Tailor-Made

A Prodigium Short Story

TA Moore

Readers love TA MOORE

Dirty Work (Dirty Deeds #1)

"The bad guys shift as we work out the puzzle, but the new feelings between Clay and Grade just keep getting stronger... TA Moore never lets her fans down." —Paranormal Romance Guild



Bone to Pick (Digging Up Bones #1)

"If you're looking for a book that will keep you on the edge of your seat, make your heart race, and make you laugh out loud all at the same time, then this is the book for you. —A Wonderful World of Words



Shift Work (Night Shift #1)

"Damn Ms. Moore, it's like you got me at hello. Or was it naked in the elevator? Either way the hook was set and as I read, I was all yours." —Paranormal Romance Guild



Every Other Weekend

"It entertained, it kept me riveted and it increased my fate in writers... Definite recommendation to anyone who likes MM romantic suspense." —Alpha Book Club



Collared (Devil Take Me)

"TA Moore has written a gem filled with a world that kept me shuddering in fear as I couldn't stop reading." —Rainbow Book Reviews



Footwork

"Footwork has everything: heart-wrenching and sweet moments, suspense, banter, snark, action, fun, love and lots of steam." —QueerRomanceInk



Swipe

"*Swipe* has just about everything one could want in a bad-boy romance. The action was explosive, the relationship dangerous, and the men very, very hot. Buckle up for this one it is a wild ride that has a very satisfying outcome." —Joyfully Jay

Published by Rogue Firebird Press

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of author imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Tailor Made

Copyright © 2020 by TA Moore

Cover Art by TA Moore

All rights reserved. This book is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution via any means is illegal and a violation of international copyright law, subject to criminal prosecution and upon conviction, fines, and/or imprisonment. Any eBook format cannot be legally loaned or given to others. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact Rogue Firebird Press.

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

2020

Contents

1. 1 1

2. 2 5

3. 3 8

4. 4 12

5. 5 14

6. 6 16

7. 7 19

8. 8 22

About the Author 25

Author Catalog 26

Dead Man Stalking 29



1

NEWS SPREAD BY WORD of...mostly mouth, it was 85% mouth really, from butcher to baker to candle-maker (ok, that one wasn't a mouth, but still).

There was to be a Wedding -- the capitalisation audible in every voice no matter what said it--at the Abascal Hotel and Spa. Belladonna, the dark dame herself, was to host it.

In. A. Month.

There was obviously some machination there. A scandal to bury. A coup to discreetly boast about. That was for the cream of the Prodigium to worry about. For the rest of them they just needed to work how to source all the materials they needed to bid for the Abascal's patronage on short notice.

After all, how did you find a gross of murderers' hands to finish the table setting with when you only had a month to work with?

"No, really," Astrid said. She picked up a sandwich from the lunch box and waved it in the air in exasperated figures-of-eight. "How? I had a dozen in storage, of course, but

where I am to get the rest? I've begged my contacts on Death Row to see if they could push a few through early, but it's not like the old days. People don't want to put themselves out."

She took a sulky bite out of the sandwich and then pulled it away from her mouth to squint at it dubiously. Red goo leaked out over her fingers.

"This is jelly," she said distastefully and pulled up the corner of the bread. "And...brown stuff?"

Dim tossed another load of dirt over his shoulder and straightened up.

He braced the shovel against the dirt and leaned his weight on the scarred wooden handle. Sweat itched on the back of his neck and under his arms. He wiped his face on his sleeve, dirt on top of dirt.

"Peanut butter and jelly," he said. "What were you expecting?"

She scowled down at him from her perch on the gravestone. "Brie," she said. "Garlic butter sausage. Shaved skin. But you're right. Once this wedding ruins us, we'll have to get used to not having the finer things in life anymore.

I'll be eating peanut butter sandwiches and catering Bar Mitzvahs and you'll be...mending socks on street corners."

That possibility made her sigh heavily, but didn't put her off eating the rest of the sandwich. She chewed on mordantly on the crusts as she swung her feet against the stone.

"I thought you were going to help," Dim said.

"Uh, I did," Astrid said. She gestured at the half-excavated grave. "The gravesite of an unconsummated bride? What more do you want?"

"Help digging?"

"Do I look like I dig holes?"

"You're a ghoul! I know you do."

