## The Storm Door

## Tad Williams

Nightingale did not take the first cab he saw when he stepped out into the rainy San Francisco streets. He never did. Some might call it superstition, but in his profession the line between “superstitions” and “rules of survival” was rather slender. He stepped back onto the curb to avoid the spray of water as the second cab pulled up in response to his wave. Paranormal investigators didn’t make enough money to ruin a pair of good shoes for no reason.

Somebody should have warned me that saving the world from unspeakable horrors is like being a teacher—lots of job satisfaction, but the money’s crap.

“Thirty-three Gilman Street,” he told the driver, an ex-hippie on the edge of retirement age, shoulder-length gray hair draggling out from under his Kangol hat and several silver rings on the fingers holding the wheel. “It’s off Jones.”

“You got it.” The driver pulled back into traffic, wipers squeaking as city lights smeared and dribbled across the glass beside Nightingale’s head. “Helluva night,” he said. “I know we need the rain and everything, but...shit, man.”

Nathan Nightingale had spent so much of the past week in a small, overheated, and nearly airless room that he would have happily run through this downpour naked, but he only nodded and said, “Yeah. Helluva night.”

“Gonna be a lot more before it’s over, too. That’s what they said. The storm door’s open.” The driver turned down the music a notch. “Kind of a weird expression, huh? Makes it sound like they’re...” he lifted his fingers in twitching monster-movie talons, “coming to get us. Whooo! I mean, it’s just clouds, right? It’s nature.”

“This? Yeah, it’s just nature,” agreed Nightingale, his thoughts already drawn back to that small room, those clear, calm, terrifying eyes. “But sometimes even nature can be unnatural.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess so. Good one.” But it was clear by his tone that the driver feared he’d missed the point.

“That’s it—the tall house there.”

The driver peered out the window. “Whoa, that’s a spooky one, man. You sure you gonna be okay, man? This is kind of a tough neighborhood...”

“I’ll be fine, thanks,” said Nightingale. “I’ve been here before—it was kind of my second home.”

“If you say so.” The driver called just before Nightingale slammed the door, “Hey, remember about that storm door. Better get an umbrella!”

Nightingale raised his hand as the man drove off. An umbrella. He almost smiled, but the wet night was getting to him. If only all problems were that easy to solve.

As he pressed the button beside the mailbox lightning blazed overhead, making it seem as though one had caused the other. A moment later the thunder crashed down, so near that he did not hear the sound of the door being buzzed open but felt the handle vibrating under his hand.

The light was out in the first-floor stairwell, and no lights were on at all on the second floor, what Uncle Edward called “the showroom,” although no one ever saw it but a few old, trusted collector friends. Enough of the streetlight’s glow leaked in that Nightingale could see the strange silhouettes of some of the old man’s prize possessions, fetish dolls and funerary votives and terra cotta tomb statuettes, a vast audience of silent, wide-eyed shapes watching Nightingale climb the stairs. It was an excellent collection, but what made it truly astounding were the stories behind the pieces, most of them dark, many of them horrifying. In fact, it had been his godfather’s arcane tales and bizarre trophies that had first lured Nightingale onto his odd career path: at an age when most boys wanted to be football players or firemen, young Nate had decided he wanted to hunt ghosts and fight demons. Later, when others were celebrating their first college beer-busts, Nightingale had already attended strange ceremonies on high English moors and deep in Thai jungles and Louisiana bayous. He had heard languages never shaped for the use of human tongues, had seen men die for no reason, and others live when they should have been dead. But through the years, when the unnatural things he saw and felt and learned overwhelmed him, he always came back here for his godfather’s advice and support. This was one of those times. In fact, this was probably the worst time he could remember.

Strangely, the third floor of the house was dark, too.

“Edward? Uncle Edward? It’s me, Nathan. Are you here?” Had the old man forgotten he was coming and gone out with his caretaker Jenkins somewhere? God forbid, a medical emergency...Nightingale stopped to listen. Was that the quiet murmuring of the old man’s breathing machine?

Something stirred on the far side of the room and his hackles rose; his hand strayed to his inside coat pocket. A moment later the desk lamp clicked on, revealing the thin, lined face of his godfather squinting against the sudden light. “Oh,” Edward said, taking a moment to find the air to speak. “Guh-goodness! Nate, is that you? I must have dozed off. When did it get so dark?”

