

# STAKEOUT AT THE VAMPIRE CIRCUS

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**T**he circus is supposed to be fun, even a monster circus, but the experience turned sour when somebody tried to murder the vampire trapeze artist.

As a private detective, albeit a zombie, I investigate cases of all sorts in the Unnatural Quarter, applying my deductive skills and persistent determination (yes, the undead can be very persistent indeed). Some of my cases are admittedly strange; most are even stranger than that.

I'd been hired by a transvestite fortune-teller to find a stolen deck of magic cards, and he had sent me two free tickets to the circus. Gotta love the perks of the job. Not one to let an opportunity go to waste, I invited my girlfriend to accompany me; in many ways her detective skills are as good as my own.

Sheyenne is beautiful, blond, and intangible. I had started to fall in love with her when both of us were alive, and I still like having her around, despite the difficulties of an unnatural relationship—as a ghost, she can't physically touch me, and as a zombie I have my own limitations.

We showed our passes at the circus entrance gate and entered a whirlwind of colors, sounds, smells. Big tents, wild rides, popcorn, and cotton candy for the humans, more exotic treats for the unnaturals. One booth sold deep-fried artichoke hearts, while another sold deep-fried human hearts. Seeing me shamble by, a persistent vendor offered me a free sample of brains on a stick, but I politely declined.

I'm a well-preserved zombie and have never acquired a taste for brains. I've got my standards of behavior, not to mention personal hygiene. Given a little bit of care and effort, a zombie doesn't have to rot and fall apart, and I take pride in looking mostly human. Some people have even called me handsome—Sheyenne certainly does, but she's biased.

As Sheyenne flitted past the line of food stalls, her eyes were bright, her smile dazzling; I could imagine what she must have looked like as a little girl. I hadn't seen her this happy since she'd been poisoned to death.

Nearby, a muscular clay golem lifted a wooden mallet at the Test Your Strength game and slammed it down with such force that he not only rang the bell at the top of the pole, he split the mallet in half. A troll barker at the game muttered and handed the golem a pink plush bunny as a prize. The golem set the stuffed animal next to a pile of fuzzy prizes, paid another few coins, and took a fresh mallet to play the game again.

Many of the attendees were humans, attracted by the low prices of the human matinee; the nocturnal monsters would come out for the evening show. More than a decade had passed since the Big Uneasy, when all the legendary monsters came back to the world, and human society was finally realizing that unnaturals were people just like everyone else. Yes, some were ferocious and bloodthirsty—but so were some humans. Most monsters just wanted to live and let live (even though the definition of “living” had blurred).

Sheyenne saw crowds streaming toward the Big Top. “The lion tamer should be finishing, but the vampire trapeze artist is due to start. Do you think we could ...”

I gave her my best smile. With stiff facial muscles, my “best smile” was only average, but even so I saved it for Sheyenne. “Sure, Spooky. We've got an hour before we're supposed to meet Zelda. Let's call it ‘gathering background information.’”

“Or we could just call it part of the date,” Sheyenne teased.

“That, too.”

We followed other humans through the tent flaps. A pudgy twelve-year-old boy was harassing his sister, poking her arm incessantly, until he glanced at me and Sheyenne. I had pulled the fedora low, but it didn’t entirely conceal the bullet hole in my forehead. When the pudgy kid gawked at the sight, his sister took advantage of the distraction and began poking him until their mother hurried them into the Big Top.

Inside, Sheyenne pointed to empty bleachers not far from the entrance. The thick canvas kept out direct sunlight, protecting the vampire performers and shrouding the interior in a pleasant nighttime gloom. My eyes adjusted quickly because gloom is a natural state for me. Always on the case, I remained alert. If I’d been more alert while I was still alive, I would be ... well, still alive.

When I was a human private detective in the Quarter, Sheyenne’s ghost had asked me to investigate her murder, which got me in trouble; I didn’t even see the creep come up behind me in a dark alley, put a gun to the back of my head, and pull the trigger.

Under most circumstances, that would have put an end to my career, but you can’t keep a good detective down. Thanks to the changed world, I came back from the dead, back on the case. Soon enough, I fell into my old routine, investigating mysteries wherever they might take me ... even to the circus.