"Not in this outfit," Astrid sniffed. She stuck one long, bony leg out in front her. "These are designer jeans. I'm not getting corpse goo on them."

Dim rolled his eyes and went back to work. Usually he had people for this sort of thing, but every graverobber in Roanoke was booked out weeks in advance and this was a special request.

"Designer jeans, my ass," he muttered under his breath as he dug. "Rip offs."

"What?" Astrid snapped.

"Nothing."

The shovel hit wood with a solid thunk. Finally. He used the blade to scrape the dirt away from the lid. A small, brass plaque was screwed to the wood. Dim crouched down, licked his thumb, and rubbed it over the gritty, warm metal.

"It says Dennis," he said.

"The nose knows," Astrid insisted. "That's a bride dead on her wedding day, darling."

"It says he was 92."

There was a thump as Astrid finally jumped down into the grave. She shouldered Dim out of the way and squinted at the plaque herself for a second.

As if he'd just forgotten how to read.

"Maybe it's meant to say Denise," she said and waved jam sticky fingers at the coffin. "They just ran out of room."

Dim shook his head. "Let's just get the lid off and see what we're working with here," he said. Even if he had to dig another hole, maybe he could use the materials from this one for something. "Can you--"

Astrid made a distressed noise. "I just got my nails done, Dimi," she whined. "I don't want to get them dirty."

"Hold the torch?" Dim asked.

She thought about it for a second and brightened. "That I can do." Clods of dirt thunked back down on the coffin lid as she scrambled back out. It took a second as she trotted back over to get the torch from the guard and then came back. She clicked it a couple of times and then it came on, a bright puddle of light splashed over the old coffin.

Dim used the shovel to break through the lid and pulled away chunks of treated, half rotten wood with his hands. Denis had been dead long enough that the smell was faded, the ripe bouquet of rot and embalming fluid faded to a dusty memory of corruption.

"Huh," Dim said.

Astrid steadied herself on the headstone and leaned over to peer in. She raised perfectly plucked eyebrows. "Huh."

In the coffin, laid out on stained satin, the desiccated mummy of an old man lay with his wizened fingers tangled through the ribs of a skeleton in a tattered, yellow wedding dress. An old, old stained bloomed pink on the lace.

It might have been wine.

Dim scratched his jaw. "I suppose I can work with this," he said. "Toss me the sack, Asi?"

She dropped it on top of him, damp and smelly canvas. He neatly excavated the grave, scrambled out with the knobby bag on his back, and filled

it back in again. The sod didn't look quite how it had when they'd started, but it was an old grave. No one would look that closely.

Not once they dragged the guard's body to the other side of the graveyard.

Astrid refused to give the lunch box back. It was retro, she said, and that was fashion forward.

"Would it count if you killed them yourself?" he asked as they got into his car. "I mean, not like any of them are properly hanged anymore."

She paused for a second as she considered and then shrugged.

"I suppose if it doesn't work, I'll at least have my freezer stocked for the year," she said. "I just have to find 120 murderers. Know any?"

Dim shrugged and started the car. "Who doesn't?"



2

IT WASN'T WINE.

Dim hummed to himself as he unpicked the ancient lace of the dress. The silk was cracked and brittle, white darkened to a yellow-ivory that was within a few shades of the old bone.

It was perfect. Just what the customer wanted, with an added touch of gore to just give it that Ragno signature.

He laid the pieces out on his work table-- over the disarticulated rib bones and ribbon-knotted hanks of dirty, untangled hair--and laced his fingers together to crack his knuckles.

Time to get to work.

The clock on the wall ticked away toward the Witching Hour as Dim threaded dead girl's hair onto a needle made of her bones to weave the lace and silk together into a heavy, faux-brocade. The ribs he used to bone the corset, the bones broken by bullets laced together with strips of stained lace at the front.

Once the top was finished--he only needed to harvest a few lengths of cartilage to stiffen the high ruff--Dim took a break. His fingertips were blistered and his back ached from being hunched over as he worked.

Most tailors who were monsters were brownies or kobolds, who could spin a dress out of moonlight and milk by dawn, but they didn't tend to work for monsters. They fed on mortal gratitude and debt, and monsters felt neither of those things. Besides, any monster who could afford to pay for a Ragnu bespoke gown expected the sweat and service as much as the stitches and seams.

Luckily they paid very well for Dim's blisters. Well,they did once the old grave gold and unearthed treasures were traded for dollars and stocks.