Relieved, Nightingale went to the old man and gave him a quick hug, being careful not to disturb the tracheotomy cannula or the ventilator tubes. As always, Edward Arvedson felt like little more than a suit full of bones, but somehow he had survived in this failing condition for almost a decade. “Where’s Jenkins?” Nightingale asked. “It gave me a start when I came up and the whole house was dark.”

“Oh, I had him take the night off, poor fellow. Working himself to death. Pour me a small sherry, will you, there’s a good man, and sit down and tell me what you’ve learned. There should be a bottle of Manzanilla already open. No, don’t turn all those other lights on. I find I’m very sensitive at the moment. This is enough light for you to find your way to the wet bar, isn’t it?”

Nightingale smiled. “I could find it without any light at all, Uncle Edward.”

When he’d poured a half glass for the old man and a little for himself as well, Nightingale settled into the chair facing the desk and looked his mentor up and down. “How are you feeling?”

Arvedson waved a dismissive hand. “Fine, fine. Never felt better. And now that we’re done with that nonsense, tell me your news, Nate. What happened? I’ve been worrying ever since you told me what you thought was happening.”

“Well, it took me a while to find a volunteer. Mostly because I was trying to avoid publicity—you know, all that ‘Nightingale—Exorcist to the Stars’ nonsense.”

“You shouldn’t have changed your name—it sounds like a Hollywood actor now. Your parents wouldn’t have approved, anyway. What was wrong with Natan Näktergal? It was good enough for your father.”

He smiled. “Too old country, Uncle Edward. Remember, being well-known gets me into a lot of places. It also leads people to misjudge me.”

Arvedson made a face. He still hadn’t touched his sherry. “Fine. I’m also old country, I suppose. I should be grateful you even visit. Tell me what happened.”

“I’m trying to. As I said, it wouldn’t do to recruit just anyone. Ideally, I needed someone with special training...but who gets trained for something like this? I figured that my best bet was through my Tibetan contacts. Tibetan Buddhists spend years studying the Bardo Thodol, preparing to take the journey of dying, which gave me a much larger group to choose from. I finally settled on a man in Seattle named Geshe, who had pancreatic cancer. He’d refused pain relief and the doctors felt certain he only had a few days left when I met him, but he was remarkably calm and thoughtful. I told him what I wanted, and why, and he said yes.”

“So you had found your...what was your word? Your ‘necronaut.’”

Nightingale nodded. “That’s what I called it before I met Geshe—it sounded better than ‘mineshaft canary.’ But after I got to know him it...it seemed a little glib. But he was precisely the sort of person I was looking for—a man trained almost since childhood to die with his eyes and mind open.”

Lightning flashed and a peal of thunder shivered the windows. In the wake, another wash of rain splattered against the glass. “Filthy weather,” said Arvedson. “Do you want another drink before you start? You’ll have to get it yourself, of course, since we don’t have Jenkins.”

“No, I’m fine.” Nightingale stared at his glass. “I’m just thinking.” Lightning flashed again and so he waited for the thunder before continuing. “You remember how this started, of course. Those earliest reports of spontaneous recovery by dying patients...well, it didn’t seem like anything I needed to pay attention to. But then that one family whose daughter went into sudden remission from leukemia after the last rites had already been said...”

“I remember. Very young, wasn’t she? Nine?”

“Yes, a few weeks before her tenth birthday. But of course what caught my attention was when the parents started claiming it wasn’t their daughter at all, that she’d changed in ways that no illness could explain. But when I got in to see the child she was asleep, and although she looked surprisingly healthy compared to my general experience with possession cases, I couldn’t get any kind of feeling from her one way or another. When I tried to contact the family a few days later they’d moved and no one could find them.

“There were others, too—too many to be coincidence, most of them unknown to the general public. The greatest hindrance in these situations is the gutter press, of course—any real study, let alone any chance to help the victims and their families, is destroyed by the sort of circus they create. These days, with television and the internet, it’s even worse. If I don’t strenuously keep my comings and goings a secret, I wind up with cameras in my face and following me everywhere and looking over my shoulder.”

“They are vermin,” said Edward Arvedson with feeling.

