

A photograph of a human skeleton in a room decorated for Halloween. The skeleton is the central focus, shown from the chest up, facing slightly to the left. The room is dimly lit with vibrant purple and red lights. In the background, there are string lights and other skeletons, some of which are glowing. The overall atmosphere is spooky and festive.

CATACOMB SEASON

A DEAN SHERWOOD
SUPERNATURAL
ADVENTURE

Catacomb Season

a Dean Sherwood supernatural adventure
by [Quentin Dodd](#)

When the zombie grabbed my arm, I didn't even jump. This would have been more impressive if it had lunged at me out of a dark alley, but since I was waiting in the entrance line for the Catacombs of Terror, it was obvious the risk was pretty minimal. I was there with Lionel Brent, whom I knew from the Downtown Business Association, his girlfriend Shannon Parker, and Shannon's sister Bridget. Bridget was in town visiting from Cincinnati, and Lionel and Shannon had thought she would appreciate a double-date. So far, though, Bridget had been thoroughly—if inexplicably—unimpressed with me. Maybe that would change when she saw how suavely I handled being accosted by a costumed weirdo.

The sidewalk on this side of the old courthouse building was thick with people waiting their turn to get in. During the majority of the year, the old courthouse was an underused Beaux-Arts landmark, but in the months leading up to Halloween the extensive basements and sub-basements were converted into a haunted attraction, which drew thousands of people every weekend. This had started when the building stood empty, as a way to raise money for its upkeep. Even though the old courthouse had eventually attracted some tenants, the Catacombs of Terror were now a beloved local institution and weren't going anywhere.

I had never visited the Catacombs myself, for the same reason a house painter doesn't paint houses on his day off. But Lionel and Shannon had suggested we go before

getting dinner, and I didn't want to be churlish. The line to get in was long, but it kept moving at a good pace. Some of the visitors had even decided to come in costume, which made for a festive atmosphere. In addition, the waiting patrons were entertained by the spooky antics of various characters from the Catacombs, who ran around in a mock-menacing fashion or leaped out from the shadows. There was the usual spectrum of monsters, including hooded skeletons, werewolves with snouts dripping blood, maniacal nurses waving clearly unhygienic medical instruments, a few headless horrors, and a healthy number of zombies.

It was one of these zombies who had grabbed me, a skinny guy in a flannel shirt and jeans, and a dollar-store latex mask that had been touched up with glycerin to make the fake brains glisten in the streetlights. At first, I thought he was just doing his bit, but then he leaned in toward me and said, "Dean?"

"Excuse me?" It's always surprising when some random person knows your name, even more so when the random person is pretending to be one of the living dead.

The zombie looked around, presumably to make sure his zombie supervisor wasn't about to see him break character, then he lifted up his mask for a moment to show me the face underneath.

"Gary!"

I had known Gary Stambaugh and his brother Wade ever since we were little kids, playing in a treehouse fort while our parents barbecued in the back yard. Gary was a bit taller than me, scarecrow-thin, with a narrow face and nose like a Roman emperor. He worked for the city water department, a fact that made me slightly surprised every time I turned on a tap and water came out.

"Hey, man, are you busy?" Gary asked.

"Well, we were kind of in line here." I gestured to Lionel and Shannon, who had their arms around each other, and Bridget, who was checking her phone.

"Do you mind if I borrow Dean for a little bit?" Gary asked the others. "I'll bring him back before you get up to the entrance, okay?"

To their credit, Lionel and Shannon glanced in my direction to see if there was a "please make up some sort of excuse" expression on my face. There wasn't. Gary put two fingers in his mouth and whistled sharply in the direction of a thickset zombie wearing a stretched and discolored pink tutu. This horrifying vision trotted up and removed its mask, revealing Gary's brother Wade. Wade was shorter and stockier than Gary, and was the assistant service manager of a tractor dealership in Fort Haub, a little agricultural town twenty minutes outside the city.

"Oh, hey, Dean," he said.

"Dean said he'd help," Gary told his brother.

