

Tickity-Tock

by Joseph Conat

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Me and Finn caught the call about 1:38 a.m. Mugging turned to murder, the dispatcher said. They never get anything right. I clicked the car to manual and let Finn take the wheel. She's a better driver.

The scene was at the mouth of an alley three doors down from some shitty hipster club called "Legba's." Bad taste; the place was kitty-corner from a Louisiana Orthodox Hounfour. Bet the rum was cheap, though.

Beat cops had it roped off. An ambulance added its strobes to the disco ambience on the street. CSU hadn't made it out yet. I was glad; having those geeks whine over my shoulder as I walked the scene made my teeth grind. We flashed the shields and went under the ropes.

Victim was male. Dressed in a pleather coat, pleated chinos, South Korean knock-off Converse. Half the face was gone, one eye staring up, unblinking, into the rain and night.

"It ate him!" There was a girl, presumably the hipster corpse's girlfriend, sitting on the curb, sobbing. A scratchy EMT blanket was wrapped around her shoulders. Half a metric ton of mascara cascaded down her face. She was shaking and keening as a harried medic tried to examine her. She kept flinching away, batting at the medic's hands. "It ate him!" she cried again.

I let Finn go talk to the girl. I was more comfortable with the body, anyway.

As I said, half the face was gone. The ragged edges of the skin indicated that something had, indeed, eaten him. I grunted.

I felt Finn come up behind me, look over my shoulder. "Anything?" I asked her.

"Waiting for the sedatives to kick in."

I pointed at the body. "See it?"

She whistled. "Yeah. Shit."

I stood up, walked around, head down. As I searched, I pulled out my two-way, keyed dispatch. "Dispatch, L-27; looks like we got a 1704."

"Acknowledged, L-two-seven. Will dispatch a Z-Unit."

"Yeah." I went back to searching.

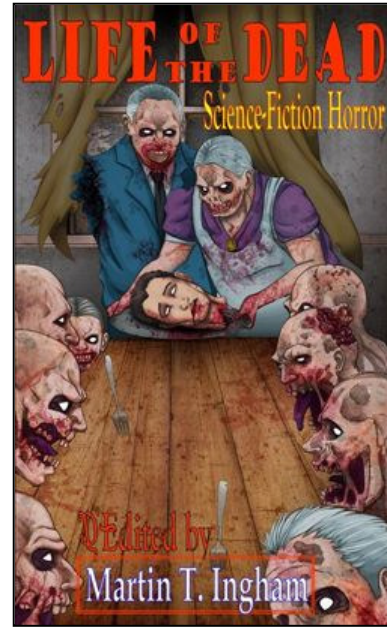
Found it in the gutter. I pulled out my phone, took a panorama of the scene. Poking at the screen, I placed an ARO pointing at my find.

"Casing," I said. I heard Finn shuffling in the alley the other way.

"Finger," she said.

"Huh?" I headed for her. I walked over to where she crouched in the alley, stepping over the body on my way. Finn had her phone out, too. She pointed at what she'd found.

A finger, covered with scabrous gray flesh, lay near a trash bin. It twitched.



"See it?" Finn asked. I looked closer.

A sharp bit of copper wire stuck out of the finger, out from the stump of the knuckle.

"Tickity-tock," I said. I pulled out my two-way again. "Dispatch, this is L-27. Tell the Z-Unit to try for a capture; let us take a look at it."

"Will do, L-27."

"Detectives?" It was the EMT. We wandered over.

The girl was more relaxed now, practically catatonic. "She ready?" Finn asked.

"Maybe. That's not why I called you, though." The medic peeled back the blanket, then the dark-stained shirtsleeve. A semi-circle of flesh was torn from the girl's shoulder.

"Shit," Finn breathed.

"Yeah," I said. "Too bad. She looked nice."

* * *

Last call had happened, I guess. The uniforms were directing stumbling jackholes away from us and our crime scene.

"Ricky and me had a fight," the girl mumbled. Her ID said her name was Corinne Fleischman. I chuckled at the appropriateness of the name. I'm not good with social graces.

Her purse also held a little .22. Finn sniffed it, bagged it for evidence.

"He was leavin'. I thought. I thought he was leavin'. I came out to yell at him, an' also he had the keys." Corinne took a deep, shaky breath. "It grabbed him."

"Uh-huh," I said. I was looking at my phone. I mean, I was recording what she said, but I was also playing *Four Pictures, 1 Word*. That game is addictive. "So who shot him?" I asked.

"Whuh?" Corinne blurted. Finn snorted.

"Yeah," I said. "Someone put a bullet in Ricky's head. There's a hole and everything. Cyan!"

"Cyan? What?" Even Finn cocked an eye at me. I pointed at my phone.

"Cyan," I explained, pointing at my phone. "All the things are blue."

Finn looked over my shoulder. "Oh. Yeah, I see it."

"See, what happened," Corinne butted in. "What happened was, see, the thing grabbed him..."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"Blonde," Finn said, helping out with my game.

"I should have got that," I muttered.

"...and I, I have this gun for, for protection..."

"Sure."

"...and I, I shot it."

"Were you drinking?" Finn asked.

"I, yeah. I had a few, yeah, I mean, it's a bar..."

"So, you were drinking and you tried to defend your boyfriend, but you shot him."

"I... yeah."

"Sure, that checks out," Finn said. "Cheese." I typed it in.

"Did you hire the tickity?" Finn asked.

Corinne blanched. I thought so, at least. Hard to tell, what with the shock and the dying and all. "The... what?"

"The tickity," I said. I looked up from my phone and hit the girl with my hardest cop eye. "The remote-controlled zombie."

"Um..."

"Shit," Finn sighed. She was losing patience.

