

Dust and Shadows

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Part 1: Sceadu

Chapter 1

They say that life is a bitch and then you die; no one ever mentions that it is still a bitch afterwards.

My name is Jordan Chase; it's not the name I was born with (or died with for that matter). I make my home these days in the netherworld city of Nekropolis. I'm a freelance Sceadu, a revenant seeker. I track down the renegade shades, shadows and revenants that illegally leave Nekropolis. Although, I have to admit, it has been a while since I have gone live side. Cases are infrequent, since very few Nekropolitans can go live side without the aid of a Terran; unlike someone like me, who can do it on his own.

I got an office on the Westside; at least it seems to be the Westside. Directions can be a little disorienting down here. Even the phrase down here is misleading. Nekropolis isn't located so

much at a where as a when, and that still isn't totally accurate. Suffice it to say, the City of Eternal Dusk isn't easy to find, just easy to get to. The only thing you need to do is die. I should mention though that not everyone that dies ends up in Nekropolis; I don't know what the prerequisite might be but apparently, I met the criteria.

Sitting at my desk and contemplating the neon sign outside my office window, the phone rang breaking into my reverie. I let it ring a few times before answering; don't want to seem as if I'm not busy. "Chase."

"Jordan, put on channel six."

"Hello to you too, Val." Valentyna Minsky, formerly of the now defunct Krof Gazyeta Buro. Val and I go back a ways; we got history.

"Just do it!"

Yeah, we got history all right, the Civil War type of history. Taking a half smoked cigarette from the ashtray/coffee mug, I hit the remote and surfed over to channel six. I lit the cigarette with a brass lighter Val had once given me. Okay, so she threw it at my head, but hey, it's still something. Taking a hefty pull on my smoke, I leaned back and focused on what got Val's panties in such a twist.

". . . and to repeat our top story, sightings of a Terran have been reported throughout the city. Anyone with information

is advised to contact the local authorities. This is Fawn Lebowitz, Thanotos Necro News."

"Well?"

I exhaled a blue cloud of smoke and stared at the flashing neon lights. "Fawn's looking good." I could hear Val grinding her teeth.

"The story, jerk."

Like me, Val is a freelance agent. If a Terran made it to Nekropolis, then you can bet your life or un-life that she would somehow become involved. However, it's doubtful that an actual living entity is running around the city. For one thing, an inbound has to cross the Shattered Plains, which includes crossing the River Styx, and passing the Shadow Sentinels, not to mention the city's Cerberus Squad. It was a minute before I realized that Val had posed a question.

"Sorry Val, what was that?" Teeth grinding again.

"Pay attention. Will you help me track down the Terran?"

"Val, there is no Terran. It's not possible."

I took another pull on my smoke and then stubbed it out on a desk corner. Conversations like this ruined the experience of a good vice. Exhaling another carbon cloud, I waited for Val to stop grinding her teeth. The next thing Val said got my attention. The one thing she knew would get to me; she used my Terran name.

Few people alive, dead or un-dead know my true name. Even fewer people dare use it. Only Valentina gets away with it.

"Listen Val; why not let the Inbound Necro Service handle this?"

"The INS couldn't find their collective backsides with a GPS."

I don't know why I bother arguing with Val, she always gets her way. "All right Val, I'll check into this for you." What the hell, it's not like clients are breaking down my door. I silently counted to five and then asked, "Usual fee okay?"

"Fee? C'mon Jordan, I think I rate a favor. You do remember that it was me who helped you on the Dustmen case don't you?"

The Dustmen. The Nekropolis criminal syndicate, specializing in the trafficking of the drug Lethe. The Dustmen don't believe in healthy competition, so they eliminate any upstart organizations and on occasion smart-ass revenant seekers.

"Yeah, I remember. You mean the case where you almost got us cleansed." Cleansing is one of those fate worse than death scenarios. When you get cleansed, you have no chance of recycling. Of course, no one knows when or if they'll be recycled. Me, I've been waiting for some time now.

"Are you ever going to let that go?"

"Hadn't planned on it. My fee?"

Val ground her teeth again. At this rate, she would be all gums by the end of our conversation. It's a shame; she has such a great smile.

"Fine, just find me that Terran."

I couldn't resist a final jab. "Plus expenses."