He fed a pod into the Keurig and left it to spit and sizzle as he hunted through the drawers for syrup. All he found was a bottle of banana abandoned scornfully at the back of a cupboard. He grumbled under his breath, but he'd

inherited his sweet tooth from Grandmother so it wasn't as if he could pretend he didn't expect to get cleared out sometimes. He finally found some old sugar cubes he'd stuck in the petty cash box and added a couple to his mug.

One drink of the hot liquid and he added another sugar.

He needed something to keep him going until dawn. Dim knuckled his eyes and stifled another yawn. Left to his own body clock he'd be quite happy at this hour, but it raised too many of the wrong eyebrows to have a tailor's shop that only opened after midnight. The monster's own Senate, the Prodigium, had ruled that any monster owned businesses had to keep mundane opening hours.

Dim's father had done it as a young man, and now it was Dim's turn.

One day, when he was old and bristly, it would be his turn to retire from the daytime business and hand the shop over to his child. Which would be Van, he supposed.

He thought about that for a moment as he drank his coffee. Try as he might, he couldn't imagine it. Maybe he just needed time. Van had been fourteen when they found out about each other. Neither of them had quite gotten used to that yet.

Or maybe Dim should just accept that he'd need to get up in the morning for the foreseeable? That or look into adoption.

He had just taken another drink of coffee when he heard the distant rattle of the chimes hung over the door. 'Put the finger food away' bells, Astrid called them. Dim swallowed hot coffee and licked his lips. He'd locked the door, though.

Van was upstairs. He'd been swearing at Overwatch up there when Dim got home and say what you like about the kid, it hadn't taken him long to work out not to sneak out around Grandmother. No one else had the key.

It wasn't exactly a good idea to give your human staff a key when sometimes...well, sometimes you were taking corpses apart for the aesthetic.

They might get the wrong idea. Worse, they might get the right one.

Dim carefully put his coffee down, grabbed the dead girl's thighbone, and ventured out of the workroom. It was probably just Astrid, he told himself. She might have gotten an early start on her Hands of Glory centrepieces.

He nudged the door into the main shop open and squinted at the unexpected glare of all the lights. Bolts of cloth were bright on the shelves, already stitched gowns glittered on the dress forms, and rolls of silk ties and socks shone with expensively muted style in cubby holes.

A tall man in old jeans and a battered old jacket stood at the counter, a length of gun metal grey cashmere folded between his fingers. There was a shotgun laid down next to him and blood on his jeans.

Now that he was faced with the intruder, Dim's came up short on what to actually do about it. Murder seemed easiest, but it had its drawbacks. He cringed at the thought of having to clean blood out of all the fabric and wood in here. Besides, Van had only learned he was a monster last year. They'd all agreed it was best to try and ease him in to the...messier bits.

"I've called the police," Dim said.

"That would be stupid," the man said, his voice empty and calm. He let the fabric slip out of his fingers and turned around. He looked amused as he took in the bone in Dim's hand. "Put that down."

For a moment Dim was struck by how pretty he was, a spray of gilt freckles on high cheekbones and a jaw that could slice silk. His mouth got that dry, sticky feeling he usually had before he talked to a hot guy....apparently his dick wasn't worried about the fact the hot guy was an intruder.

Then Dim recognised him.

Luka Kohary. The bloody left hand of the Prodigium. Who could probably execute Dim for finding him hot. Or for any reason. No reason.

Who'd ask him to justify himself?

Dim dropped the thigh bone.



3

THE VELLUM WAS BUTTER soft and the calligraphy impeccable. The gilded edges were stiff and body warm as Dim turned it in his hands. He'd seen one before. Heard about them more than once from clients eager to boast about their connections as he measured their chests. He just wasn't sure why Kohary had given it to him.

"It's an invitation," Kohary said as he took his jacket off.

Dim resisted the urge to tell him not to make himself comfortable. It would be suicidal, but the idea of Kohary at ease made his head hurt like someone had closed their fist around it.

"I know that," he said. "I don't know why you gave it to me?"

"I showed it to you." Kohary took the invite back, to Dim's relief. "So you'd know I was actually invited, not here to involve you in some plot."

Dim wiped his hands on his thighs. "I wasn't going to ask."

Kohary folded the invite and stuffed it in his back pocket. The careless treatment made Dim wince and bite the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood, thin and tart and not at all human on his tongue.