"Hey, Corinne," I said, snapping my fingers. She looked at me through teary, bleary eyes. "If I go into Legba's, you know, start asking questions, pull the tapes from their cameras, the cameras from the traffic light, the ATM over there, am I going to see you in there with Ricky the

Human Ricotta over there for, like, a long time? Or am I going to see him with another girl and then stepping out for a smoke? You see what I'm getting at?"

"...no..." But I could see she did.

"So, Tricky Ricky's in there, chatting up some, uh..."

"Skank," Finn supplied.

"...skank, thank you, and you know about it. He's been acting funny for, let's see... three weeks, right?"

Corinne nodded. I couldn't tell if her sweat was because of stress or fever or what. I went with stress.

"Yeah," Finn jumped in. "So, you asked around, got an idea what was going on. You followed him. Maybe you had the gun, maybe you got it after you confirmed your suspicions."

"...after..." Corinne muttered.

"Do we charge her now?" Finn asked.

"No point." I turned to the EMT. "You're going to want to get her strapped down on a gurney in a moment." The EMT and her partner scrambled for the back of the ambulance. I put my attention back on Corinne. Her gaze had gone distant, wide-eyed. She was shaking, and not out of fear of the long arm of the law. We didn't have long.

"Where'd you hire the tickity?!" I asked again. I put some iron behind it. Her eyes snapped to me.

"T... t-t..."

And then she keeled over.

The turn was different for everyone. Some took a couple days. I saw one once took 90 seconds, I swear to God.

Finn and me helped the EMTs slap the ex-Corinne onto the gurney and strap it down. "Need me to sign anything?" I asked them.

"Got a card? Administration'll call you, probably." I gave them my card. On the gurney, Corinne twitched and moaned, opened its eyes. Its skin was stone-grey, the eyes already filming over. The male EMT drew some blood for proof, then they started loading the gurney into the ambulance, avoiding the thing's straining jaws.

Corinne'd be in the hospital's crematorium within the hour.

* * *

Blame Hitler. Or maybe Karl Haushofer or Sven Hedin. Whoever first gave the secret of creating Ro-langs to ol' Adolf.

March, 1945. As U.S. troops forded the Rhine, they met the first of the Reich's last-ditch wonder projects: the Armee der Toten. A bunch of risen troops, mainly German, shambling through the forests. Machine guns dangled uselessly from their stupid, zombie arms. Zombies can't shoot; zombies just shuffle and chomp and scare the bejeesus out of you.

Still, it was neat enough that the Allies made sure to grab the secret during Project Paperclip. So the U.S. started seeing what they could do with zombie troops. So did the Russians and the Brits, naturally. Real interesting conflicts for a while.

But zombies are bullshit, militarily. As mentioned, their primary activities, i.e. shuffling and chomping, do exactly jack and/or shit versus flamethrowers, artillery, and a guy who can run and shoot at the same time. Still, turning your dead into pack animals and bullet soakers for the rest of their term of enlistment made for a great savings. Also delayed paying out death benefits, 'til the Supreme Court stepped in.

Naturally, such interesting technology eventually trickled down to the private markets. There was a brief surge of heavy zombie use until the Pennsylvania thing in '68. But you can watch the documentary for that. That's when somebody came up with the tickity.

See, your basic zombie just follows what passes for instinct in its dead little brain, and that instinct is "wander aimlessly until you bump into the flesh of the living, which you will eat."

But you get yourself a little basic neurosurgeon, some copper wire, a shitty remote control... bang, you can steer the thing wherever you like. Can't make it do anything other than walk where you want it to, can't make it hold a gun or target a particular guy, but a steerable undead monster can still be useful.

Anything useful is useful criminally. Soon enough there were add-ons and advancements. More and more cunningly helpful. And, once zombies became illegal in 1972... well, if zombies are outlawed, only outlaws have zombies.

Except for certain religious exemptions, of course.

"To find a tickity, just look for the nearest zombie warehouse," I said, walking across the intersection. Finn shrugged and followed, bopping our preliminary reports to CSU via her phone as we went.

With Louie Orthodox, normal church hours didn't apply. Still, I didn't want to interrupt a ritual or anything. I tried to remember what day it was.

"Fete Ogoun," Finn said.

"Thanks." I knocked on the door.

It took four more series of knocks before I finally heard somebody coming. There was a rattle as the door was unlocked and opened.

"Good eve—" I started, then stopped. I was staring at a handsome black face with blank, grey-filmed eyes.

"Ah, fuck." I snapped my fingers in front of its face. "Go get the houngan," I told it.

Silently, it stepped aside, letting us in, then wandered back into the church. Hopefully, it was getting its master. Me and Finn waited.

Eventually another handsome black face came back to us. This one's eyes were more toward the tired—red and bleary.

"Good evening, sir," I started again, showing my badge. "Sorry to wake you."

"We were feasting Ogoun," he grated. "He showed us much. Prophecy and power."

"Did he show you the zombie attack across the street?" I asked.

The tired eyes widened. "No," he admitted.

"Well, great. More work for us."

Finn stepped in to play the heavy bureaucrat. "Mr..."

"Thompson," he answered.

"Mr. Thompson, we need to see your zombies and all associated paperwork."

"Of course." He led us back into the hounfour. It was neater than I expected. I expected empty rum bottles and flour all over the place. I'd heard these fetes could get wild.

I admit it, I don't go to church much. At all.

He showed us into his office and we waited while he rooted around in a battered filing cabinet. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I'm new to the hounfour and I'm still finding—ah!" He pulled out a tatty manila folder marked "Current" thick with paperwork and handed it to Finn. She leafed through it.

"Ten right now," Thompson said. "Seven Type II's, three Type III."