"Dean said what?" I asked, but by this point Wade and Gary were already escorting me out of the line. They hustled me around the corner and over to a metal door with a taped-up sign on it reading, "Catacombs Employees Only! Enter at your own risk!" It was locked, and Gary pounded on it like a madman for a few seconds until Wade elbowed him out of the way.

"You've got to jiggle the handle," Wade said. "It's not locked, but the door's broken and it won't open unless you jiggle the handle." He demonstrated the correct handle-jiggle technique and the door swung open.

"How did you know that?"

"I was there when it got broken," Wade said.

"Who else was there?" Gary asked.

"Nobody."

"Did you break the door?"

"Yes."

Gary was about to launch into a brotherly tirade when Wade cut him off. "This is what you want to yell at me about right now? The stupid door? Come on, we've got bigger fish to fry."

"Guys?" I raised a hand. "Do you think you could let me know what's going on here?"

"It's going to be easier if we show you," Gary said.

"Or tell you. I mean, she's not here anymore," Wade said.

"She's not?" asked Gary. "Seriously?"

"Man, I don't know any more than you do. Stop bothering me," Wade said.

"How did you guys even know I was out in the line?" I asked.

"We didn't. We were looking for Tina and all of a sudden there you were. I figured it was some kind of sign."

They led me down a set of concrete steps and into an institutional-green basement corridor. Various members of the haunted house cast rushed in all directions, getting dressed and undressed, sorting out costumes and touching up makeup. At the same time, the non-costumed crew repaired damaged props with hot glue and gaffer tape, or traced out connections from the sprawling network of cords and cables that ran across the floors like an alien tentacle infestation. The whole place buzzed with a nervous, gleeful backstage

energy. From somewhere in the distance, I could hear the sound effects from the Catacombs of Terror: screams and moans and ominous synthesizer music, combined with running feet and the occasional heartfelt shriek.

Wade and Gary stopped in a large room off the main hall. Several metal conference tables had been pushed together to make one large super-table in the center of the room. Half of it was covered with plastic cups full of makeup brushes, and piles of makeup trays in various gruesomely-tinted shades. A couple of portable lighted mirrors had been set up, and some full-body mirrors were affixed to a wall with more gaffer tape. The other side of the big table was piled high with carefully-labelled paper bags, plastic containers, lunch boxes, and thermoses. A gawky high-school girl in a blood-spattered lab coat sat on one of the folding chairs, eating cold yakisoba from a glass dish. She looked up when the three of us entered.

"Amber! Did Tina come back?" Gary asked.

"No," Amber said, using the traditional tone of the aggrieved teenager to stretch out the word to two syllables. "If Tina came back, I wouldn't be here. Not after what happened."

"Hi," I said, stepping forward. "I'm Dean Sherwood. What actually *did* happen?" I was hoping to get this wrapped up quickly and get back to my group, though Lionel and Shannon and, most likely, Bridget, were probably getting along just fine without me.

"It's okay," Gary said to Amber. "Dean deals with weird stuff like this all the time."

"He's like a ghost hunter," Wade added.

Amber raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Well, not exactly."

"That's right," said Gary. "It's not just ghosts. It's all kinds of things."

I was about to protest further, but decided it wasn't worth the trouble. Even though I would have phrased it differently, they were correct as far as the general outlines went. I looked from Wade to Gary to Amber. "So, can somebody start from the beginning?"

"There's this girl," Wade began.

"Tina Boorman," Amber added.

"She works here. She's usually in the vampire's chamber," said Gary.

"But Liz Hogue wanted to try being a vampire bride, so Tina said she'd switch places," said Amber.

"Tonight Tina was going to be one of the background ghouls, like us," Gary explained. "We're not like the room actors, who have to stay in one place. We just run around and scare whoever we feel like."

"Sounds like nice work," I said.

"But Tina didn't have a costume," Amber said. "Well, she sort of did. She was just wearing her regular clothes, so I guess she was going for 'slutty zombie.' But she didn't have a mask."

"We had a mask for her," Wade said.