“In any case, when I talked to you I had just learned of an accident victim in Minnesota who had recovered from a coma and, like the girl in Southern California, seemed to have undergone a complete personality shift. He had been a mild and soft-spoken churchgoer, but now he was a violent, alcoholic bully. His wife of twenty-four years had divorced him, his children no longer saw him. The front yard of his house in Bloomington was a wreck, and when he opened the door the stink of rot and filth just rolled out. I only saw him for a few seconds through the chain on his front door, but what I witnessed was definitely madness, a sort of...emotionless focus that I’ve only seen in the criminally insane. That doesn’t prove anything, of course. Brain damage can do that, and he’d certainly been badly injured. But he recognized me.”

“You told me when you called,” said Arvedson. “I could tell it upset you.”

“Because it wasn’t like he’d seen my picture in The Enquirer, but like he knew me. Knew me and hated me. I didn’t stay there long, but it wasn’t just seeing the Minnesota victim that threw me. I’d never heard of possessions happening at this rate, or to people so close to death. It didn’t make sense!”

“It has my attention, too,” Edward said. “But what I want to hear now is what happened with your Buddhist gentleman.”

Nightingale let out a breath. He swallowed the last of his sherry. “Right. Well, Geshe was a very interesting man, an artist and a teacher. I wish I could have met him at a different time, but even in our short acquaintance he impressed me and I liked him. That’s why what happened was so disturbing.

“He had checked out of the hospital to die at home. He’d lost his wife a few years earlier and they’d had no children, so although some of his students and colleagues came by to sit with him from time to time, at the end there was only his friend Joseph, an American Buddhist, and the hospice nurse who checked in on him once a day. And me, of course. Geshe and I didn’t speak much—he had to work too hard to manage the pain—but as I said, he impressed me. During the long days in his apartment I spent a great deal of time looking at his books and other possessions, which is as good a way to get to know someone as talking with them. Also, I saw many of his own works of art, which may be an even better way to learn about another human being—he made beautiful Buddhist Thangkas, meditation paintings.

“As Geshe began to slip away Joseph read the Bardo Thodol to him. I’ve never spent much time studying it, myself—I think that hippie-ish, Tibetan Book of the Dead reputation put me off when I was younger, and these days I don’t really need to know the nuts and bolts of any particular religious dogma to work with the universal truths behind them all—but I have to say that hearing it and living with it, even as Geshe was dying with it, opened my eyes.”

“There is great truth at the heart of all the great faiths,” Arvedson said solemnly.

“Yes, but what I truly came to admire was the calmness of the people who wrote the bardos—the practicality, I suppose is the best word. It’s a very practical book, the Bardo Thodol. A road map. A set of travel tips. ‘Here’s what’s going to happen now that you’re dead. Do this. Don’t do that. Everything will be okay.’ Except that this time it wasn’t.

“The famous teacher Trungpa Rinpoche said the best thing we can do for the dying and the newly dead is maintain an atmosphere of calmness, and that’s certainly what Geshe seemed to have around him at the end. It was raining outside most of that week, but quietly. Joseph read the bardos over and over while he and I took turns holding Geshe’s hand. With my special sensitivities, I was beginning to sense something of what he was sensing—the approach of the Great Mystery, the crossing, whatever you want to call it—and of course it troubled me deep down in my bones and guts, but Geshe wasn’t frightened in the least. All those years of training and meditation had prepared him.

“It was fascinating to see how the dying soul colors the experience, Uncle Edward. As I said, I have never delved too deeply into Tibetan Buddhism, yet the version of dying I experienced through Geshe was shaped so strongly by that tradition that I could not feel it any other way—it was as real as you and I sitting here in the dark, listening to the wind and the rain.” Nightingale paused for a moment while the storm rattled the windows of the old house. “The thousands of gods, which are one god, which is the light of the universe...I can’t explain. But touching Geshe’s thoughts as he began his journey, although I felt only the barest hint of what he felt, was like riding a roller-coaster through a kaleidoscope, but simultaneously falling through an endless, dark, silent void.”

“‘...When your body and mind separate, the dharmata will appear, pure and clear yet hard to discern, luminous and brilliant, with terrifying brightness, shimmering like a mirage on a plain,’” Arvedson quoted. “At least, that’s what the bardo says.”

