

# NECROMART

## A Short Story



ALEX SCOTT

# NECROMART

*By Alex Scott*

The neighborhood seemed like the perfect home for Angelo and Nell Dorian. They would have a house with plenty of room, a street with plenty of friendly-looking neighbors, a nearby school where they could send the kids they were eager to start having, and stores within easy walking distance. After the agent showed them the house, they decided to take a walk and familiarize themselves with some of those stores.

At the corner right down the road were restaurants, a salon, a cafe, and a five-story building with a store called Neccomart. "I've never been to one that was multiple stories," Angelo said.

"I've been to stores like that in the UK, but not here," Nell said. "The big boxes killed most of the downtown department stores over here. I love this. It looks so old-fashioned, like we found a time capsule. Let's check it out."

The interior had a pleasant aroma with a small hint of spice. On one hand, the architecture of the store and the supply of handcrafted goods and obsolete machines suggested a

throwback to the mid-twentieth century, too far back for most people to even be nostalgic. On the other hand, the tablets at the cash registers, the digital photo development station, and the HDTV on display on an endcap suggested a store where the twenty-first century was fully present and accounted for. This floor had a generous sampling of all the departments, including clothes, toys, hardware, and electronics. The more focused departments still waited upstairs.

Angelo and Nell took a look at the directory on the wall by the elevators.

"I'm guessing you want to check out sporting goods first?" Nell said.

"Very funny." Angelo had never been much of an athlete, and Nell, a college football nut, had always liked to gently poke fun at that. He didn't mind watching a game, but preferred to think of himself as a "social" sports fan—it was an excuse to hang out with friends or go on a date with Nell and get a few drinks, but he'd never found a favorite team or anything. "I'd like to take a look at their tools, to start with." And if they had more of these old

machines, he could use their parts to build something new.

"Let's start from the top and work our way down, then we can head back to the hotel room before it gets dark." Nell reached for the call button, but the elevator was already opening.

An old woman with flowers in her hat nodded at them on her way out. The couple gave her a smile.

Angelo and Nell went in, and found that one of the buttons had already been lit—basement level 2. "Well," Angelo said, "we can just wait until it goes back up."

"Sure." Nell leaned on the back wall. "Though you wouldn't think a department store had that many basements."

The elevator went down.

And it kept going down. "What've they got down there," Nell said, "a football stadium?"

"Maybe they need the space for extra merchandise."

"You think this is one of those towns where they raised up the ground level to stop flooding, so now there's a whole underground?"

"Maybe," Angelo said. "But that just makes it more interesting. And it's not like we're staying long."

The elevator stopped. Angelo got his thumb ready on the Close Door button.

The doors opened. He pushed the button.

But the doors wouldn't close.

"Well, great," Angelo said. "Might as well get out. Maybe there's a staircase that can take us back up."

The elevator let out into a small, empty hallway, with a curtain of elongated beads hanging at the very end. Behind the beads was only darkness.

As soon as Angelo and Nell got out, the elevator doors shut, and the car went back up.

"Damn thing must be busted," Angelo said, looking back at the door. "Guess we're definitely taking the stairs."

"Angelo." Nell tugged on his sleeves. "Those beads over there? I don't think those are actual beads."

Angelo stepped over for a closer look. "I... I think you're right."

The beads, on closer inspection, were finger bones, connected with tiny chain links on each end. "They look so real," Nell said.

"No, they've gotta be fake. They'd never use real bones, right?" Angelo touched one of the bone beads with his fingertips. It was very smooth, almost polished. "What's going on here? We're not even close to Halloween."

As if pulled by invisible hands, the curtain opened down the middle, drawn to hooks on each side of the doorway. Behind it, hanging lanterns gave off pale firelight that illuminated

aisles of odd merchandise.

The two of them took uneasy steps through the curtain. Was this the Neccomart's inventory? Or another department altogether, one that for whatever reason, wasn't on the directory?

Something tapped the floor beside them and cast a long shadow. Angelo and Nell turned to look.

A human skeleton stood beside them.

They jumped back with a yelp, then hooked their arms around each other.

Its skull lowered in such a way that its brow and its teeth made a sinister grin. For a moment Angelo thought it might just be a model, meant for a classroom... But not with that blue flame misting behind its eye sockets and within its ribcage.

Its jaw opened. "Good afternoon." Its voice was a growling whisper. "Thank you so much for coming to the Necromart. Would there be something I can help you with?"

"Angelo," Nell whimpered through gritted teeth. "It can talk."

"I heard it," Angelo whispered. But now what?