"What if I wanted to kill one of the Abascals?"

"Not sure having to get a tux off the rack would stop you," Dim said.

Amusement creased the corners of Kohary's eyes without touching his mouth. It seemed more genuine for some reason, more trustworthy.

"Maybe I'd ask you to sew a curse into a veil," he said. "Stitch compulsion into a pair of shoes."

"I don't do shoes."

Kohary laughed. It was a surprisingly normal sound. The glass counters didn't shatter and the rolls of brocade didn't sprout rot and wither.

"A good thing I didn't come for a curse then," he said. "Thwarted because you 'don't do shoes', how would I explain that to the Prodigium when they called me to task?"

He waited, like he actually expected Dim to have an answer.

"I could give you the name of a cobbler?"

Kohary raised his eyebrows. "You'd sell out a fellow craftsman, another monster?"

If it meant that Luka Kohary would take his tight jeans and broad shoulders out of Dim's shop? Dim would give him a name, directions, and call an Uber. Maybe not the name of someone he liked, but that only thinned the herd some. Monsters, in general, were designed to be a solitary lot. They weren't affable.

He swallowed and the spit in his throat clicked wet and noisy.

"They'd do the same for me."

Kohary' s eyes were very green, a glassy beer-bottle hue like a fly, as he studied Dim. Then he closed them for a second, and when he opened them again they'd faded to the dull moss colour of nature.

"Then the two of you are lucky," he said. "I need some clothes. For the wedding."

Dim stared at him for a second and tried to hang onto the confused tangle of doubt and fear that had ruled him so far. There was absolutely no reason for the Left Hand to travel to Roanoke except the wedding, or to turn up without appropriate clothes.

It didn't work. The breathless, almost nausea of excitement shouldered its way on and settled down. The Left Hand of the Prodigium wanted to wear Dim's clothes to the wedding that Belladona was throwing for her daughter?

That would make his name.

Kohary' s smile reached his mouth again, a slant of cruelty to it as if he knew what Dim was thinking. And that he was about to punch a hole in whatever daydream he'd entertained.

"I want an insult in fabric," he said. "Something that says exactly what I think, so that I don't have to."

Dim bit his tongue again, but his monster had roused under his skin. It wasn't as scary as some. Not yet. Wait until he was Grandmother's age. For

now it was just an itch in his fingers and something cold and compelled in his brain that unfolded like a spider.

"What do you think?" he asked. He had to. If he wanted to finish the commission that was what he needed to know, and he didn't have a choice in doing it and doing it well. Habit made him pat at his pockets for his notepad to scribble down notes. "What do you want to say?"

Kohary blinked. His eyes had darkened again, black and glossy as a beetles back. They reminded Dim of Grandmother, but the flicker of comfortable familiarity was deceptive.

"That I hate them all," Kohary said, his voice like sand and glass in his throat. "And I think they're all beneath me."

Something in his jacket chirped. It was oddly bizarre to see him pull out something as mundane as a mobile and check the screen. He looked annoyed for a second at what he saw and then dismissed it as he looked back up.

"Draw some ideas up," he said. "I'll be back in a few days."

The protests stuck in Dim's throat. There were just too many of them to get out all at once.

He already had a dozen commissions lined up, too many to add one more. Even if he had the time, which he didn't, and he accepted the work, which he obviously would since no one said no to Luka Kohary, he needed measurements, direction, a clearer timeline for appointments than 'a few days'.

Before he could sort them by order of priority, Kohary had left himself out. Dim swallowed the nest of words and made himself go over to check the door. It was already locked and he could feel Kohary's magic on it, like worn soft leather and wire against his fingertips.

"Shit," he muttered to himself.

That was a record even for him, from ambition to the gutter in under a minute. Dim raked his fingers through his hair and heaved a sigh. He shouldhave known better. When

the gods cursed someone they went all in. Too many generations to think about and his family were still getting the pride slapped out of them.



4

THE DAMASK PUDDLED ON the ground in front of Grandmother as she worked, peacock green with darker blue patterns woven into the fabric.

She clicked her tongue.

"The Left Hand of the Prodigium," she mused. "In our designs."

"He's been in the shop once."

She waved one leg at him, a gesture that simultaneously dismissed his protest and told him to hush.

"We could put a sign over the door," she said. "By charter from the Prodigium."