“Yes.” Nightingale nodded. “I remember hearing it then and understanding it clearly, even though the words I heard were Tibetan. Joseph had begun the Chikkhai Bardo, you see—the bardo of dying. In the real world, as we sometimes think of it, Geshe had sunk so far into himself he was no longer visibly breathing. But I was not really beside him in that little room in Seattle, although I could still hear Joseph’s voice. Most of me was inside—deep in the experience of death with Geshe.

“I could feel him, Uncle Edward, and in a way I could see what he saw, hear what he heard, although those aren’t quite the right words. As the voices of people I did not know echoed around us—mostly Geshe’s friends and relations and loved ones, I suspect, for I do not think he had many enemies—he and I traveled together through a misty forest. It seemed to me a bit like some of the wild lands of the Pacific Northwest, but more mountainous, as if some of Geshe’s Tibetan heritage was seeping through as well.”

“Climbing,” said Edward Arvedson quietly.

“Yes, the part of the afterlife journey the Egyptians called “the Ladder” and the Aztecs thought of as the beginning of the soul’s four-year journey to Mictlan. I’ve never dared hold a connection with a dying soul as long as I did with Geshe, and going so deep frightened me, but his calm strength made it possible. We did not speak, of course—his journey, his encounters, were his alone, as all ours will be someday—but I felt him there beside me as the dark drew in.

“I won’t tell you everything I experienced now, but I will tell you someday soon, because it was a researcher’s dream come true—the death experience almost firsthand. To make the story short, we passed through the first darkness and saw the first light, which the bardos call the soft light of the gods and which they counsel the dead soul to avoid. It was very attractive, like a warm fire to someone lost in the night, and I was feeling very cold, very far from comfort and familiar things—and remember, I had a body to go back to! I can only imagine what it seemed like to Geshe, who was on a one-way journey, but he resisted it. The same with what the bardo calls the ‘soft light of the hell-beings.’ I could feel him yearning toward it, and even to me it seemed soothing, alluring. In the oldest Tibetan tradition the hot hells are full of terrors—forest of razor-leaved trees, swamps bobbing with decomposing corpses—but these aspects are never seen until it’s too late, until the attractions of one’s own greed and anger have pulled the dying soul off the path.

“But Geshe overcame these temptations and kept on moving toward the harsher light of truth. He was brave, Edward, so brave! But then we reached the smoky yellow light, the realm of what the bardo calls pretas...”

“The hungry ghosts.”

“Yes, the hungry ghosts. Found in almost every human tradition. Those who did not go on. Those who can’t let go of anger, hatred, obsession...”

“Perhaps simply those who want more life,” Arvedson suggested.

Nightingale shook his head. “That makes them sound innocent, but they’re far from that. Corpse-eating jikininki, ancient Rome’s Lemures, the grigori of the Book of Enoch—almost every human tradition has them. Hell, I’ve met them, although never in their own backyard like this. You remember that thing that almost killed me in Freiberg?”

“I certainly do.”

“That was one of them, hitchhiking a ride in a living body. Nearly ripped my head off before I got away. I still have the scars...”

The night-time city waited now between waves of the storm. For a moment it was quiet enough in the room for Nightingale to hear the fan of his godfather’s ventilator.

“In any case, that smoky yellow light terrified me. The bardo says it’s temptation itself, that light, but maybe it didn’t tempt me because I wasn’t dying—instead it just made me feel frightened and sick, if you can be sick without a body. I could barely sense Geshe but I knew he was there and experiencing something very different. Instead of continuing toward the brilliant white light of compassion, as the bardo instructed, this very compassionate man seemed to hesitate. The yellow light was spreading around us like something toxic diffusing through water. Geshe seemed confused, stuck, as though he fought against a call much stronger than anything I could sense. I could feel something else, too, something alien to both of us, cold and strong and...yes, and hungry. God, I’ve never sensed hunger like that, a bottomless need like the empty chill of space sucking away all living warmth...”

Nightingale sat quietly for a long moment before he spoke again. “But then, just when I was fighting hardest to hang onto my connection to Geshe, it dissolved and he was gone. I’d lost touch with him. The yellow light was all around me, strange and greasy...repulsive, but also overwhelming...