Type I was your typical shambling corpse, mindless, hungry. Type II was the Vodoun variant: vacant and unthinking, sure, but directed by its master via some unduplicatable process.

Both Type I and Type II died before getting up and walking again. Type II's usually bequeathed their crappy zombie-ness to the church at death. You got some old codgers wandering around certain parts of town, fetching groceries and shit for their master. Type III's were more temporarily dead indentured servants. They owed the church something, or were being punished for some ecclesiastic misdeed. They were zombified for a period of time, again through some mystical and difficult to replicate process, but reverted to fully alive once they'd paid their dues. It was a legal gray area; setting aside the difficulty of prosecuting for "temporary murder," there were currently two cases in federal courts winding their way up to the Supreme Court regarding

cruel punishment versus First Amendment rights. In the meantime, at least there was paperwork.

All this was just bullshit, anyway. Our zed was a Type I or I'd eat my own brains. But if you want to find a zombie, it can help to ask a zombie master.

Finn went to count the zombies Thompson had in his back rooms. I hung back with Thompson in his office.

"These the only zombies in the neighborhood?" I asked. Subtle as a brick to the daddy sack.

Thompson shrugged. "So far as I know."

"C'mon. We're not after you. Ours was a biter. Ate half a guy's face." Thompson winced. "We know you don't work with those. But maybe you know a guy, needed some advice. Maybe where to get a tickity."

Thompson grimaced. "Tickitys. Replicating the will of the bokor with shit from Radio Shack. It's a whi—" He stopped and stared at me stone-faced.

"No, it's cool," I said. "We white men steal a lot of shit. Hey, by the way, thanks for the blues."

He didn't laugh. Nobody gets me.

"Anywho," I said "know anybody around here does tickitys? I promise I won't tell anyone you told me."

"The church has its own way of dealing with those who meddle unknowing with the realm of the dead," he growled.

"So, no, then. Fine."

Finn chose that fortuitous moment to return from her audit. "All clear," she said.

"Cool. Cool, cool, cool," I said. "We might double-check this down at the registrar, you understand," I told Thompson.

"Go ahead," he snarled. "You'll find it all correct."

"Great." I turned to go.

Thompson had one of his II's show us out. When we reached the door Finn said to it "I hope that Samedi digs your grave soon." It bowed and shambled off.

"What the hell was that? You practice?" I asked Finn.

"I read a lot. Anything from the houngan?"

"Just posturing."

As we headed back to the car my two-way chirped. "Yes, Mother?" I answered it.

"Lincoln Two-Seven, this is Sergeant Deacon with the Z-Unit." Another humorless voice. Cops are all steel, no silly putty.

"Go ahead, Sergeant."

"We think we have your zed." He gave me an address about five blocks from where we were.

"Great, thanks." I grinned at Finn and we hopped in the car.

* * *

"So, let me see if I've got all the pieces straight," Finn said as the car drove itself to the Z-unit. Helicopters droned overhead. 1704's are taken pretty seriously.

"Shoot," I answered.

"Ex-Corinne thinks her boy Ricky is dicking around," she started.

I laughed. "I see what you did there."

She snorted. "Anyway, she gets a gun, 'cause she wants to cap the fucker herself, but hires a tickity for evidence removal."

"Yeah," I said. "If she'd been thinking straight, there's two ways she could have gone with it. One, like she did, 'It got him, I tried to kill it, I can't shoot for shit.'"

"And two," Finn cut in "'It got him, he turned, I had to kill him boo-hoo-hoo.'"

"That's about it," I said. "If she'd gone with option two, she might have gotten away with

it better. Killing a zed is legal, if she can prove he turned before she shot him."

"So, she shot first, you think?"

"I think either way they're both dead. I'm more concerned with who's making tickitys around here."

"That's kind of Vice's area, right? Or Major Crimes?"

"Yeah, but we're here."

The car rounded a corner and pulled up behind the big, black APC that the Z-Unit drove around in. The memory of '68 was in Z-Unit's DNA.

A Z-Unit foot soldier, trying to look badass in his bulky armor, waved us to yet another alley. I sighed and went in.

Three guys surrounded the zombie, one holding an animal control shock loop that was snugged tight around the zombie's neck. Every once in a while he'd give the zed a zap just to watch it twitch, then they'd all laugh.

I went to the one looking bored and leaning against the wall. You could smell "sergeant" on him even before you saw the stripes on his shoulder. "Sergeant Deacon?" I asked anyway.

"You must be L-27," he yawned.

"Yeah, I'm Detective Benson, this is Detective Finnerty. Mind if we take a gander at your catch?"

"Be my guest. Don't get too close," he warned. Like that wasn't self-evident.

I stepped over to the two chuckleheads playing Zappy Zombie. I pulled a penlight out and shone it on the zombie. It had been a black man, once, maybe mid-fifties when he kicked. You had to judge by the hair; death and decomposition had a way of making all races look alike. Chucklehead Uno hit the dance button again. As the thing did the electric mambo I caught a glint of reflected light from one side of its face. I squinted at it. Damn if somebody hadn't shoved a camera, probably a webcam, in one of its eye-sockets. Ah, the Internet age. "Show me its hands?"

Chucklehead Dos moved in, grabbed the zombie's arms. The zombie lunged for him, started gnawing on a plastic shoulder pad like a puppy with a shoe. The Z-Unit ignored it and lifted its bony arms. Sure enough, missing the middle finger on its left hand.

"I think that's our boy," I said. "Do me a favor, see if you can dig out a control unit from its skull before you burn it."

I felt the sergeant move up behind me. "If it's a tickity, we gotta bring it to the morgue and let the experts take it apart," he informed me.

"New procedure?"

"Yeah." He sighed.

"Well, have fun." I pulled out another of my business cards, tucked it into the zombie's back pocket.