I laughed as the line went dead, giving me my cue, but before I could head out, I heard the faint scuff of a footstep. Overcome by a sense of foreboding, I cast a glance at my office door. Sure enough, my office door flew open and an exquisite woman glided in, I don't mean that as a metaphor, she didn't walk; she actually glided in like an ice skater. Behind her, two big lugs plodded in, draped in studded red-leather. I didn't see any weapons but that didn't mean they weren't fortified.

I've got a problem with people that don't knock. Casually, I reached into my right-hand desk drawer and withdrew my hex-gun and just as casually, I placed it on the desktop. I always keep it loaded with stasis rounds; I am good at what I do but my popularity tends to suffer for it. If she was the least bit threatened or insulted, she didn't show it. The two lugs on the other hand fidgeted until she stayed them with a slight gesture, displaying a gold serpent ring on her left hand.

"Mr. Chase I presume." Her voice was like ice, and she had a smile that didn't reach her eyes, a death smile. Quite a looker though . . . if you like trouble. The flashing neon illuminated her alabaster skin in alternate hues of blue and red. I nodded and offered a smile of my own, never taking my eyes off her bodyguards; they didn't smile, golems never do.

Pointing to the chair across from me, I rummaged in my desk for a pack of smokes. Retrieving a cigarette from a crumbled pack of Lucky Strikes, I struck a match, lit up, inhaled deeply (yeah, I know but it's not as if it's gonna kill me) and waited for her to introduce herself.

As she sat, her silken robe whispering softly, the woman studied me like some sort of puzzle or rather like something she just stepped in. I exhaled a nicotine cloud, while her pet golems glared at me through the smoky haze. After a few moments, she began.

"I am Lamichae Sharlyn." She paused waiting to see how I would react.

The Lamichae. I have to admit, I was impressed. Of course, the serpent ring should have been a dead (no pun intended) give away. The high priestess herself coming in person to see me! Kind of makes me wish I'd put on a clean shirt this morning...almost. Taking another drag on my smoke, I deliberately moved the hex-gun closer; I may have been impressed but I'm not stupid. I have no idea what the Daughters of Lamia, one of the most powerful guilds in Nekropolis, would want with me but it can't be good. Exhaling another noxious cloud, I waited for her to continue. She seemed a little perturbed that I still hadn't responded to her title. Maybe she was used to people quivering in fear. I don't quiver.

"I understand that you track visitants." I nodded. "The guilds have need of your unique services."

"You represent all guilds now, that doesn't sound like the Scions of Thoth or the Priests of Ea to me." I let a smug smile creep on to my face. Nekropolis may be a Thanatocracy, but each guild has its own agenda.

A scowl creased her smooth skin, the wrinkles dramatically aging her, and just as quickly vanished, taking the years with it. Yeah, I could tell that she definitely wasn't used to being around people that didn't defer to her. Too bad. My place, my rules. Then again, I seem to use my rules regardless of whose place it is. The high priestess brushed imaginary lint off her robe and made adjustments that would drive any man (and a few women) to distraction, yours truly included.

"Have it your way Mr. Chase. The Daughters require your services. We wish you to locate a missing votary and return her to us." The way she emphasized daughters struck a chord in me. I'm not musical and I don't like being played, still I was curious.

"Has she gone live side?"

"There is reason to believe that she yet remains in Nekropolis."

"A runaway Lamiahante doesn't seem to warrant coming to me. Why not ask the Cerberus Squad?"

Her sigh sounded rehearsed, as if she knew how this conversation should go. "The Cerberus Squad lacks your, shall we say, unique abilities to remain discreet."

I grant you the Squad wasn't the subtlest bunch around, but what she meant was that she personally didn't want this case to become public knowledge, especially public council knowledge.

"Do you have any idea where she might have gone to ground?"

The Lamichae hesitated before replying. "We have word that she may be in the Ura sector of the city."

Huh, a much better reason why she didn't want to use the Cerberus Squad. The Ura sector is controlled by the Priest of Ea. It also means that if she had word from there, she has a spy inside. This could get real ugly, real fast.

"Not interested. Besides, I already have a case." I could have used the Stygian Marks, but something told me to keep away from this case. I shoulda' listened. I flicked ash from my smoke, watching as it drifted down to the threadbare carpet, mixing with previous discarded ashes. I probably should get a cleaner in here.