"He was on his own."

She gave him a hard look out of one beady, black eye. "You sound like your father."

Dim pulled a face. He supposed he did. It had been the one thing he'd always swore he'd never do, back when he was Van's age, but the older you got the more you realised that pessimism was just optimists called reality.

"If we tell people Kohary shops here," he said. "We'll lose business. People won't darken our door for fear they'll run into him in his underwear."

For a moment Grandmother stopped work and cocked her head to the side. "Do you think he wears underwear?" she asked. "I would have assumed he was....what's the word Van uses...commando?"

That was the last thing that Dim wanted to think about. He was going to now, probably for a few restless, sticky hours tonight, but that wasn't the point. The naked (almost) Kohary in his head -- hotter with black briefs that clung to his thighs and outlined his cock? Or without? A question for later -- gave him a look that said he knew what he was doing.

Fuck. He might, for all Dim knew. No one really knew what Kohary's monster was or what it could do. Well, no one knew for long. It was kind of

'just before you horribly die' information.

"That's not the point," Dim said. "What am I meant to do? I already have a dozen commissions for the end of the month, now I'm meant to come up with an outfit that's fit for a banquet and an insult?"

Grandmother reached out and patted him on the shoulder. "Is it beyond you?"

Shit. Dim clenched his jaw on the unnatural compulsion that pushed on the bones of his skull. "Grandmother, don't."

She tilted her head to look at him with amusement. The curse had left her enough of her face to see the human she'd been, her nose and cheeks and the soft curve of her jaw. It had taken her eyes, though, and replaced them with the black, seed-jewel eyes of a spider. Black mandibles distorbed her mouth, the pink flesh stretched tight and peeled back in places. The black, mitten-fuzzed paw on his shoulder squeezed.

"Can you not do it?" she asked.

Dim clenched his jaw from sheer stubbornness. It didn't matter. His monster crawled up his throat and wrestled control of his tongue off him.

"I can do it," he said, through his teeth. Arrogance that wasn't his--and wouldn't have to understand the fucking consquences when they got here--

filled him. "Just watch me."

Grandmother swung forward on her line and kissed his cheek. Her mandibles were rough, like a brillo pad that was almost worn out.

"Go and make me proud," she said. "Grandmother is hungry."



5

Gloves hid his bloody fingers. They didn't help with the restless jitter of his knees and tight shoulders as his monster plucked at his nerves like they were puppet strings.

Stitch. Sew. Buttons. Get it done, prove you can.

He ignored the rant with the ease of long practice and dumped more sugar in his coffee.

"When you imagine going to the Abascal wedding," he asked idly. "How does it end badly?"

Astrid adjusted the fingers on the hand of glory she had in front of her and turned it so the long-dead murderer gave him the bony finger.

"What makes you assume it goes wrong?" she sniffed. "And do you think these need to be tinted a shade more grey? Remember, the banquet will be in the caves?"

Dim cocked his head to the side.

"Remember they're going to be lit," he said. "You don't want them to look alive. And it wouldn't be an anxiety dream if everything went right."

Astrid sighed and wiped her waxy hands on her apron. She picked up a shaved off ring of wrist bone and chewed thoughtfully on it as she considered the question.

"I'm dancing with Belladonna," she said, her eyes dreamy.It lasted a second and then she sighed as she went on. "She compliments me on what an amazing spread I've done, then she apologizes for stepping on my toes. People laugh. I realize I'm naked."

"Could be a power move." Dim pointed out.

Astrid sucked the marrow out of the centre of the wrist bone and sighed. "Naked except for my period pants," she finished.

They both grimaced at that thought.

"Why?" she asked.

Dim shrugged. The scratch in his brain had settled when it realized he was still at work. "Just a thought," he said. "I see the police are worried about gang violence up in Chesapeake? Anything to do with you?"

She mugged modestly for a moment. "Just a quick test, to see if executing them myself works."

"And?"

Astrid held her hand out and wobbled it back and forth. "Burns without being consumed and opens a few locks. Good enough for the lunch, and I'll save the real ones for the big event. I've got feelers out "

"Just be careful," Dim said. She frowned at him and he shrugged. "The great and the not-so-good are in town, cross them and they'll sell you out to the Prodigium in a second."

She rolled her eyes. "Some of us are willing to take risks to get ahead,"

she said. "We can't depend on our family to back us up."