"There aren't enough masks to go around?" I asked. Somehow, I imagined that this would be the last place on earth to ever run short of monster masks.

"There aren't as many as you think," Gary said. "The costume department takes care of the room actors, but most of the background ghouls just bring their own stuff."

"I had a different mask I was going to wear tonight, but then Tina said she needed one, so I gave it to her." Wade held up his latex zombie mask. "I pulled this one out of the

box. Nobody else wanted it."

"Tina put on Wade's stupid new mask, and then..." Gary hesitated, trying to find the right words. "I don't know how to explain what happened next. We'll just show you, and you can decide for yourself. Amber, show him."

Amber rolled up the right sleeve of her lab coat and revealed a gauze pad about the size of a hand, affixed to the inside of her right forearm by strips of medical tape. She picked at the tape and peeled off one side. Under the makeshift bandage was a pair of circular bite marks, each about the size of a clementine orange. In a couple of spots, the bites were forceful enough to have drawn blood.

"The crazy bitch bit me," Amber said.

"Out of the blue? With no warning?" I asked.

Amber ripped off the rest of the bandage and tossed it toward an overflowing trash can in the corner. "After Tina put the mask on, she was walking up and down in the hall, waving her arms and stuff."

"We thought she was just getting into character, or figuring out how well she could see in it," Gary said. "That's real important to know before you start running around."

"It was almost opening time, so I offered to help do her zombie-tone makeup," Amber said. "It was going to take her forever if she just did it herself."

"Did she say anything to you?" I asked.

"She didn't say a word. It was kind of weird, but I guess I didn't think too much about it. She sits down and I start working on her shoulder, and..." Amber shrugged.

"That's when she bit me."

"I heard Amber yell and I came in here to check on her," Gary said.

"I didn't yell," Amber insisted.

"I heard a noise that sounded like a yell," Gary amended. "Then Tina ran right past me. By the time I got Amber cleaned up, I couldn't find Tina anywhere."

I took another look at Amber's arm. The bite marks were pretty normal. As normal as human bite marks on somebody's arm could be. They were made with regular-sized teeth, not fangs or tusks or any other kind of anatomical mutation. This didn't explain why Tina had bitten Amber in the first place, but it was a good sign that things weren't as bad as they could have been.

"I'm not going to get, like, rabies or anything, am I?" Amber sounded concerned.

"Nah," I said. "Keep it washed, keep it clean, and you should be fine. Do these guys have your number, just in case I need to ask you more questions later?" I asked her.

There was no point getting her upset for no reason, but in the not-completely-unlikely event that I turned out to be wrong, I wanted to have a way to find her. Otherwise, I was just setting myself up for additional trouble down the line.

"She's in the cast book," Gary assured me. We left Amber and went deeper into the basement. Soon, the functioning lights were spaced farther and farther apart, and the cross corridors that led toward the front of the building were blocked off with black curtains. The sound effects and the screams from the patrons were louder over here. Every once in a while, a cast member pushed their way through a curtain and hurried past us into the backstage area, either to fix a broken costume, grab a quick bottle of water, or just take a breather, leaning against the wall and gulping air without a mask. Terrifying people was, apparently, hard work.

"She was headed this way when she ran past me," Gary said. "Keep an eye out for

her. She may still be around here somewhere."

"I hope she is. Otherwise, she's outside, right?" said Wade.

"What does she look like?" I asked.

"You'll know her when you see her," Wade assured me.

I was about to ask for a little more to go on when Gary gripped my arm and pointed down the hall. The black curtain hadn't closed completely when the last ghoul passed through it, and I saw a statuesque woman in a miniskirt and a tube top standing in the distance. I tried to get a look at her face before she stepped around the corner, but all I saw was a dark, irregular shape.

"Is that her?" I asked.

Wade and Gary charged down the hall without bothering to reply. I caught up in time to hear Gary say, "She's still got the mask on!" and Wade reply with, "I know! I saw it! Shut up already!"