"You try my patience Mr. Chase." The chill had entered her voice again, and the two mooks twitched but otherwise didn't move, although I felt the small hairs on the back of my neck stirring.

"Yeah, I have that affect on people." I crushed out my cigarette on the bottom of my shoe, more to check on my soapstone and ruby talisman than because I didn't want the smoke. I keep several talismans on my person at all times. Like I said before, I'm good at what I do and I'd like to keep on doing it.

"You are a rather interesting man Mr. Chase; most bodies would not remain so impassive in my presence."

She ran a delicate hand through her thick raven hair. It might have been a trick of the light, but it seemed to shimmer like obsidian. Her almond shaped eyes, blue with flecks of amber, twinkled with some inner amusement. I found myself drawn in...almost. Before anyone could react, I snatched up my weapon and fired two stasis-hex rounds, striking each bodyguard as they tried to flank my desk. Azure cocoons enwrapped the golems, effectively freezing them in their tracks. Her goons would be stuck for a while so I relaxed...somewhat. I turned my attention back to the priestess. I'm gonna have to get a talisman upgrade, I almost got caught out there but she didn't need to know that.

"Try a coercion glare on me again and the next round won't be so harmless."

The smile fell from her unblemished face, all pretenses at politeness gone. Sitting ramrod straight, she adjusted her cerise-dyed robe and folded her hands in her lap. Her skin radiated a golden hue, accenting the depths of her sparkling eyes. [Sigh] I am really gonna have to get a talisman upgrade. I stared blankly at the Lamichae, using my best poker face. Finally accepting that her compulsion charms would not work on me, she continued.

"Mr. Chase, you have a reputation for resolving delicate matters, without regard to personal interest."

"You mean that I don't follow established Nekropolis council rules and regulations."

The high priestess fussed with her robe again. "Be that as it may, it would be in everyone's best interest if you found the absent Lamichante."

"Why? What is it that makes this high priestess-in-training so important?"

After a moment's hesitation, the Lamichae relented. "The votary has in her possession an Osiris stone."

I scoffed in disbelief, so much for my poker face. "You're pulling my chain. The Osiris stone is a myth."

"I assure you Mr. Chase, the stone is quite real."

I paused to light another cigarette. Drawing in a lungful of poisonous alkaloid smoke (well poisonous to someone not already dead), I studied the high priestess, her smooth features emotionless; I don't think I'll be playing poker with her any time soon. Exhaling the stale cloud, I decided that I would take the case, what the hell, it's not like Valentina would pay up on time if at all, but I sure wasn't gonna make it easy for her.

"Okay, say I believe you and the stone is real, big deal. All it means is that she can go live side without the aid of a Terran. She'll still be subject to the restraints of being a visitant."

"Be that as it may, it is the property of the Daughters and as such must be returned."

Flicking more carpet staining ashes, I did a silent count of ten, waiting for her to continue.

"Well Mr. Chase?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of the golems twitch. Damn. They're stronger than I thought. Not wanting to have to waste another hex round, (they're not cheap); I decided it might be in my best interest to make myself scarce. Stubbing out my smoke (maybe I could add cigarettes to my bill); I stood up and reached for my leather shoulder holster, strapping it under my arm and securing my hex-gun within. Donning a black, suede duster, pausing briefly to snatch up my cigarettes, extra clips of hex-rounds (repulse, stasis and after some consideration, exorcism rounds) I headed for the exit.

"I'll be in touch."

"What about my guards."

"They should be springtime fresh in a few moments. Make sure to lock up on your way out." I left the office, smiling at her indignation.

Out on the street, beneath the glow of the neon sign, I fished a smoke out of the crumpled pack of cigarettes. Lighting up, I surveyed my immediate surroundings, a habit from my early days in the City of Eternal Dusk. Across from me, I noticed an illegal transaction taking place. Lethe-heads. The city is full of them. You see, not everyone residing in Nekropolis is content to be here and like I said before it isn't easy to leave. For

some, Lethe is the next best thing. The drug is distilled from the Lethe River, the river of forgetfulness. Citizens of Nekropolis who can't handle the truth of their existence use the drug to get by; problem is the drug is highly addictive and eventually you forget everything. In worse cases, the user becomes little more than a wraith, but since I'm not paid to police the area, it's not my deal.