Dim shrugged. The warning that Kohary was in town stuck in his throat. He liked Astrid, but not enough to cross Kohary. If he wanted a terrible death that left no corpse, he'd go and kick some of his less good-natured relatives awake.

Black Demetrius, his namesake, had slaughtered a dozen hunters and made half of the Prespes his lair. Until Grandmother had tracked him down and tucked him in to sleep so she could get the Prodigium's permission to come to the New World.

He'd probably put Dim out of his misery quick enough.

"I should get back to work," Dim said as he got up. "Thank you for the coffee."

She grinned at him, her broken, yellow fangs and Gila Monster thick spit on display. "Thank you for the goodie bags," she said and clapped her hands girlishly. "It's just the right touch for the fancies."



6

The butcher wrinkled his broad face from behind the slabs of freckled meat in his display at the question. Blood dripped from a sore on his forehead where his skin and split and he'd patched it back together badly.

"I don't know. Never gonna be invited," he points out and then scratches his jaw. "Turn up in the wrong clothes and everyone laughs at me?"

The hairdresser looked up from massaging the red-head's scalp and pursed glossy red lips. Her eyes, behind cat's eyes glasses, reflected the sunlight with sparks of red.

"Everyone's naked, except me," she said. She fished the scalp out of the tanning bath and positioned it on the mannequin head. Old blood and fresh bog water ran down the glossy, plastic cheeks like dirty tears. "Only none of them seem to notice. Should I be naked? Or should I point it to them? How do you tell Belladonna that she forgot to put her slip on?"

She sucked her teeth at the thought.

It was unanimous, and unhelpful. Everyone agreed that the worst thing they could think of was unauthorised nakedness, but that didn't exactly fit Kohary's remit. He wanted to insult everyone at the wedding, but probably not make himself look the fool doing it.

He'd not specifically forbade it, of course. Dim felt the temptation of that down in his marrow as he scratched the pencil over his sketchbook. Shoulders and lean hips sketched out roughly on the page, and the stern line of Kohary's jaw and brow in more detail than he really needed.

He could stitch smoke and ill wishes into a suit that faded in and out with the breeze. A coat of reflections picked from mirrors, here from one angle and gone another.

Everyone in the caverns would know that Kohary was naked, more or less, and no-one would say anything. If the idea of telling Belladonna she'd forgotten her vest daunted people, they'd never spit a syllable at Kohary.

The Emperor's New Clothes, but without that one honest voice to say they could all see his...altogether.

It would work.

Kohary couldn't object that Dim hadn't filled his remit. Even Dim's monster would accept that as rising to the challenge.

But...

First? It didn't feel right. It was too easy--in concept if not execution.

Or too complicated. Secondly? It didn't really matter if Kohary couldn't dispute the brief, he could still make Dim disappear and what would be done about that? Nothing.

Grandmother would mutter and curse them all, but she hadn't got to be an old--old, old--monster by letting her heart rule her head. She'd just make Van take his place and swallow her pride. It was empty calories, your own feelings gnawed back down, but it would digest.

Dim turned the page and stared at the empty sheet of paper as he tried to come up with something else. Nothing crossed his mind. When he thought of Kohary, once the instinctive flinch had passed, he could only imagine him as he'd seen him in the shop. Horror in mundane wrappings...with distracting shoulders.

Enough.

Dim tapped the pen against his forehead to try and spook that thought out. It didn't really work, but he flipped the sketchbook shut anyhow. He had other commissions to finish, even if they'd only bad mouth him professionally if he let them down.

Although, to be fair, his next client was said to have the ear of the Worm. So he could probably make Dim's pretty miserable if he really wanted.

Cobwebs harvested from the vestry of a church lay in a sticky mat on the work table. He'd asked Van to sort it, but the kid was useless at this stuff still. Plus he didn't want to do it. One day it wouldn't matter what he wanted, so Dim wanted to let him enjoy his defiance a while longer.

Although--he grimaced as he started to pick the mass apart--a while longer could be tomorrow.



7

THREE DAYS AND SIX outfits later--basic construction quietly constructed by human staff who were paid enough not to ask questions while Dim quilled flapper fringes with bone chips and made batwing collars out of hair and strings of corpse soap.

It was passé to make them out of bats, apparently.