Just then another skeleton stepped out of one aisle, then turned and headed down another. There were more of them all over the place, as if they'd sprung out of nowhere, each with blue flames inside. Some carried

shopping baskets, others price guns, still others their own skulls. And the merchandise on the shelves looked more like tools and potions from an alchemist's lab than the inventory of an old-fashioned department store.

The skeleton next to him was waiting for an answer.

And if it wanted to hurt them, it would have done so already.

"I, um, that is we," Angelo said, "my wife and I were just looking around upstairs, and, you see, we had trouble with the elevator..."

"Say no more," the skeleton said. "It sounds like Madame Cleo was feeling silly again. She'd just gone up before you came down. No matter. You may be off the beaten path, as it were, but you are in the right place. I assure you."

Another skeleton approached. "Ah, new customers. So good to see such fresh faces. You look like such a happy young couple. Are you new to the area? Good, good. Perhaps the missus would like to take a look at our selection of crafts and gadgets and materials." Without waiting for a yes or no, the skeleton grabbed her arm and pulled her away as she screamed.

Angelo grabbed out for the one skeleton's shoulder blade, but the other, the one that had greeted him, pushed back. "As for you, sir, we have all sorts of interesting games and athletic gear for you."

"Let go of me!" Angelo said. "That's my wife! Where are you taking her? Nell! Nell!"

But the skeleton kept pushing him and steering him in the direction it wanted, with more strength than mere bones should have, and before long they were down an aisle and Nell was out of sight.

An Exit sign hung from the ceiling over the next aisle, too far out of reach. And even if he could reach it, he couldn't leave without Nell.

"You're hurting me!" Nell said. "Get your hands off!"

"Oh, but I can't let you leave without showing you what incredible tools we have."

Nell could faintly hear her husband's voice calling her name from far across the store. She tried to pull out of the skeleton's grip, but even without muscle or cartilage, it still held on with the strength of a bodybuilder.

As they went along, the air grew hotter, worse than a humid summer's day. "We just have to pass through the fire department," the skeleton said.

For a moment Nell searched for a fire engine or an axe-wielding rescue worker, but it soon became clear that wasn't what the skeleton meant. The shelves in this section were blazing with small fires of different sizes and colors, some with the red of a

campfire, some with the blue of a blowtorch, and some sparking with green and purple. On the floor bordering the aisles were beds of hot coals. The endcaps held burning objects, including statues, stacks of books, and potted plants. Even the air itself wavered in this heat.

"Let me go," Nell said, sweat pouring all over her. "I'm gonna die."

"Don't be silly," the skeleton said. "We bring customers this way all the time, and they hardly ever suffer anything more than a second-degree burn."

Nell let out a high guttural wail.

Before she knew it, though, she found the skeleton was right. They'd gotten out of the heat, away from the "fire department," away from that horrible inferno.

But now if she wanted to find her husband and escape to the elevator, she'd have to go through that agony all over again.

The skeleton pulled her into an aisle. "And here we are!"

And it showed her the tools on display. Knives with various curves in their blades. Hammers with glowing runes on their heads. Joints and plates and hinges and circuits for machines that Nell couldn't come close to deciphering the meaning of. Even Angelo would have trouble with most of this, although at the very least he'd find it fascinating. Meanwhile further

down were fabrics and art tools such as inkwells and brushes and utensils, plus scrolls of paper. For the creative skeleton, no doubt.

"Look, I'm sorry," she said, "but you've got the wrong idea about me. I'm no builder."

"But your husband is, I can tell. These would make fine gifts for him, wouldn't they?"

"That may be a bit of a stretch." God help her, she was starting to argue with disembodied bones. "What on earth does this stuff even do?"

"Well, this, for example, can enhance an object's energy efficiency tenfold." He picked up what looked like a cross between a spark plug and a pacemaker. "Just think of what he could do with that. Think how appreciative of his wife he would be. Think how... amorous."

Nell took a long backward stride. "Now where do you get off—"

"You've been trying to have a baby, haven't you?" the skeleton said. "But it's been harder than you thought, hasn't it?"

"How did you—"

"You've been wondering if it'll ever happen. If you'll ever have the family you want. If you even deserve to have a child. Or perhaps made the wrong choice of husband. Perhaps even if he made the wrong choice with you."

Nell felt an unrefreshing chill. The skeleton had described her thought

process over the last few months almost exactly, as if she'd told the skeleton herself. But she'd never spoken about this to anybody, not even Angelo. If she did, he could prove her right in the worst way, and their marriage would never survive. Whereas if she kept quiet, they could keep trying, and they'd stick together on the promise that they'd eventually conceive. She'd always thought she was being irrational, letting her worries get out of hand. Surely they hadn't been trying too long, right?