"Did he get a lot of your vic over yonder?" the sergeant asked.

"Half a face. I don't know how peckish the thing was beforehand."

Finn and I headed to the mouth of the alley. We heard a yelp and a cop yelling "Goddamn it!"

We turned around. One of the Z-cops was backed against the alley wall while the other was holding down the zapper watching the zed do an involuntary tarantella. Sergeant Deacon was hovering near the cop against the wall. "It get you?" Deacon asked.

"I don't think so." The cop peeled off his gauntlet, undid the straps on his padding, rolled back his sleeve. "No. No, it didn't get me." His voice dripped with relief.

"Let's get this thing to the morgue," Deacon ordered. The relieved cop got his gear back in order, pulled his gauntlet back on. He stepped up to the zombie, pulled back a clenched fist.

"I wouldn't—" Finn said. The cop ignored her and sank his fist into the thing's gut. Literally. Like, halfway up to the elbow.

"Jesus," Finn said. The sound the cop's hand made as he pulled it out of the zombie could

only be spelled "Sssschllllorp!" Finn and I turned to head out.

"Uh... detectives?"

"Jesus!" Finn said again. It'd been a couple hours, she wanted her coffee fix. We turned again.

"You, uh... you said the zed ate half the vic's face?" Deacon asked.

"Yeah, what about it?"

"*Just* the face?"

I felt something in my gut go cold. "As far as I know..." I strode back to the zombie.

Deacon was shining his light on the alley ground. Amid the trash and piss puddles lay the detritus of our zombie pal's feast. The beam was centered dead on a couple of fingers.

Finn was already on her two-way. "Dispatch, L-27; put me through to the Forster Street CSU guys."

"You got a signal scanner on you?" I asked Deacon.

"Phillips, go get the scanner out of the car," Deacon barked. Fisty McCop, presumably Phillips, sprinted out of the alley.

Finn came up to me, two-way dangling in her limp hand at her side. "No fingers," she said. Her voice wasn't so much calm as dead.

Phillips came back holding a black ruggedized wifi scanner. Deacon grabbed it, turned it on, waved it near the zombie's head.

He slammed back the visor on his riot helmet. His face was white in the dim light filtering from the street. He shook his head.

"Huh," Finn said. There was a nearly subsonic quaver in her voice. "So, it wasn't headed back home."

"Nope."

"Whoever runs this bad boy cut it loose when we showed up."

Deacon was practically screaming into his two-way. "We need full containment protocols *now!* 1800! Code 1800!"

I could feel sweat trickling down the inside of my arm. "I guess this has gone federal."

"Yeah. Terrorism."

"Releasing a WMD."

Finn chucked me on the shoulder. "C'mon. We gotta get back to the precinct."

* * *

The precinct was in muted chaos by the time we got in. An 1800 triggers a mass bowel-loosening in everyone. Finn and I got to our paperwork and waited for the Feds.

The next two hours were a cavalcade of FBI, DHS, HHS and gallons of shitty cop coffee. We went over every freaking detail from when we caught the call to when Deacon called the 1800. Maps were drawn, Z-cops and CDC in armored hazmat gear were going door-to-door. Hospitals were on super-ultra "*no, we're not fucking kidding*" alert.

Everyone told themselves that there was only one suspected victim loose out there. That he'd turn up in an ER and be... taken care of. That it wouldn't be '68 again.

The tapes from the traffic camera and the ATM showed about fourteen minutes between Corinne shooting Ricky and our arrival.

Ricky, we presumed from his clothes, exited Legba's at 1:16 a.m. He went to the corner of the building, right next to the alley, and lit a smoke. 1:19 a.m. Corinne enters from the left.

"Bus stop around the corner," Finn muttered.

"At quarter after 1 in the morning? Taxi. Get some coffee, then get calling the hacks."

"Yeah," Finn sighed. She wandered off.

Corinne and Ricky argued for four and a half minutes. No sound, naturally, but the gist was fairly obvious. "'You bastard! Who is she?! Is she that whore from work?' 'Don't you call her a whore!'"

"What are you doing?" Finn asked. She set a cup of coffee down in front of me, sipped her own.

"Narrating." I pointed at the screen. Rick had obviously said something terribly cutting. Corinne stumbled away, sobbing, then paused. Dug around in her purse. Pulled a familiar shape from the bag. Stepped back to Ricky.

"Here comes our climax," Finn snorted. I paused the playback. "A buck says he goes for bluster."

Finn shook her head. "See his shoes, back there? Low rent hipster, petty crimes. Weed dealer when he's not detailing cars. He folds, begs."

"Let's find out." I started the video.

Ninety seconds later, Ricky hit the pavement and Finn handed me a dollar.

"The coat," I explained. "Thinks of himself as an artistic hustler, man not to be fucked with."

"Yeah."

Corinne dithered. "If she's got half a brain in her head," Finn commented "she's thinking it's almost last call. Any second now, that sidewalk is going to be covered with witnesses."

Corinne pulled out her phone. "Hey," I said. "We weren't completely stupid, were we? We told the hospital to set aside her effects, right? Like good detectives?"

Finn already had her phone out. "This is Detective Finnerty at the 11th Precinct," she said. "Put me through to the Morgue. Now!"

"Now this is interesting," I said. The zombie shambled out of the alley. "Quick. She set this up."

"Yeah," Finn said, covering the phone's mouthpiece. "That zed was set to go."

We watched as Corinne stood there like a dickhead while the zombie came from the alley and went after Ricky's corpse, then noticed Corinne standing there looking like dinner. "Not exactly a master criminal," Finn said. The zombie went for the girl, there was a struggle. Then she shoved it away and made another call.