“I fell out. No, it was more like I was shoved. I tumbled back into the real world, back into my body. I couldn’t feel Geshe any more. Joseph had stopped reading the Chakkhai Bardo and was staring in alarm. Geshe’s body, which hadn’t moved or showed any signs of life in some time, was suddenly in full-on Cheyne-Stokes respiration, chest hitching, body jerking—he almost looked like he was convulsing. But Joseph swore to me later on that Geshe had stopped breathing half an hour earlier and I believe him.

“A moment later Geshe’s eyes popped open. I’ve seen stranger things, but it still startled me. He had been dead, Uncle Edward, really dead, I swear he had. Now he was looking at me—but it wasn’t Geshe any more. I couldn’t prove it of course, but I had touched this man’s soul, traveled with him as he passed over, the most intimate thing imaginable, and this just wasn’t him.

“‘No, I will not die yet,’ he said. The voice sounded like his, but strong, far too strong for someone who had been in periodic breathing only a minute earlier. ‘There are still things for me to do on this earth.’ It was the eyes, though. That same cold, flat stare that I’d seen through the doorway in Minnesota, the one I’ve seen before in other possession cases, but there was none of the struggle I’d seen in classic possession, no sense of the soul and body fighting against an interloper. One moment it was Geshe, a spiritual man, an artist, the next moment it was...someone else. Someone as cold and detached as a textbook sociopath.

“He closed his eyes then and slept, or pretended to, but already he looked healthier than he had since I met him. I couldn’t tell Joseph that I thought his friend was possessed—what a horrible thing to say to someone already dealing with several kinds of trauma!—and I didn’t know what else to do, what to think. I sat there for most of an hour, unable to think of anything to do. At last, when the nurse came and began dealing with this incredible turn of medical events, I went out to get a drink. All right, I had a few, then went home and slept like a dead man myself.

“I should never have left them, Edward. When I went back the next day, the apartment was empty. A few weeks later I received an email from Joseph—or at least from Joseph’s address—saying that after his miraculous recovery Geshe wanted to travel to Tibet, the place of his heritage. I’ve never heard from either of them since...”

The lightning, absent for almost a quarter of an hour, suddenly flared, turning the room into a flat tableau of black and white shapes; the thunder that followed seemed to rock the entire building. The light on Edward Arvedson’s desk flickered once, then went out, as did the lights on his ventilator. Through the windows Nightingale could see the houses across the street had gone black as well. He jumped up, suddenly cold all over. His father’s oldest friend and his own most trusted advisor was about to die of asphyxiation while he watched helplessly.

“Good God, Edward, the electricity...!”

“Don’t...worry...” Arvedson wheezed. “I have a...standby...generator.”

A moment later Nightingale felt rather than heard something begin to rumble somewhere in the house below and the desk light flickered back on, although the houses across the street remained dark. “There,” said his godfather. “You see, young Natan? Not such an old-fashioned fool after all, eh? I am prepared for things like this. Power for the street will be back on soon—it happens a lot in this ancient neighborhood. Now, tell me what you think is happening.”

Nightingale sat back, trying to regain his train of thought. If only the old man wasn’t so stubborn about living on his own with only Jenkins—no spring lamb himself—for company.

“Right,” he said at last. “Well, I’m sure you’re thinking the same thing as me, Uncle Edward. Somehow these predatory souls or spirits have found a way to possess the bodies of the dying. Which would be bad enough, but it’s the incredible frequency with which it seems to be happening. I can’t possibly investigate them all, of course, but if even half the reports that reach me are real it’s happening all over the world, several times a day.”

The rain was back now, lashing the windows and tattooing the roof of Edward’s Victorian house. When the old man spoke, there was an unfamiliar tone in his voice. “You are...frightened, my dear Natan.”

“Yes, Uncle Edward, I am. I’ve never been this frightened, and I’ve seen a lot. It’s as if something fundamental has broken down, some wall between us and the other side, and now the living are under attack. What did the cab driver say to me on the way over, babbling about the weather—‘the storm door is open’...? And I’m afraid the storms are just going to keep coming thicker and faster until all our houses are blown down.”

“But why? And why now?”

“Why? Because they’ve always been there—the hungry ones, the envious things that hate us because we can still breathe and sing and love. Do they want that back, or do they just want to keep us from having it? I don’t know. And why now? I don’t know that either. Perhaps some universal safeguard has stopped working, or these entities have learned something they didn’t know before.”