Puffing away, I decided that the first order of business would be to re-charge my talismans. I headed over to Gloaming Square, a sector set up specifically for the Nekropolis occult trade. One can't help but compare the square with New York's Greenwich Village, with the tightly packed shops displaying esoteric items in the window, the parade of shoppers and charlatans crowding the sidewalks and the bewitching sense of mystery. I sought out the Ethereal Palace, one of the more reputable establishments. I lucked out; the shop was in its usual place. One of the many oddities about Nekropolis is that certain buildings tend to move about. No one knows why, but it has been theorized that when seen from above, the building alignments create mystic runes that allow for the existence of the city to continue.

Walking into the shop, I paused, feeling an itch at the back of my neck, an inkling of being watched. Not one to ignore my intuitions and not wanting to tip my hand, I used the shop's windows to catch a reflection. There, across the street, in a

recessed doorway. The shadows are a little too deep; someone's definitely trying hard not to be seen. Not sensing any immediate threat, I relegated the information to the back of my mind and continued into the shop.

The shop interior is lit by soft orange balls of floating orbs like mini suns. Of course, it's been a while since I've actually seen the sun. Out of habit, I scan the display room. Empty. I don't bother calling out for assistance; Tarot knows I'm here.

From the storeroom her voice calls to me, "Be right out Jordan."

After all these years, it still unnerves me that she can sense who is in her shop. I know what you're thinking. It's no big deal. She probably has cameras hidden throughout the joint and normally I'd agree except for one small detail...she's blind.

"Good morning Jordan." Tarot entered the main room, displaying her yoke of ever-present necklaces, 12 in all, each linked to a different zodiac sign. Her sashay creating a pleasant musical interlude, her ivory-colored, floor length gown presenting a hint of what lies beneath and of course the paisley scarf tied around her head; covering up what would be her eyes. I asked her once why she just didn't wear sunglasses. Wish I hadn't. She removed the scarf for me; where sightless orbs should have been was smooth skin, she says that she was born that way

and death hadn't seen fit to change that. Still Tarot saw better than most.

"Morning' Tarot. How are things?"

She smiled. "Looking up." Tarot has a warped sense of humor. I like that. "You want to hand me that Dissway Talisman?"

That I don't like. It's one thing to know who's around and quite another to know what they're up to. Gives her a little too much of an advantage, you know.

Sighing, I reached down to my shoe heel and extracted the talisman from its cubbyhole. Handing over the talisman, I gave Tarot a brief synopsis of my meeting with Lamichae Sharlyn. Tarot cocks her head slightly, studying me with that eerie second sight of hers. After a few moments, she placed the talisman on a square of black velvet and added two silver rings, some copper wire and a gemstone, to the mix.

"This will take a few minutes," she mutters. As she begins her work, I wander around the display room, poking at odds-n-ends. In a countertop display case, a gold band sparkles in the room's orange glow. The ring calls out to me and I pick it up. Its surface is covered in some obscure script and is warm to the touch. I was about to try it on, when a warning hiss from Tarot gives me pause and I returned the ring to the case. Don't know what the big deal is, it doesn't look all that precious to me. A peculiar book resting alone on a shelf catches my eye. Again, the script is one I don't recognize. Picking it up, I can feel a

tingling in my hands. Gently I open the cover and a mist seeps from its pages. Transfixed, I almost don't get the book closed in time as a purple tentacle erupts from the tome. Shuddering, I replace the book on the shelf. Perhaps I should just wait quietly.

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Tarot whispers. I wish she wouldn't do that.

"Stay out of my head Tarot."

She chuckles and continues upgrading my talisman. After binding the silver rings with copper wire to my talisman, Tarot replaces the small ruby with a tiger's-eye agate. A few whispered words (in a language I don't understand) and the talisman is complete.

Handing me the talisman, Tarot offers up a smile and suggest that if I should choose another line of work that talismans might not be necessary. We've been over this before. She knows I won't change or can't change.

Handing over a few Stygian marks, I say goodbye and head outside. My mysterious watcher seemed to have vanished. I decided to head over to Pearl's. If anyone has valid information, it would be Janice.