Sheyenne drifted to the nearest bleacher, and I climbed stiffly beside her. The spotlight shone down on a side ring, where a brown-furred werewolf in a scarlet vest—Calvin—cracked his bullwhip, snarling right back at a pair of snarling lions who failed to follow his commands. The thick-maned male cat growled, while the big female opened her mouth wide to show a yawn full of fangs. The lion tamer roared a response, cracked the whip again, and urged the big cats to do tricks, but they absolutely refused.

The lions flexed their claws, and the werewolf flexed his own in a show of dominance, but the lions weren’t buying it. Just when it looked as if the fur was about to fly, a loud drumroll came from the center ring.

The spotlight swiveled away from the lion tamer to fall upon the ringmaster, a tall vampire with steel-gray hair. “Ladies and gentlemen,

naturals and unnaturals of all ages—in the center ring, our main event!” He pointed upward, and the spotlight swung to the cavernous tent’s rigging strung with high wires and a trapeze platform. A Baryshnikov look-alike stood on the platform, a gymnastic vampire in a silver lamé full-body leotard. He wore a medallion around his neck, a bright red ribbon with some kind of amulet, and a professional sneer.

“Bela, our vampire trapeze artist, master of the ropes—graceful, talented . . . a real swinger!” The ringmaster paused until the audience realized they were supposed to respond with polite laughter. Up on the platform, Bela lifted his chin, as if their applause was beneath him (and, technically speaking, it was, since the bleachers were far below).

“For his death-defying feat, Bela will perform without a safety net above *one hundred sharpened wooden stakes!*” The spotlight swung down to the floor of the ring, which was covered with a forest of pointy sticks, just waiting to perform impalement duties.

The suitably impressed audience gasped.

On the trapeze platform, Bela’s haughty sneer was wide enough to show his fangs; I could see them even from my seat in the bleachers. The gold medallion at his neck glinted in the spotlight. Rolling his shoulders to loosen up, the vampire grasped the trapeze handle and lunged out into the open air. He seemed not to care a whit about the sharp wooden stakes as he swung across to the other side. At the apex of his arc, he swung back again, gaining speed. On the backswing, Bela spun around the trapeze bar, doing a loop. As he reached the apex once again, he released, did a quick somersault high in the air, and caught the bar as he dropped down.

The audience applauded. Werewolves in the bleachers howled their appreciation; some ghouls and less-well-preserved zombies let out long, low moans that sounded upbeat, considering. I shot a glance at Sheyenne, and judging by her delighted expression, she seemed to be enjoying herself.

Bela swung back, hanging on with one hand as he gave a dismissive wave to the audience. Vampires usually have fluid movements. I remembered that one vamp had tried out for the Olympic gymnastics team four years ago—and was promptly disqualified, though the Olympic judges could not articulate a valid reason. The vampire sued, and the matter was tied up in the courts until long past the conclusion

of the Olympics. The vampire gymnast took the long view, however, as she would be just as spry and healthy in the next four-year cycle, and the next, and the next.

A big drumroll signaled Bela's finale. He swung back and forth one more time, pumping with his legs, increasing speed, and the bar soared up to the highest point yet. The vampire released his hold, flung himself into the air for another somersault, then a second, then a third as the empty trapeze swung in its clockwork arc, gliding back toward him, all perfectly choreographed.

As he dropped, Bela reached out. His fingertips brushed the bar—and missed. He flailed his hands in the air, trying to grab the trapeze, but the bar swung past out of reach, and gravity did its work. Bela tumbled toward the hundred sharp wooden stakes below.

Someone screamed. Even with my rigor-mortis-stiff knees, I lurched to my feet.

But at the last possible moment, the vampire's plummeting form transformed in the air. Mere inches above the deadly points, Bela turned into a bat, stretching and flapping his leathery wings. He flew away, the medallion still dangling from his little furry rodent neck. He alighted on the opposite trapeze platform, then transformed back into a vampire just in time to catch the returning trapeze. He held on, showing his pointed fangs in a superior grin, and took a deep bow. On cue, the band played a loud "Ta-da!"

After a stunned moment, the audience erupted in wild applause. Sheyenne was beaming enough to make her ectoplasm glow. Even I was smiling. "That was worth the price of admission," I said.

Sheyenne looked at me. "We didn't pay anything—we got free tickets."

"Then it's worth twice as much."

With the show over, the audience rose from the bleachers and filed toward the exit. "The cases don't solve themselves," I said to Sheyenne. "Let's go find that fortune-teller."

## 2

As Sheyenne and I walked along the midway in search of the fortune-teller's booth, we suddenly heard screams—not the joyful