We turned the corner and skidded to a halt. A flimsy barricade of sawhorses wrapped in fake "Police Line--Do Not Cross" tape, blocked the mouth of the corridor. On the other side, Catacombs of Terror patrons moved along in groups and bunches, going from one series of horrifying vignettes to another. There were high school kids clinging to each other and laughing, bemused adults taking in the atmosphere, dedicated gorehounds and horror connoisseurs studying every detail, as well as a certain number of people with their hands over their eyes. This last group had been talked into visiting the Catacombs by friends and were now suffering serious second thoughts. Here and there, roving ghouls helped to usher the crowds along and prevent traffic jams.

A particularly violent shriek caused me to jump, and I saw a college-aged woman in

an orange sweater and glasses being seized by a ghoul that had leapt at her from behind a column of steam pipes. The ghoul was Tina, and I finally got a good look at the mask she was wearing. It was made of twigs and slender branches, painstakingly woven together to make a solid shape that started wide over the forehead but tapered down as it reached the jaw. There were irregularly-shaped eye holes, several antler-like projections, and an open space at the bottom that revealed Tina's mouth. I got a quick impression of coral-pink lipstick smeared with blood, but then our eyes met for a second and I forgot everything else. The normal coloration of her eyes was gone entirely, replaced by a blackness as emotionless and terrible as the eyes of a shark. In that instant, I understood why Gary had been so pleased to find me in the line.

Tina had a death grip on the woman with the orange sweater, who was now beginning to suspect this was not all part of the show. Wade, Gary, and I pushed through a dozen Boy Scouts and wrenched Tina's hands loose. The poor woman in orange ran away, still shrieking, and Tina turned her attention to me. Tina was at least six feet tall, so she would have been plenty impressive even under normal circumstances. Now, though, I felt an overwhelming impulse to drop to my knees and grovel. Even worse than that, I had a momentary vision of drawing a knife across Wade's throat and offering the steaming blood to the black-eyed manifestation that stood before me. Making that vision a reality was the only thing I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

It was Gary who broke the spell. "Dammit, Tina, give me that thing!" He reached out for the mask, which was held on with an old brown boot lace. Tina's head snapped around to face him and she grabbed both of his wrists.

The Catacombs of Terror patrons gave us a wide berth as we struggled. I think most

of them assumed we were putting on an act, even if they couldn't tell what we were trying to accomplish. Most of the time, the theme for each vignette in a haunted house was pretty clear: torture chamber or vampire's den or haunted asylum or what have you. This time, all they saw was two relatively normal-looking guys, despite one of them wearing a tutu, trying to wrestle a third guy out of the clutches of a fitness model in a wooden mask. As I fought to break Tina's grip, I heard someone behind me say, "I don't get it."

A discarded five-gallon plastic bucket stood by one of the sawhorses. I grabbed it and swung it at the back of Tina's head. It connected with a solid "bong" sound. She dropped Gary and returned her attention to me. This time, I knew better than to meet her gaze. Instead, I kept my eyes at the level of her collarbones and shuffled backward, hoping to draw her away from the innocent bystanders. She followed me for a step or two, but stopped in the center of the corridor. Her body language was bizarre, and to me that was even more unsettling than the mask itself. Whatever was in charge of Tina now, it wasn't interested in acting the way a normal human acted.

She raised her arm stiffly to swing at me, and I held up the bucket as a shield. When I still wouldn't look up at her, she hesitated. Instead of attacking me, which I had been expecting, she abruptly turned and ran toward the entrance with a stiff-limbed gait. I was about to follow her when I heard Gary yelling from the floor.

"Quit doing that!"

Gary was sitting on the floor with his legs splayed while Wade crouched next to him. The patrons, still assuming this was all part of the act, detoured around them. Wade was holding one of Gary's arms, which Gary snatched back as soon as he noticed me watching.

"He hurt his arm," Wade told me.

"Yeah, so quit messing with it." Gary was pale, and his left hand hung limply as he hugged his left arm to his chest.

"Can you walk?" I asked.

"Yeah, I can walk. Just give me a minute."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. I felt something snap," Gary said.