Luckily there were a few clients who just wanted alterations made. A chupacabra had his father's human skin and new measurements and a banshee had brought in handfuls of moth-eaten corpse finery from her dead clan to eke out to cover her bony, chicken-chested body—while leaving enough skin showing to keep her admirers about.

Dim sat on the floor in his workshop, a mug of coffee next to him and waxy white lace piled in his lap, and stretched Spanish moss and ivy over a massive old ball gown. He hunched over, his eyes hot and scratchy, as he tore the lace decoratively around the rotted out peep holes and old, crusty-edged burns.

He was engrossed enough that he missed the rattle of the door chimes.

A warm, calluses rough on his shoulder, heavy through his thin shirt, was the first warning he noticed. Dim tried to bolt to his feet, but Kohary leaned on him.

"You'll ruin your work," he said. "Take your time."

Dim swallowed and muttered something obedient under his breath as he gathered the gown up into his lap. He had so many pins in it that it rattled.

While he hung back over the dress form and stashed the materials away, Kohary idly browsed the space. He ran fingertips along use-worn tables and tested his thumb against the point of an awl.

The bright red drop of blood that bubbled out of the skin and down to Kohary's wrist stopped Dim in his tracks. He watched, breathless and

tempted, as the thick liquid stained the leather cord on Kohary's wrist a dull red. His throat was so dry that he couldn't even swallow.

Kohary studied him for a moment, head tilted to one side, and then licked the side of his hand clean.

"I had started to wonder," he said. "You look so human."

Dim finally managed to find enough spit to lick his lips. "I'm not." His voice sounded less offended than it should have been. There were stories of people who harboured human children and, out of sentiment or convenience, let them be.

They were short stories.

"Cursed blood," Dim said as he tried again. "Grandmother was human once, we all get a good skin out of that. For a while."

"And then?"

Dim shrugged. "If I can still fit into this skin, I leave Grandmother's territory. If I can't...she'll tuck me in and put me to sleep with the others. But you know that."

Kohary sucked the injury on his finger. "I do. My clothes."

"Finished," Dim said. The sudden shift in attention from him to his tailoring was....a relief and an odd disappointment. He gestured to the changing area, closed off with tarp curtains and plastic on the floor. Some monsters were messy when they took their skin off. "You can try it on if you want."

"And here was me, thinking I'd get a say," Kohary said.

Dim shrugged, not quite apologetically. "Cursed blood," he said. "Sometimes I have to do what it needs."

"Sounds...indiscreet."

Dim squared his shoulders, because he'd dealt with this his whole life.

"It's an appetite," he said. "Like any other. Grandmother's line has never broken the Prodigium's laws."

"Only because they are broken after you've left," Kohary said.

"Good enough," Dim said.



8

Kohary picked up the folded clothes that Dim had indicated. He rubbed his thumb along the sharply stitched collar.

"Did you curse these?" he asked. "That would end--"

"No," Dim said. "There's no room."

Kohary looked at him, an expression of genuine curiosity on his face even as his eyes flickered black and dangerous. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know," Dim said. He shrugged and spread his hands, fresh blisters under old calluses. "We aren't witches or sorcerers. Grandmother knows some tricks, but...it's just what we do. Weave and sew and curse...and it just doesn't want you."

"Huh," Kohary said dryly, eyes green again. "And here I thought we had something."

He disappeared behind the curtains and Dim clenched his jaw on the urge to splutter out that his monster might not want to eat Kohary, but Dim would. That would be stupid. He leaned back against the sewing table and rolled his head from one side to the

other. There was a knot just between his shoulder blades that had been there long he'd started to think it had moved in.

Denim and an old grey t-shirt fell to the floor. The glimpse of bare feet and lean, tanned calf was oddly distracting. Dim looked away as he felt his temples flush. It wasn't that he'd a foot fetish, more that it seemed intimate.

Vulnerable, almost.

Clothes rustled. Zippers rasped. After a while Kohary brushed the curtain back out of his way and stepped out, still barefoot on the old, scarred floors. Hand-sewn jeans clung to his long legs and fit snug and low around lean hips. A black silk shirt fit him like a second skin, the cuffs folded back up his forearms.

"Not exactly what I expected," Kohary said. "I could have bought this at Target."

Dim snorted as walked over to adjust the way the collar sat and adjust the sleeves at the shoulders.

