inside.

A wave of hot sour air hit her in the face, full of stale beer and less pleasant substances. She swallowed hard against the initial sickly urge, and turned away from the door.

Muffled, inside, she heard Zoltan say, "Ah!" and then she heard him on his cell phone, giving the address and information to the 911 operator.

After a few moments, there was a small commotion on the other side of the door. He said, "I have removed the smaller items that were heaped against the door, but I cannot move the sofa myself — it is upended, and somewhat tipsy."

"All right," she said, taking a breath of the potpourri-scented air in the hallway and then reaching around the door to take hold of the sofa with one hand. The sofa was one of those older monsters made of neutron star material and prickles. She lifted it to one side and pushed the door open.

The interior of the apartment was dim, all the windows heavily curtained. Zoltan was trying light after light, but they were either unplugged or the bulbs were burnt out, until he tried one of the cheap floor lamps, which illuminated the space but also threw long shadows. A figure she guessed was Lizzie was swathed in a blanket and curled up on a loveseat that did not match the sofa she'd just moved aside. The floor was littered with bottles and cans. There was a box fan on the floor, aimed at the loveseat, but it wasn't on, and all the windows were shut. The room was sweltering in the late summer heat.

"Oh, shit," she said.

"She's alive," Zoltan said, turning back toward the loveseat. "And even responds somewhat. I am hopeful she is not as bad as this room looks."

Poor Simon came upstairs at just that moment. He started to say something to Megan, and then he turned almost visibly green as the smell hit him. He galloped back downstairs and out the front door with impressive speed.

"Simon's waiting outside for the ambulance," Megan told Zoltan.

"Ah, wise boy," Zoltan said, with a grimace. He bent over the loveseat and shook Lizzie. "Come, my girl, you need to wake up for your old landlord, whose heart is not good enough for these kinds of scares."

Lizzie moaned in response, which Megan had to admit was better than she expected.

The EMTs arrived a few minutes later, and were guided inside by Simon, who stayed downstairs on the porch, holding the door for the gurney's return. Megan helped them kick a path to the loveseat, and then retreated back to the door to set the sofa down on its legs, off to the side.

Zoltan answered their questions about Lizzie as if he were related to her, down to knowing her birthdate and wallet name. He presented them with a document that was apparently his authorization to stand as her medical proxy (in lieu of her awful next-of-kin), then moved back to the doorway to join Megan while they examined Lizzie and got her onto their gurney.

Megan frowned down at Zoltan with some confusion, and said, back to her low voice, "I thought you had enhanced strength. You should've been able to take care of this door yourself."

He avoided her gaze and shrugged. "It is daylight. And I have been... not very well lately. I probably *could* have handled the door, but it seemed ill-advised to burst in, not knowing where she was and how the barricade might fall."

Megan watched him for a moment, and something that had been niggling at the back of her mind since she had stayed with his family tackled her. "Oh, wait, were *you* the person they were talking about at the house who lost all your, uh, 'donors' to the men in black arresting them?"

Zoltan cleared his throat and looked more uncomfortable than Megan thought she'd ever seen him. "Yes, I suppose I am. Voluntarily being a... partner for a registered vampire was subject to arrest for 'perversion' under our invading overlords. My lawyer is hard at work, trying to get my friends released."

The EMTs emerged at this point with Lizzie strapped onto the gurney. She was pallid and greenish, eyes closed.

"Pardon," Zoltan said, watching them negotiate the stairs. "I need to go with them."

"Of course," Megan said.

Zoltan closed and locked Lizzie's door, and returned his keyring to the pocket of his sleek black trousers. "Perhaps you could mention to Watson that I will need a ride home in a few hours and will call her?"

"Yes, of course," Megan said again. Watson was out on some case or other, but Megan knew she'd probably be back inside of a couple hours.

"I will see you later, then," Zoltan said, trotting down the stairs. He paused and looked back at her. "Could you also perhaps call that charming elderly gentleman of whom Lizzie is so fond? She might like to have a friendly face if... when she wakes up."

"I can get Ira's number, no problem," Megan said, knowing Watson would have it.

"Thank you very much, Megan," he said solemnly, and hurried out the front door.

Megan went downstairs and stood on the porch with Simon, leaving the front door open so the stairwell could air out. They watched the EMTs carefully settling the gurney in the ambulance and finally inviting Zoltan to jump in the back, which he did as gracefully as one can. The ambulance lights came on and it rolled out of the driveway onto Marigold Lane, and away toward town.

They stood in silence in the humidity of late afternoon. A vague breeze crept onto the porch and ruffled Megan's freshly butched hair.

"Well, that sucks," Simon said finally.

"Yeah," Megan said. Her stomach tightened and she knew it was time to say something to him. "I've been really self-centered about the fallout from everything." She bit her lip to try to keep the tears out of her eyes and said, "I'm sorry about what happened. Forgetting that you were human... locking you into my apartment and asking Watson to walk you! It was horrible, I wasn't even paying attention to what was going on with you. I'm so sorry."

She saw him turn to look at her out of the corner of her suddenly wet eye. *Dammit, stop being a fucking faucet, Megan.* It took serious force of will, but she finally looked at him.

His expression was, she thought, a little surprised and more than a little sad. He took one of her big hands in both of his and looked up into her face over the edge of his tinted glasses. "Thank you. That means a lot to me." His yellow eyes were bright and damp around the edges. "But I know what was happening to you, Megan, and having your mind actively fucked with is not something to take lightly. I'm good, I'm okay. I had other people taking care of me through all that, and I'm really not pissed at you, I promise. You can let go of blaming yourself for that."

Megan tried to hold it together for another ten seconds, and then they ended up in a mutually bawling hug, her on her knees, him standing.

"I'm sorry..."

"No, *I'm* sorry..."

"I was so terrified..."

"I missed you so much..."

"Everything hurt all the time..."

"When you didn't say anything after..."

"But you were out all the time..."

"I feel so alone..."

"I can't..."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"God, we're dorks."

"Yeah, but we're sexy dorks."

"I am SO not sexy right now."

"Well, me either."

They finally let go and looked at each other's puffy red wet faces. Megan fumbled for her handkerchief to wipe her nose and Simon used the front of his t-shirt to rub his whole face.

"I feel really bad that I didn't pay more attention to Lizzie," Simon said, sitting down on the porch swing. "I'm supposed to be her friend."

"She wasn't letting anyone in, I think," Megan said, who thumped down to sit crosslegged at his feet. "I heard you knocking on her door a couple times, and she kept sending you away. I know Watson tried too." She snorted. "I was too wrapped up in my own shit."

"You and she have always just been nodding acquaintances, though," Simon said.

"Maybe she would have talked to me because of that," Megan said with a shrug.

Megan scooted around and rested her head on Simon's leg. He ruffled her hair. "I missed you a lot," he said.

"I missed you too," she said. She had a sudden flash of memory—which gratified her, as such things did these days—and added, "And I promise I'll never make a 'Megan's best friend' crack about you again."

"I appreciate that," he said with a hiccupping laugh. "Though you're still allowed to skritch me behind the ear occasionally."