"I bet it's broken," Wade said.

"Yeah, no kidding." We helped Gary to his feet, where he took a deep breath and started to look a little better.

"Can you get somebody to drive you to the hospital?" I asked.

Gary nodded. "Sure. I'll see if Amber's still back there. If not, I'll drive myself."

"Don't drive yourself, Gary," I said.

"It's fine. The other hand works. Don't worry about it."

For a moment I was torn between chasing down Tina and making sure Gary didn't try to drive with a broken arm.

"Don't be an idiot," Wade said as his brother shuffled back past the sawhorse barricades. "Do the smart thing for once. Just get a ride."

"Shut up, dumbass," Gary said. "This is your damn fault anyway."

When Gary had gone, Wade and I started off toward the entrance at a race-walking pace. There was no time to waste, but we also didn't want to alarm the visitors by charging headlong for the door.

"I'm guessing you know a little bit about where this mask came from," I said to Wade.

"Not really. I mean, I found it, but I don't know where it came from or anything," Wade said, puffing a little as we hurried.

"Let's start with that. Where'd you find it?"

"It was about a week ago. I was out at Jeff Harmon's place by Oak City. Do you remember Jeff? He went to high school with us. Anyway, I was out there real early one morning doing some hunting."

"I thought deer season didn't start until November."

"It's bow season right now. I've had my bow for five years and I haven't got a damn thing with it yet, so this year was going to be my year. I was up in a tree stand in Jeff's woods, just before dawn, and this buck came by and I hit him."

"Hey, congratulations." Sitting in a tree in the freezing cold on the off-chance a deer might wander by so I could skewer him with an arrow wasn't anything I ever planned on doing myself, but I couldn't deny there was some skill involved.

"Then I had to chase him down, which took for-freaking-ever," Wade said. "I don't know how long I chased him before he dropped, but I was pretty sure I wasn't in Jeff's woods anymore. And I was pretty sure I was done with bow hunting. To be honest, I had no idea where I was."

By this point, we had pushed our way through to the entrance to the Catacombs of Terror. One of the ticket takers, dressed as something resembling a Gothic Winnie-the-Pooh, recognized Wade and let us pass.

"So I finally saw the deer laying on the ground in this little clump of trees. I was just about there when the ground collapsed under my foot. I thought I stepped in a sinkhole or something, but it was only about a foot deep. There was a bunch of broken clay pieces in

there, like I'd stepped on a big old pottery jar or something, and when I took my foot out, I saw this mask. It was the weirdest damn thing."

We emerged at the top of the old courthouse steps. The line of guests ran down from here and away to the right. No one was screaming, and there was no evidence of panic, so it didn't seem like Tina had started in on anyone else yet. She was still nowhere to be seen. We climbed onto the wide concrete newel posts to get a better look around.

"The mask was creepy as hell," Wade said as we scanned the area, trying to look like we belonged up there. "I figured some kid made it, and his mom told him to throw it away because it looked like something a serial killer would do. But he didn't want to get rid of it, so he hid it in the woods."

"Or it may have been there for two hundred years, just waiting for somebody to pick it up," I said.

"Seriously?"

"It's not impossible."

I pointed across the street, to a parking lot bordered by a bar, a couple of offices, and a sandwich shop. "Hey, is that your truck over there?"

"Yeah. They say the lot's for customers only, but I keep a cup from that sandwich place on the dash, and nobody's said anything. It's a lot closer than the regular Catacombs parking. Anyway, I figured if that mask scared me, it would probably scare somebody else. So I took it with me. Might as well get some use out of it, right?"

"Did it give you a weird feeling?" I asked.

"You know, it kind of did. I picked the thing up and I carried it over to where the deer was and then, I don't know why I did this, but I opened the deer up with my knife and

splashed a bunch of blood on the mask. Couldn't tell you why I did that."

"Yeah, I'd say that qualifies as a weird feeling."