“Then here is the most important question, Nate. What are you going to do about it, now you know? What can one person do?”

“Well, make sure it isn’t just one person trying to deal with it, to begin with. You and I know lots of people who don’t think I’m a charlatan—brave people who study this sort of thing, who fight the good fight and know the true danger. More than a few of us have dedicated our lives to keep the rest of humanity safe, without reward or thanks. Now I have to alert them all, if they haven’t discovered this already.” He stood and began to pace back and forth before the desk. “And to make sure the word gets out, I’ll use the very same tabloid vultures that you and I despise so much. They’ll do good without knowing it. Because for every thousand people who’ll read headlines that say things like ‘So-Called Demon Hunter Claims Dead Are Invading the Living World’ and laugh at it as nonsense, one or two will understand... and will heed the warning.” He moved to the window, looked out into the darkness. “We can only hope to hold these hungry ghosts at bay if every real paranormal researcher, exorcist, and sympathetic priest we can reach will join us—every collector you know, every student of the arcane, every adventurer behind the occult lines, all of those soldiers of the light that the rest of society dismiss as crazy. This will be our great war.”

Nightingale turned and walked back to his chair. “So there you have it, Uncle Edward. I’ll spread the word. You spread the word, too. Call in old favors. If enough of us hear the truth, we may still be able to get the storm door shut again.”

The old man was silent for a long time as thunder rolled away into the distance.

“You’re a brave young man, Nate,” he said at last. “Your parents would be proud of you. I’m going to have to think for a while about the best way to help you, and though it embarrasses me to admit it, I also need some rest. You’ll forgive me—I get tired so quickly. I’ll be all right until Jenkins comes back in a few hours. You can let yourself out, can’t you?”

“Of course, Uncle Edward.” He went to the old man and gave him a quick hug, then kissed his cool, dry cheek. He carried his empty sherry glass to the sideboard. “Now that I’m back in town, I’ll be by to see you again tomorrow. Good night.” On his way to the door Nightingale stopped and held his fingers up to catch the light from the desk lamp and saw that the darkness there was only dust.

“Tell Jenkins he’s getting sloppy,” he said. “I can’t imagine you giving him a night off in the old days without finishing the cleaning. Looks like he hasn’t dusted in weeks.”

“I’ll tell him,” said his godfather. “Go on, go on. I’ll see you very soon.”

But Nightingale did not go through the doorway. Instead, he turned and slowly walked back into the room. “Uncle Edward,” he said. “Are you certain you’re going to be all right? I mean, the power’s still off. You can’t breathe without your ventilator.”

“The generator can run for hours and hours. It’ll shut itself off when the regular power comes back.” He waved his hand testily. “Go on, Nate. I’m fine.”

“But the strange thing,” said Nightingale, “is that when the generator came on half an hour ago, the ventilator didn’t. There must be something wrong with it.”

Arvedson went very still. “What...what are you talking about?”

“Here. Look, the little lights on it never came back on, either. Your ventilator’s off.” The room suddenly seemed very quiet, nothing but the distant sound of cars splashing along out on Jones Street, distant as the moon. “What happened to Edward?”

The old man looked surprised. “I don’t...Nate, what are you saying...?”

The gun was out of Nightingale’s coat and into his hand so quickly it might have simply appeared there. He leveled it at a spot between the old man’s two bushy white eyebrows. “I asked you what happened to Edward—the real Edward Arvedson. I’m only going to ask this once more. I swear I’ll kill him before I let you have his body, and I’m betting you can’t pull your little possession trick again on a full-grown, healthy man like me—especially not before I can pull the trigger.”

Even in the half-light of the desk lamp, the change was a fearful one: Edward Arvedson’s wrinkled features did not alter in any great way, but something moved beneath the muscles and skin like a light-shunning creature burrowing through the dark earth. The eyes fixed his. Although the face was still Edward’s, somehow it no longer looked much like him. “You’re a clever boy, Nightingale,” said the stranger in his godfather’s body. “I should have noticed the ventilator never came back on, but as you’ve guessed, this sack of meat no longer has a breathing problem. In fact, it no longer needs to breathe at all.”

“What’s happened to him?” The gun stayed trained on the spot between the old man’s eyes. “Talk fast.”