"It's obviously an expensive outfit, to people who care about that," Dim said as he tugged the line of the garment straight. "And anyone at the Abascal wedding, will care. So you have means, you have knowledge, you have connections -- and yet you still chose not to try. I couldn't think of a better insult than...indifference."

Kohary made a thoughtful sound in his throat and Dim realised how close he'd gotten. He tried to stumble back, but Kohary caught his arm before he could get anywhere.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked.

Dim tried to think of the right answer. "Our gift," he said. "Tithe to the Prodigium."

Better than taking money from Kohary, probably. Maybe. Not from the brief, bleak expression that flashed over Kohary's face.

"I take nothing from my father," Kohary said flatly. "I make my own way."

He pulled Dim back in and kissed him. His mouth was warm and his tongue insistent as it tangled with Dim's. Sharp teeth chewed on Dim's lips and drank the taste of his curse from his blood. He tasted like pride, black and old and angry, and Dim nearly drowned in it.

True pride. Hubris. Something that ran down to Kohary's bones.

Despite his best intentions Dim surrendered to it. He curled a hand around Kohary's hip, fingers tucked into the belt loops he'd stitched up hours before, and ran the other one up into the thick, tawny crop of Kohary's hair.

When Kohary broke away from the kiss, Dim was dizzy with it. He staggered, so full his skin felt like a sausage under the grill, and stared wide eyed and breathless at Kohary. If he didn't know better he'd have thought Kohary looked nearly as startled as him.

Of course, that was stupid.

Kohary cleared his throat. "That seems a fair down payment," he said.

"If these clothes irritate people as much as you claim, I'll be back with the balance."

The 'no need' managed to get to the tip of Dim's tongue eventually.

Too late, though. Kohary had already gone.

Dim wiped his fingers over tender lips. He wasn't sure if he'd not been able to protest, or if he'd not wanted to.



TA MOORE is a Northern Irish writer of romantic suspense, urban fantasy, and contemporary romance novels. A childhood in a rural, seaside town fostered in her a suspicious nature, a love of mystery, and a streak of black humor a mile wide.

Coffee, Doc Marten boots, and good friends are the essential things in life. Spiders, mayo, and heels are to be avoided.

TA Moore can be found at the following locations:

Blog: www.tamoorewrites.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/TA.Moores/

If you've enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review for TA Moore on Amazon and other book retailer sites. Actually, it would be great to leave them for any book you've enjoyed. Authors truly appreciate it.

Author Catalog

Published by Rogue Firebird Press

NIGHT SHIFT

Shift Work

Split Shift

Shiftless

DIRTY DEEDS

Dirty Work

Dirty Job

YULE LADS

True North

North Star

BABYLON BOY

Hex Work

Hex Sells

DIGGING UP BONES

Bone To Pick

Skin And Bone

WOLF WINTER

Dog Days

Stone The Crows

Wolf At The Door

LOST AND FOUND

Prodigal

ISLAND CONFIDENTIAL

Wanted - Bad Boyfriend

Island Love

TAILOR-MADE

BLOOD AND BONE

Dead Man Stalking

THE PRODIGIUM

Cash In Hand

STANDALONE BOOKS

Liar, Liar

Every Other Weekend

Swipe

Take The Edge Off

Footwork

Sting in the Tail (Carnival of Mysteries)

Other Publications

Labyrinth of Stone

Red Milk (Requiem for the Departed)

The White Heifer of Fearchair (The Phantom Queen Awakes)

A Different Kind of Monster (Blood Fruit)

Words of Wisdom (Barefoot Nuns of Barcelona & other short stories)—Finalist in the Orange Northern Woman Short Story Prize

Island Life (Ulster Tatler) —Winner of the Orange Northern Woman Short Story Prize

Elf Shot (Bad, Dad, & Dangerous)

Dead Man Stalking



Agent Luke Bennett proved that humans could rise just as high in the ranks as their vampire colleagues—until a kidnapper held him captive for a year and turned him without his consent.

Now he's Took: a reluctant monster afraid to bite anyone, broke, and about to be discharged from his elite BITERs unit. When an old colleague suggests he consult on a BITERs case, Took has little to lose. The case is open and shut... but nothing is ever that easy. As he digs deeper, he discovers a lot more than one cold case is at stake, and if he wants to solve this one, he'll need the help of the BITERs team.

Even if that brings his old commander, Madoc, back into his life.

Dead Man Stalking

Bone to Pick