"It just seemed like a good idea at the time," Wade said. "After I did it, I remember thinking the mask dried off really quick. Like, one minute it was soaked, and the next time I looked down it was completely dry. Like it had just sucked up all the blood. You know, now that I think about it, I wonder if I should have just left that damn thing where I found it."

Before I could respond, Wade pointed. "Hey! There she is!"

Across the street, we saw the tall, masked figure of Tina. The other people on the sidewalk weren't pointing and running, so they must have assumed she was just another Catacomb ghoul on her dinner break. Tina pivoted with a broken-mannequin lurch and began to stalk through the parking lot.

Wade and I hopped from our perch and ran down the stairs. Tina hadn't pounced on any of the scores of people she had already passed, which made me think she was looking for a particular kind of victim. I had no idea who that might be, and I didn't care all that much. All I wanted to do was stop her before someone else got injured, and I worried that our luck was going to run out soon.

"Wade, what have you got in your truck?" I asked as we crossed the street.

"I don't know. Stuff."

"Let's go take a look." The last time we had tried to stop Tina, she had broken Gary's arm, and I doubted things were going to go easier when there was one less of us to hold her down. I didn't like the idea of beating her senseless with a tire iron, but maybe the junk in Wade's truck might give us some other options. After a minute of frenzied digging in the

mess, we hit on something we could use. Before we could resume the chase, though, I heard my name being called.

"Dean!" Lionel, Shannon, and her sister Bridget were on the sidewalk, watching me in surprise as Wade and I wrestled a bulky green and brown bundle out of his crew cab.

"Where'd you go?" Lionel asked. "You never showed up, so we went through the Catacombs without you."

"Sorry about that. I sort of got called in to work."

Lionel frowned. "Work? I thought you managed your uncle's buildings. Was there some kind of emergency?"

"This is more of a side job than my regular day-to-day thing," I said.

Shannon and her sister took in Wade as he returned to rooting around in the back seat of his truck. Even without the tutu and the fake blood, people tended to assume Wade was up to something sketchy. I always felt this was because of the Fu Manchu mustache he insisted on trying to grow, but that was neither here nor there at the moment.

"What kind of side job?" Shannon asked.

"Dean, do you want the rifle, too?" asked Wade. "I've still got it back here."

"I think we ought to be running along." I helped Wade close the truck doors.

"Bridget, it was very nice to meet you. Lionel, Shannon, have a good night. Sorry I had to skip out like this. Come on, Wade."

As we shouldered the bundle and hurried away, Wade asked, "Was that your date?"

"It doesn't matter anymore."

"She was cute."

"I got the feeling I wasn't her type."

"Her loss."

"You'd think so," I said.

We saw Tina pushing her way into Puccini's sandwich shop, and we rushed to catch up with her, at the same time trying to keep the bundle we carried from coming loose and tripping us up. We weren't particularly graceful about it, but we managed.

The interior of Puccini's was full of pink neon and chrome. Half a dozen people waited in line at the counter while a kid in a striped polo shirt alternated between taking orders and slicing up deli meats. A couple of people, obviously fresh from the Catacombs of Terror, nodded knowingly at Tina when she came in, as if a woman in a miniskirt and a nightmarish ritual mask was obviously no big deal. Wade and I, wild-eyed and panting, got a much more startled reaction, which I tried not to take personally.

Tina stood motionless for a moment and slowly looked over the room. Her black, bottomless eyes locked onto the kid behind the counter. She strode toward him, scattering the others like human duckpins. The kid looked up at her, stood slack-jawed for a second, then stepped back from the counter. He grabbed a heavy-duty serving fork and, with a surprising amount of grace, popped off the circular blade from the meat cutter.

He held the blade up to Tina, like some prehistoric shaman presenting a talisman. I heard him say one word in a flat, sleepwalker's voice.

"Blood."

"Okay, Wade, let's do this," I said.

Wade dropped the bundle. Each of us grabbed an edge and pulled it out, unwrapping several yards of mesh netting, decorated with green and brown cloth patches. It was a camouflage net, the kind of thing that hunters wrap themselves up in to hide from

suspicious animals.