"That's probably when she called us," I said. Finn wasn't paying attention, she was using her "I will cut you!" voice on someone at the hospital. On the tape, the zed twitched away, still under radio control. Sometime after, obviously, the tickity's operator cut the strings and bailed.

"They got the stuff," Finn told me, hanging up. I stood, grabbed my jacket off the back of my chair. "Let's go."

We were nearly to the door when a woman in a sharp suit stepped in our path. I looked her up and down. Short, aggressively styled blonde hair on a short, aggressive woman. Her whole attitude was "I've dealt with enough people underestimating me, I'm gonna kick your teeth down your throat as a way to say 'Hello.'"

"And where do you think you're going?" she asked. I saw our captain standing off to the side, looking tired and unhappy.

"Donut run," I said, moving to go past her. "You like glazed, cake, jelly-filled...?"

Sharp-Suit Lady produced her badge. "Special Agent in Charge Lentzer," she identified herself. "F..."

"Yeah, eff you, too," I snapped.

"...B.I.," she finished, her tone notably lacking in patience. "This case..."

"...is federal jurisdiction," Finn interrupted. "We know. But which Feds?"

"Hm?"

Finn gestured around the bullpen at the clusters of suits scattered pseudo-randomly throughout. "I see you G-men, CDC, DHS... I think that colonel's with Army CID..."

"Who's got priority here?" I asked the captain.

He shrugged. "They're still pissing that out."

"Well, you let us know how the dick-measuring contest goes," Finn said, brushing

Lentzer aside and opening the door. I followed her.

"I got five bucks on you," I promised Lentzer. I'm pretty sure her hand twitched in the direction of her sidearm, but I was out the door and gone.

* * *

"Maybe they'll be in the ER," Finn said. As usual, she was reading my mind. We came up on a roadblock, our third. I turned on the flashers, held my badge up to the window, and we got waved through.

The alert had gone out an hour ago. Not a top-priority alert, but cautionary. *No need to panic, folks, just call if you see any undead shambling around, report any contacts, and be prepared to shove a garden spade through your loved ones' heads.* Cops and National Guard were doing their best to keep things calm, keep traffic moving. At this hour, it wasn't too bad. When folks got up for work, checked their phones, turned on their TVs, things would start to hop. I went back to brooding.

Fourteen minutes. Corinne shoots her cheatin' chap, zombie eats him and her, Corinne dials 9-1-1.

Eleven minutes later, Finn and I pull up.

Another, what, twenty, thirty minutes talking to voodoo priests and wandering around?

How many people were out and about? How many homeless, how many junkies, whores, just regular folk walking to the store for a pack of smokes? Whose fingers were in that zombie's gut? How many people did the new victim run across?

Where the hell were they?

"Yeah, we'll check in at the ER first," I said. But something in my gut told me it was a waste of time.

* * *

As we pulled into the ER lot, a black SUV, blue lights flashing, pulled in behind us.

Finn and I sighed in unison and got out, headed back to the SUV. SAC Lentzer stepped out of her land yacht, smirking.

Finn handed me a \$5 bill. Lentzer's smirk faded.

"Your lucky night," Finn said.

"You'd think," I replied.

Lentzer was scowling so hard, I thought her face would implode. "Let's try some cooperation," she growled. Her tone was so grudging, you'd think I'd slapped her puppy.

"Sure," Finn said. "You can tag along."

Inside, all seemed calm. Couple drunks, couple stabbings. But triage never was so quick, or thorough. Everyone walked in that door for treatment got ushered right over to a bed to be examined for bites. I think they had orderlies doing it, too.

Lentzer took charge, striding imperiously to the desk, badge in hand. "I'm Special Agent—"

Finn shouldered in next to her, badge also in hand. "Morgue?" she asked.

"Down the hall, turn right, past the cafeteria, left, elevator to the basement," the nurse rattled off. Thank god for Finn. I was lost just trying to remember the damn directions.

Finn led us through the maze. "Hey, a minotaur," I grumbled, but nobody paid attention to me.

The basement was cold, as you'd expect. A bored intern sat behind a desk, trying to coolly ignore the armed National Guardsman standing next to the morgue door. A suspiciously new-looking padlock kept the swinging double doors shut.

"11th Precinct," I said. "You got something for us?"

"Huh? Oh! Yeah!" The intern opened a desk drawer, rummaged for a second, pulled out a white plastic bag. Finn took it, dumped it on the desk. Purse, wallet, lipstick, etc.

"Where's the phone?" Finn asked.

"The what? Phone?" the intern babbled.

"Oh, my God, this case!" I groaned. I grabbed him by the shirt and hauled him half over the desk. Finn calmly started collecting the late Corinne's things and putting them back in the bag.

"Listen..." I checked the intern's ID badge "Brad, do you know what the actual fuck is going on out there?"

"I, uh..." His eyes skittered to the Guardsman, who stood stoic at the door. I could swear I saw his lips twitch, though, trying not to smile.

"Yeah, Brad," I said. "That nice Guardsman there is authorized to shoot you in the face for fucking with us. Big ol' emergency out there. This lady..." Finn pointed at Lentzer "has the authority to order that nice Guardsman to shoot you in the face. We're not here for lipstick, is what I'm sayin'. Now *where is the fucking phone?!*" I shook him like a maraca.

"Ow!" he yelped. "I bith mah dung!"

"He what?" I asided to Finn.

"He bit his tongue."

"Good." I let the little shit go and he slumped in his chair, hand covering his mouth.

"Ah dun' knah..." he started. I gestured to the Guardsman. "Shoot him in the face," I said. The Guardsman obligingly stepped forward, cradling his AR-15.

"No!" Brad squealed. "I thold it!"

"To who?!"

"Whom," Finn corrected. Lentzer actually snickered.

