

THE SEARCH

by Steve Bowkett

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BARON NOCTA WAS DEAD. I was sure of it. During my research over the past two years I had traced his every movement up until the time he died—apparently of natural causes—in Prague in 1858, more than three years ago.

I interviewed people present at his passing and his funeral. I held his death certificate in my hands. I visited his gravesite in the grounds of Nocta's estate, sunken deep in a valley surrounded by pinewoods in a small Eastern European principality. And I watched, not without emotion, as a small group of village children came to place flowers by his tombstone—whether out of love and respect or through superstition I was not entirely sure.

Baron Nocta was dead. So why, I wondered, did people still hear his voice in the depths of the night, and receive letters and instructions in his handwriting?

I might never have investigated or even heard of this matter if my younger brother Adam hadn't gone missing on Nocta's estate. He had been the fourth to vanish in less than six weeks. The first disappearance coincided with the earliest reports of strange voices in the castle grounds and other odd phenomena. Throughout that springtime, so they swore to me, local people had heard the Baron shout and bellow as though from deep underground. And the more curious or more foolish on venturing closer heard angry whisperings coming up through the stones of the castle itself. You might not be surprised to learn that no one had yet shown any interest in buying the vacated property!

I should explain that my brother had been a dealer in rare and antiquarian books. Two days before his last letter to me he received an inquiry from the Baron concerning a rare volume of arcane ritual and its use in preserving the 'life force,' whatever that might be. It so happened that Adam was able to procure this book at

huge expense. But the Baron's offer to purchase and his request that the volume be delivered personally would still leave my brother a very handsome profit.

All of this I learned from an inspection of Adam's ledgers and rather sketchy diaries, and hearsay from his secretary Miss Mason who, I suspected, knew more about his business than my brother did himself.

Towards the end of our meeting Miss Mason showed me Nocta's letter. True enough, the handwriting resembled samples of the Baron's script that I examined later, but in this case the penmanship was crude and jagged; and the more I looked the more convinced I became that some someone known to Baron Nocta was forging his style to exploit his considerable influence.

But why? I asked myself. And the answer came like a thunderbolt.

Because they were trying to bring him back!

I stepped up to the huge gaping entranceway to Nocta's castle and looked back at the early summer sunshine flickering down through the trees. My earlier suspicions and the fears that followed them seemed melodramatic now, and I felt rather foolish at the thought of confronting Nocta's minions, should they in fact exist...

Perhaps they did not, for after three hours of diligent searching I had found no one. The place was empty, left as it had been at the time of Nocta's death. But the mystery of the letters and Adam's absence still remained. The day was drawing on now and the sky was darkening towards evening. I had only the cellars left to search.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am no coward—at least that is my own considered opinion. Nor do I regard myself as squeamish. Yet what I saw in the first of the cellars brought a scream tearing up from my throat; the urge to run headlong away from the horror was upon me and took all of my will to control.

The four...shapes...upon the stone slabs had once been living, breathing people. Now they more closely resembled the dried husks of flies trapped and fed upon in the spider's lair.

In the first few moments I had noticed the gold ring on the finger of one of those victims, but it took me many minutes to gather the courage to look at it in detail and confirm the worst of my fears.

So the work of Nocta's minions had been of the darkest kind. But where were they now? Had they failed in their terrible mission and simply left the castle to decay and the Baron himself to rest in his final lonely peace?

In the next moment I received my answer. For out of the utter stillness of the vault there came a low chuckling laugh, bloated with evil triumph.

And I turned and saw that Nocta and his associates—if indeed he used any accomplice—had not yet finally succeeded, but neither had they failed. Perhaps my life force would allow the process to be completed, I thought fleetingly, as the skeleton's fingers closed about my throat.