Tina raised her arms in an imperious gesture, and the kid began climbing over the counter to reach her. Fortunately, being mesmerized didn't make him any more coordinated, so he didn't make it over on the first try. That gave Wade and me enough time to act. We sprang at Tina, encircling her with the netting and latching onto her legs like a pair of rambunctious toddlers. I took the opportunity to hook her right ankle, and all three of us went down in a heap.

At this point, everyone else in the shop decided they'd had enough and ran for the exit. I didn't blame them.

Tina was wrapped up in the net, but she was far from incapacitated. "Don't look at her!" I shouted to Wade as the three of us rolled around.

Wade wasn't listening. The kid had finally made it over the counter and was trying to use his meat slicer to chop down anyone who stood between him and his new goddess. Wade was busy trying to fend him off with a few frenzied kicks while keeping his grip on Tina at the same time.

"Ow! Kid, cut it out!" Wade yelled. "Dean, can you hold her for a second?" Wade rolled off the pile before the poor possessed idiot got lucky and sliced into something vital. Suddenly I was the only person left restraining Tina.

As I've mentioned, Tina was extremely tall and in superb shape. Even without supernatural assistance, it would have been tough to keep her from doing whatever she felt like doing. I had the sinking feeling that my best efforts were only going to prolong the inevitable. She snapped her teeth at me savagely and would have taken a chunk out of my face if she'd been half an inch closer. My options were dwindling. I didn't want to let her go

and risk prolonging this rampage, but I also didn't want to get bitten or turned into a mindless thrall.

"Wade!" I grunted, dodging another bite. "Little help here!"

"Hang on." There were scuffling sounds, then a soft thump, and the mesmerized sandwich kid dropped to his knees with a moan. Apparently, the mask's powers of mental domination were no match for a solid knee to the groin.

Wade leaned over where Tina and I were still struggling. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"The mask! Get it off!"

Wade squinted. "Hold her still. It's tied on."

"Cut it!"

"Oh! Right!"

He looked around for a second, trying to see where the meat slicer had gotten to. Then, with a flash of belated inspiration, he reached into his boot and pulled out a folding knife, which he flipped open with one hand.

My luck had run out by this point, and Tina had sunk her teeth into my shoulder. It was more than a little painful, but at least her head was steady for a moment.

"Wade! Now!"

Wade sliced through the boot lace that held the mask on. I grabbed it with my free hand and threw it across the room. The change was instantaneous. Tina pushed away from me with an expression of revulsion.

"What are you... What happened?" she said.

"It's okay." I tried to use a soothing voice, but it was difficult because she'd kicked

me in the stomach when she recoiled, and I was still trying to get my breath back. "You're all right now. Everything's fine. You just had a bad reaction to the mask Wade gave you."

"Yeah, sorry about that," said Wade, who was untangling her from the camouflage netting and helping her to stand.

I crawled over to where the mask had skidded to a stop under one of the tables. The last thing I needed was for the counter kid, simultaneously recovering from Tina's domination and Wade's knee, to stumble upon the thing and start the whole cycle again.

Now that it wasn't being worn, the mask of woven branches looked strangely inert, like something that should be hanging up in a natural history museum or an art gallery. I ran my finger over the eye holes. To be honest, I kind of wanted to put it on. Tina had been in contact with something very ancient and very powerful, and there was a part of me that wanted to know what that had been like. I wondered if I could get away with wearing it for just a few seconds.

With an effort, I looked away, then kept my gaze fixed on the ceiling lights until I could wrap it in several layers of the netting. I would take it home figure out what to do with it there, away from any innocent bystanders. Once uncle Willard knew about the mask's hypnotic powers, he would be more than happy to stand by and brain me with a frying pan if I got out of control. When I was done wrapping, I saw the kid gingerly retreat to his station behind the counter. He pulled a loaf of bread from the warmer, tore it in half, and took a bite.

"I hate Catacomb season," he said to no one in particular.

www.QuentinDodd.com

Cover photo by [Kenny Eliason](#) on [Unsplash](#)