But still, the skeleton stood there, waiting for her answer.

"Why'd you have to separate us?" she said. "I'd rather be with him right now."

"Of course you do," the skeleton said. "But not without bringing a gift, surely? Something that wouldn't just show you were thinking about him, but would make his talents flourish, put him in your debt!"

She picked up one of the objects off the shelf. It had a small switch, a few gears inside, and a set of diodes along the edge. "My debt, huh?"

"If his affection ever waned, all you would have to do is hold one of these over his head, and he'd be yours as surely as he was at the wedding."

Nell flicked the switch up and down. "What does this do?"

"Funny you should ask."

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Angelo saw a racket made out of a skeletal arm, with the netting attached to fingers as long as the radius and ulna, which were strapped together for the handle. It looked and felt too unwieldy for tennis or badminton or lacrosse, so he asked the same question that Nell had asked about the thing with the switches.

"Oh, that's just some gear for one of our skeleton games. See the craftsmanship in the netting, the finesse used in fixing the bolts into the back. But I imagine you'd have to understand the game to appreciate it."

"I guess so." There were also balls and gloves and helmets and what looked like a protective cup made from an animal's skull. Some of the objects, though, seemed perfectly ordinary, like the footballs... though Angelo wasn't sure he wanted to know where the skin came from. "I'm just not sure this is really for me. Sports is more my wife's thing."

"Yes, you met her at a tailgate. Your friends had dragged you, did they not?"

"How did you know that?"

"Lucky guess. It must be difficult, isn't it, always having this one part of her life you can't really share?"

"I'd watch your step there, buddy. A couple doesn't have to have everything in common to be happy

together. I have hobbies that she doesn't care about, and that's fine."

"Of course, of course, forgive me," the skeleton said, picking up a basketball. "But what happens if you have that baby you've been trying for, and you find it shares her interests more than yours?" It began to spin the ball on its fingertip. "Whether a boy or a girl, she'll get a grip on it and never let go. He'll go to games with her. She'll join a team for her. They'll go to the backyard and play catch. When they look to one of their parents for strength, they won't turn to you. They'll turn to your wife. What kind of man will you be then?"

Angelo tightened his grip on the racket. "You're definitely out of line." And what made him especially mad was that he'd thought the same thing. That if he didn't learn to like sports and get more active, he'd risk being shut out out of his own children's lives, if he ever had any.

"If you ever had any," the skeleton said. "That seems like an especially big *if* sometimes, doesn't it? If I were in your shoes, and if sports didn't make me feel like less of a man, *that* certainly would."

Angelo put the racket back on the shelf, specifically so he wouldn't bash that smug skull off the thing's head. "I like to build," he said through clenched teeth. "It's what I did with my dad when I was a kid. We'd tinker

around with RC cars and computer equipment. I can always share that instead."

"Well, of course, sports isn't everything," the skeleton said.

"And I see you've got some board games."

"Oh yes, everything from chess to go to Ouijaland to Pentagrams to Snakes and Daggers. You could choose one of those, and use it to bond with any future son or daughter you might have. Or you could choose one of our magnificent sporting goods, the kind that would show your wife how much you understand her and care about her. The kind that she could share with your children, should you have any, and they'd all be grateful to dear old Dad for bestowing it upon them."

Angelo took another look at the balls and helmets. Some of them seemed to be for sports that he didn't even know about, so how was he supposed to know which one to pick for Nell? Those board games didn't give him the easiest feeling, either.

"And just imagine," the skeleton said. "Your dear wife might be so grateful, she'd never let you forget it in the boudoir. Hm?"

Angelo slid his foot backward, staring at the skeleton, its clawlike fingers wrapped around the basketball, its eyes blazing with that blue flame. "What would you even

know?" Angelo said. "You're not even alive." Then, he added, "Were you ever alive?"

"That's neither here nor there," the skeleton said. "The question is, do you want your wife's eternal gratitude? Or do you want her to look for a man who can satisfy her wants *and* her needs?" It leaned forward, grinning into Angelo's face. "Just how much do you want to be a father?"

"What are you really after?"

"Of course, that's if your wife's even capable of making you a father."

"All right, listen here." Angelo grabbed the skull and glared straight into its eye sockets. "You've been belittling me and my manhood ever since I came in, but I will not stand here and let you say one word against my wife. I love her, and I don't need any of your Satanic Temple reject merchandise to prove it. Show me where she is so I can leave."