"Jimmy. He works in the cafeteria."

"Great. Thanks." I pulled a couple zip-ties from my pocket, grabbed Brad's wrists, zipped him to the desk. "We'll be back for you later."

Finn and Lentzer were already at the elevator. I turned to go and the Guardsman snapped me a salute. I'm pretty sure I saw him wink, too.

* * *

Jimmy was comparatively easy, once we found him. The instant Finn showed her badge, he sighed and pulled the phone out of his pocket. "How much trouble am I in?"

"We got bigger fish to fry," I said, taking the phone. It was a newer smartphone, in a hot pink case covered with fake rhinestones. I cocked an eye at him. "Really?"

"For my girlfriend."

"Save up and buy one like a man," Lentzer said. She reached for it, but I passed it to Finn. She had the call log up in two seconds.

"There," she said, tapping the phone. The number popped up, ready to call. She handed the phone to Lentzer, who already had her (matte-black, business-like) phone out.

"Chase this number down, top priority," she barked. We were already headed out.

* * *

In the lot, we huddled between our patrol car and the SUV. Lentzer was shouting into her phone, one hand covering her ear. That was because a handful of helicopters were flying overhead.

"Apaches?" Finn asked.

"I dunno," I answered. "Too dark to see."

"Well, fuck." Agent Lentzer turned to us, clicking off her phone. "No address, no name. Disposable phone."

"Worth a shot," I said.

"Don't you have any juice with the NSA?" Finn asked.

"Don't need it," Lentzer answered. "State of Emergency. Lemme talk to the DHS, see if we can follow the cell towers or something."

I pulled open the passenger door on the patrol car and slumped in. Dug my phone out of my jacket pocket and glanced at it. 5:17 a.m. Christ, I was tired. I closed my eyes. I'm just resting

them, I told myself.

I dreamt of them. Line upon line of moaning, rasping, ticking wind up soldiers with blood on their chins and gristle caught in their teeth, marching and moaning. They saw something, something that made them open their hungry maws and stretch out their rotted hands, sackcloth fingers and groan.

Finn. It was Finn and her gun was empty and she was cornered in an alley and she had no way to run.

In the middle of it all, a stage magician grinned like a skull. "It's Saturday!" he crowed.

Finn's pleading eyes locked with mine and she screamed—

My eyes snapped open. How long was I out? Phone said 5:24 a.m.

Shit.

I needed more coffee. My sour stomach disagreed, but I let the brain's desperate need for chemical stimulus override that. I opened the car door and leaned out. "Hey, guys, who's up for—?" I stopped.

I examined the thought. *That is a thin fucking thread*, I told myself. *Yeah, I know*, myself said back. *But it kinda feels...right. Doesn't it? A little?*

Yeah, I begrudgingly told myself. *Yeah, it kinda does.*

"Up for what?" Finn asked. Her eyes were narrow. She could read me like a billboard. "What have you got?"

"Coffee. There's a place down the block from that Louie O church."

Finn strode around the car, hopped in the driver's side. "I know just the place."

* * *

"Tell me about Louie O," I said. I was using my phone's browser, scrolling through some search results.

"What do you want to know?" Finn asked.

"I don't know, just talk."

"Okay." She took a moment, thinking, swerved around a car parked in the middle of the lane—looked like a family packing their shit to bug out of the city.

Lentzer's black SUV caught up to us, blue lights adding their azure stutter to our own flashers. We hadn't said anything to her when we left. She must have gotten the hint when we just up and drove away. I looked forward to her sunny disposition when we stopped.

"Well, you know, voodoo, or 'vodoun' kinda went underground end of the nineteenth through the early twentieth. End of the war, though, when we all found out zombies are real, the practice popped back up, kind of a 'Hey, we've been doing that the whole time!'"

"Okay," I muttered.

"Somewhere in there it got formalized, went through the usual schisms. Louisiana Orthodox claims they have the best, closest relationship to vodoun as it was practiced down in the bayou, after the Haitian Revolution. There's also Louisiana Reformed, and a bunch of 'originals' practice the stuff straight out of Africa."

She passed an olive-drab covered truck on the left. I kept looking at my phone.

"What are you looking at?" Finn asked.

"Obituaries. Tell me about Type III's."

"Okay, well, vodoun has a history with zombies. These days, sometimes when a congregant dies, they kind of deed their body to the church. Bokor rises 'em up, they act as servants, general labor, until they fall apart."

"Until Samedi digs their grave."

"Right. Baron Samedi is the lord of death. Ultimately, he decides when you're really, most sincerely dead. Those are Type II's."

"I asked about..."

"Yeah, I'm getting there. So, if there's a conflict between members of the church, or a

member *and* the church, the houngan can decide that the guilty party can pay kind of a restitution by serving as a zombie for a while. There's a process, a secret process, that, um... I don't know. Kills them, maybe? Then they're a zombie until they're released and brought back to life? I'm not sure."

"Are we sure they're dead?"

"Oh, yeah. No heartbeat, no breathing. They're dead. And then they're not."

"Every time?"

Finn glanced at me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, does it always work? The waking up?"

She furrowed her brow. "You know... I don't know."

"Right."

Finn pulled up in front of the church. We hopped out just as Lentzer pulled in behind us, popping out like a Jack-In-The-Box intent on beating the shit out of the kid winding the crank.

"What the hell, you guys?!" she bellowed.

I headed across the street. Finn and Lentzer trotted to keep up. "Where are you going?" Finn asked.

I pointed at a shop about a quarter block down. Even at this early hour, its lights were on and the neon "Open" sign flashed, spilling scarlet on the street. "Coffee," I said. "I told you."

* * *

Coffees in hand, we went back to the church. Mounting the steps, I put a hand on Finn's arm, held her back.