A slow, cold smile stretched the lips. “That is not for me to say, but rather it is between him and his god. Perhaps he is strumming a harp with the other angels now...or writhing and shrieking in the deepest pits...”

“Bastard!” Nightingale pulled back the trigger with his thumb. “You lie! He’s in there with you. And I know a dozen people who can make you jump right the hell back out...”

The thing shook its head. “Oh, Mr. Nightingale, you’ve been playing the occult detective so long you’ve come to believe you’re really in a story—and that it will have a happy ending. We didn’t learn new ways to possess the living.” The smile returned, mocking and triumphant. “We have learned how to move into the bodies of the recently dead. Quite a breakthrough. It’s much, much easier than possession, and we cannot be evicted because the prior tenant...is gone. Your ‘Uncle Edward’ had a stroke, you see. We waited all around him as he died—oh, and believe me, we told him over and over what we would do, including this moment. Like you, he caused us a great deal of trouble over the years—and as you know, we dead have long memories. And when he was beyond our torments at last, well, this body was ours. Already my essence has strengthened it. It does not need to breathe, and as you can see...” The thing rose from the wheelchair with imperial calm and stood without wavering. Nightingale backed off a few steps, keeping the gun high. “...it no longer needs assistance to get around, either,” the thing finished. “I feel certain I’ll get years of use out of it before I have to seek another—time enough to contact and betray all of the rest of Edward Arvedson’s old friends.”

“Who are you?” Nightingale fought against a despair that buffeted him like a cold wind. “Oh, for the love of God, what do you monsters want?”

“Who am I? Just one of the hungry ones. One of the unforgiving.” It sat down again, making the wheelchair creak. “What do we want? Not to go quietly, as you would have us go—to disappear into the shadows of nonexistence and leave the rest of you to enjoy the light and warmth.” The thing lifted its knotted hands—Edward’s hands, as they had seemed such a short time ago—in a greedy gesture of seizure. “As you said, this is a war. We want what you have.” It laughed, and for the first time the voice sounded nothing at all like his godfather’s familiar tones. “And we are going take it from you. All of you.”

“I don’t think so. Because if you need bodies to survive here, then those bodies can be taken back from you...” And even as Nightingale spoke his gun flashed and roared and the thing in his godfather’s shape staggered and fell back against the wheelchair cushions, chin on chest. A moment later the so-familiar face came up again. Smiling.

“Jenkins,” it said. “If you would be so kind...”

Something knocked the gun from Nightingale’s hand and then an arm like an iron bar slammed against his neck. He fought but it was like being held by a full-grown gorilla. His struggles only allowed him to slide around enough in his captor’s grip to see Jenkins’ blank eyes and the huge hole in the side of the caretaker’s head crusted with bits of bone and dried tissue.

“I lied about giving him the night off,” said the pseudo-Edward. “The living get impatient, but my colleague who inhabits him now was perfectly willing to stand in the dark until I needed him.” Now Arvedson’s body stood again, brushing at its clothes; the hole Nightingale’s gunshot had made in its shirt was bloodless. “Bullets are a poor weapon against the risen dead, Nightingale,” it pointed out with no little satisfaction. “You could burn the body, I suppose, or literally pulverize it, and there would be nothing left for us to inhabit. But of course, you will not get the chance to tell anyone about that.”

“Bastards!” He struggled helplessly against the Jenkins-thing’s grip. “Even if you kill me, there are hundreds more like me out there. They’ll stop you!”

“We will meet them all, I’m sure,” said his godfather’s body. “You will introduce us—or at least the new resident of your corpse will. And one by one, we will remove them. The dead will live, with all the power of age and riches and secrecy, and the rest of your kind will be our uncomprehending cattle, left alive only to breed more bodies for us. Your driver was right, Mr. Nightingale—the storm door really is open now. And no power on this earth can shut it.”

Nightingale tried to say something else then, shout some last words of defiance, but the pressure on his neck was crushingly strong and the lights of the world—the lamp, the headlights passing in the street below, even the storm-shrouded stars beyond the window—had begun leaching away into utter darkness.

His last sight was of the cold, hungry things that had been hiding behind that darkness, hiding and waiting and hating the living for so long, as they hurried toward him to feed.