"Touched a nerve, didn't I?"

"A big one."

"Angelo, I'm here."

Nell came running down from the other end of the aisle with the other skeleton behind her. She was holding a strange device covered with little lights and switches. As soon as he saw her, Angelo ran up and kissed her in a tight embrace. "You're safe," he said.

She held up the device and whispered. "I had to agree to buy this just so he'd let me come find you. He



said it enables voice commands on any machine."

He took it from her and laid it on the shelf next to the bone arm racket. "Don't need it. Come on. We're leaving." Grabbing her hand, he started leading her toward the end of the aisle. The exit was right on the other side, but the other skeleton was standing in his way.

"You can't leave yet," that skeleton said. "You haven't even seen our clothing and automotive departments."

"Not interested." Angelo shoved him aside.

Another skeleton appeared at the end. In its hand was a fireball as big as a grapefruit. "You never did take a look through the fire department." It held the fireball out to Angelo and Nell, and the two had to dodge aside and maneuver around to avoid it and get past.

Now other skeletons accumulated in the outer aisles, their bones chattering as they moved forward. "You don't want to give each other a gift?"

"You don't want to show your affection in a unique way?"

Angelo and Nell broke off in a mad dash toward the exit.

"Do you really love each other?"

"If you can't have children, what do you have left?"

"If you don't give each other gifts, what do you have left?"

They barreled through the growing crowd of skeletons, even pushing and

knocking them away. Turned out Angelo had an inner linebacker all along and didn't realize it. And Nell was naturally aggressive to begin with, and was picking out skeletons to ram with her shoulder.

"Maybe your love is a lie."

"It's only a matter of time."

The original two skeletons—Angelo wasn't sure anymore how he knew—had made it around ahead of them and linked their arms together with some others, forming a fence of bones between Angelo on one hand and the exit on the other. Seeing how hard they were fighting to keep him and Nell from leaving only made Angelo madder. Judging from the way Nell squeezed his hand, she wasn't much happier.

For a brief moment, they were exactly of one mind.

Angelo and Nell bent forward and rammed the fence of skeletons, then lifted them onto their shoulders and tossed them onto the floor behind them. They heard the splintering of bone on linoleum as they reached the door. Angelo pulled it open.

They ran up a flight of stairs for what seemed like forever, and came out into the main lobby of what had seemed like a normal department store. The girl at the desk noticed them on their way out and said, "Have a great day."

"Yeah, you too." Angelo said it

almost by reflex. Did that girl know what was under her feet? What kind of business she was working for? If nothing else, hopefully those skeletons were at least kinder to coworkers than to customers.

Angelo and Nell didn't stop moving until they got outside and found a table in front of a cafe. And even then, it was hard to feel safe. The Necromart, as they called it, was so vast that Angelo and Nell were probably still standing on top of it. Everything carried on above ground, in the shops around them, as if the Necromart weren't there.

But did they all know? Did the neighbors?

"So..." Nell panted and adjusted her hair. "Maybe this isn't the right neighborhood for us."

"I'm with you there," Angelo said. "We'll just have to keep looking, I guess."

"I like Halloween and all, but not *that* much. I just want a place with plenty of trick-or-treaters in cute costumes. That's enough."

"I still wanted to look at that house on the foot of the mountain anyway."

A server came and asked if they needed anything. Nell ordered an iced coffee to go.

When she got it and paid for it, all she did at first was stare into it. "Those

things they were saying..."

"Don't worry about it. They were just trying to mess with our heads, that's all."

Her face had still lost some of its cheer. She ran her finger on the side of the plastic cup, tracing curved lines into the dew.

Angelo laid his hand on her arm.

She said, "If it ever turned out I was infertile..."

"And what if it's me?" Angelo said. "I'd hardly be the man you thought you married."

"No, of course you would. It's my fault, it has to be."

"Even if it was, you're still Nell. You're still my whole life. But if it's me..."

"Get real, Angelo," Nell said. "There's still nobody I'd rather be with." She gave him a proud, solid kiss. "Do you really mean all that mushy stuff?"

"Of course I do. We just fought through a skeleton army together. If we can do that, we can do anything."

She let out a chuckle and took a sip through her straw. "I thought I'd never be able to get all that out," she said. "At least we got one good thing out of this."

"Just don't ask me go back down there and thank them."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

## The End

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Scott is a graduate of the University of Tennessee, and he lives in Chattanooga. He is currently pursuing a Master's in Education with the goal of becoming a teacher.

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