"Let's let Scully have a turn," I said.

Lentzer strode up to the door and hammered on it. She had an impressive knock for someone who probably wore kid-sized sneakers to the gym. Not too long after, the door opened.

No zombie doorman this time. Mr. Thompson stared wildly at Lentzer, then over her at us. He sagged, and was opening the door and stepping aside before Lentzer had a chance to use her G-mojo on him. We followed him inside and back to his cluttered office.

I noticed the wastebasket was full. There was a disposable lighter on the desk. I tsked. "Contemplating a little administrative cleanup? Get rid of the redundant paperwork?" I asked.

"Most people use a shredder," Finn chimed in. "Doesn't stink up the place as much."

"Oh, but then you'd have all those bits left over," I reminded her.

"*Incriminating* bits," Finn said, as though the light was just dawning.

"I think what Laurel and Hardy are getting at," Lentzer growled. "Is that you appear to have something to hide."

"I think we're more like Rowan and Martin," I said.

"Which one are you?" Finn asked.

"I dunno. Which one's the dumb one?"

"We are in a state of emergency," Lentzer continued to Thompson, masterfully controlling her mirth at our antics. "Federal emergency. Any second now *habeas corpus* will be formally suspended. Hear what I'm saying?"

Thompson nodded. "It wasn't me," he said. He sounded as tired and beat as I felt.

"You said you were new here," I reminded him. "Problem with your predecessor?"

Thompson nodded.

"Had a few Type IIIs you couldn't wake up? Maybe a few *unregistered* Type IIIs?"

"He was a bokor, a sorceror, as well as houngan. As bokor, he served the loa with both hands."

"Which means...?" Lentzer asked.

"He was a sorceror for hire," Thompson explained. "He worked with both the light and the dark. Though, lately..."

"So," Finn jumped in. "He has a bunch of Type IIIs, some of which he shouldn't have..."

"He would give the punishment of the church for money. A lover, a business partner, they might feel slighted or cheated..." Thompson said.

"Our boy would zombify their enemies for cash."

Thompson nodded. "Whether or not it was just was not his concern."

"But some of them stayed dead," Lentzer followed along.

"And he raised 'em up and sold 'em to a clockmaker, who made 'em into tickitys," I came in for the grand finale.

"Where is this bokor?" Lentzer snarled.

"Dead. Fully and completely," Thompson replied.

"The church has its ways..." I sighed.

"Where did he live? We have to find those tickitys!" Lentzer's voice held a slightly crazed quaver. I think that was scarier than suspension of Thompson's constitutional rights, or the guns prominently displayed on our hips.

Thompson gave us an address. As we ran out, Lentzer was on her phone, calling a raid on the place.

* * *

Federal Z-Unit cops give municipal Z-s a massive case of penis-proxy envy.

These guys were decked in state-of-the-next-art gear, dripping with armor and munitions like I'd never seen. All black, of course; they looked like Iron Man gone goth.

Behind them were the CDC specialists, clad like ghosts made out of balloons. And behind them, mixed with the National Guard, were our Z-Units, casting longing glances at the big boys, looking like shabby grocery store Halloween-costume knock-offs.

All of this was taking place in front of a shitty one-story house in an equally shitty neighborhood. The sun was up; it looked like a nice day, weather-wise. A few folks were loading their cars, preparing for impromptu vacations away from here. A few more were sitting on their porches, watching the fun with slack, almost bored, expressions. Some drank coffee. More drank beer.

I spotted Deacon near the perimeter. He was supposed to be keeping the crowd back, but the crowd was doing that on its own. You couldn't have gotten a more populace barren area if you'd told them we were giving out free leprosy.

"Hey," Deacon hailed me. "I hear you ran this fucker down. Nice work."

"Thanks," I said. "But he's not the big fish. Honestly, we're going to need this whole circus somewhere else."

"Oh," Deacon said. "You mean a federal operation is a complete waste of fucking time? I'm shocked," he deadpanned. I liked this guy more and more.

"Best we're going to get is the clockmaker's name and address. Then the shitshow goes on the road."

Lentzer was in tense conversation with some other dark-suited government drone—I guessed DHS. Finn sighed and tossed her empty coffee cup away.

I caught her eye, gestured with my head. We sauntered as chalant-bereft as we could to be closer to the Iron Men Zs.

Lentzer appeared at my elbow. "Fucking Homeland Security," she seethed. "They're gonna shit all over this, claim it smells like peach cobbler." She nudged me, like suddenly we were old pals. "What's your plan?"

I shrugged. "Wait for them to break down the door, wander in during the inevitable 'hup hup!' chaos, see if I can find the clockmaker."

"Standard operating procedure," Finn remarked. She yawned.

One of the Iron Men unshouldered a slender tube, moved in front of the door. "What, are they gonna launch an RPG at it?" Finn wondered.

The Iron Man positioned the tube right over the latch, thumbed a button. A piston shot

out of the tube with a simultaneous pneumatic hiss and deafening bang. The door flew open, the section around the latch apparently vaporized.

"Sledgehammer works just as well," I snarked.

"Doesn't look as cool, though," Finn countered.

"There is that."

Black armor swarmed through the door. I waited a minute, then continued my casual saunter in. I would've whistled, I was trying to be so casual, but I thought that might be overdoing it.

I followed a cluster of Zs into the house. The expectations of quality, based on the outside, were met and then some on the interior. Ratty couch, dusty TV on a second-hand entertainment center, overflowing trash in the hall. Even a bookshelf made out of stolen milk crates. Looked like somebody took a gander at a frathouse and said "How can we make this crappier?"

I checked the bookshelf as the armorbacks cleared the first floor. Couple bibles, some of the usual books by the big names in voodoo. A biography of Marie Laveau.

"Basement!" I heard somebody call. There were a series of thuds, big black boots stomping down the stairs. I checked out the entertainment center. Guy had an Xbox. I wondered if anyone would notice if I boosted a couple games.

Lots of shouting downstairs, then the distinctive BANG of a gun. I ran into the kitchen. There was another BANG.

One of the DHS Black Knights barred my way through the basement door. "Dude!" I shouted.

A small steel hand on my arm pulled me bodily out of the way. Lentzer was in the DHS schmuck's face, waving her badge like a revolutionary with a flag. "FBI, fuckface! Move it!"

Shockingly, it worked. I followed the small—but mighty—agent down into the dank.

In layout it was a standard basement. Couple support poles, furnace and water heater tucked off to the side, washer, dryer, and utility sink near that. In decor, it was hounfour part deux. Impressive altar covered with icons and leavings of rum and tobacco, flour lines on the floor. The lines were partially scattered and obscured by three bodies and spreading pools of blood which, I felt, ruined the effect the designer was going for.

All three were black men. Two had bullets neatly placed through the center of their foreheads. One had been torn limb from limb.

I recognized one of the headshots as the doorman from the church. I guess Samedi finally dug that grave.

"Get a unit over to the Louie O," I told Finn. "Book Thompson for murder." She nodded, headed upstairs with her phone.

I sicced Lentzer on a hapless lieutenant who had dared utter the word "jurisdiction," and wandered around the basement.

I was hoping for a desk with a big red folder on it marked "Evil Bad Guy Stuff." No such luck. I sighed. Looking around, I spied the bokor's lower half.

Naturally, his pockets were covered with guts. I didn't have any gloves on me. I went over to the dryer, pulled it open. Bingo. I fished out a clean shirt, wrapped it around my hand, went back to the half-body. Shoveled the guts out of the way, gingerly fished in the pocket for his phone. Success.

I used the shirt to wipe it off and trudged upstairs.

In the kitchen, the DHS suit that Lentzer had been arguing with outside was pacing back and forth, phone glued to the side of his head. CDC mooks crowded the living room, waiting to check the scene. I pulled a chair out from the rickety linoleum-topped table, sat down, put the bokor's phone in front of me.

"That the jigsaw puzzle's?" Finn asked, grabbing the seat next to me.

"Yep. Wanna help me with it?"

"You bet. Let's get this shit done and over."

I pulled up the logs, read out the numbers while Finn did a reverse look-up. Fifth one down, we hit something interesting. "Jennifer Dunn, D.D.S.," Finn said.

"Google that—"

"Not my first rodeo, cowboy." She was already tapping away.

What the hell did we ever do before we had all this constant, instant access? I wondered. Actual detective work? Sounded exhausting.

"Neurology doctor. Lost her license in Colorado, three years ago."

"Got an address?"

"Naturally."

I got up, went to the head of the stairs. "Lentzer!" I called down. "Wanna go grab some more coffee?"

She was up the stairs like a shot. "Sure do," she answered, a wicked gleam in her eye. "Know a place?"

* * *

"Do you want to bring the Dick Head Society in on this?" Finn asked.

"What?" Lentzer blurted.

"Dick Head Society. D...H..."

"No, I got it," Lentzer said. "I'm just gonna steal it."

"Have at." Finn was magnanimous.

"No, let's leave the dickheads to their 'win,'" Lentzer said, using air quotes. Deduct ten points from Gryffindor.

I snagged Deacon. "Get some of your boys together," I told him. I gave him the address.

He grinned under his visor. "You got it."

* * *

Jenny Dunn, D.D.S., ran her "dental practice" out of her home. Nice, discreet plaque on the door, tasteful. I said as much to Finn. She grunted.

"Yeah, real nice. The Martha Stewart of mad science."

Deacon's black APC thundered up to the curb. Him and four of his men piled out. I was pleased to see Deacon hefted a big ol' sledgehammer. Old school.

We stepped aside as Team Deacon got in position. "One... two..." Deacon counted.

On "Three!" he John Henry-d that door and they all piled in. Me, Finn, and Lentzer drew our sidearms and slunk in after them.

Deacon's group cleared the front of the house. I was getting impatient. "Try the fucking basement, already."

Turns out I was wrong. She had a big ol' utility shed—almost a barn—in the back yard.

She was sitting calmly at a work desk when we busted in. Pale, drawn. Long brown hair done in a loose ponytail, looked like it was tied with rubber bands. Big, thick glasses in outmoded frames. Eight guns pointed at her face, she just looked up at us with eyes as dead as those of her products.

"I know," she said. "I surrender. It was stupid."

"You're damn right it was stupid," Lentzer snarled. She grabbed Dunn by her ponytail, slammed her head down on the desk. Dunn didn't even whimper. Just closed those pale eyes.

Finn was checking out the workspace. "Benson," she moaned.

In the back, in the shadows, were six large kennel-like cages. Man-sized. Shock collars were chained to the wall. They dangled, empty.

"No," I whispered. "Oh, god, no, no, no. No. *No!*"

Finn was back at the work desk. She shoved Lentzer back, grabbed Dunn and just full-on punched her in the face.

"Where are they?!" she screamed. "Your tickitys! Where the hell are they?!"

"I was going to try and get out," Dunn mumbled, through lips that were already swelling. "I don't have a furnace..."

"The tickitys!" Lentzer barked. "Where are they?"

Dunn stared at her with those dead eyes. She shrugged.

"I let them go."

* * *

Dunn rode in the APC. I didn't trust Finn. Or myself.

At the precinct, Lentzer disappeared into what I assumed would be long series of grueling meetings about who fucked up, precisely, and when. I wasn't worried. I couldn't think of anything we could have done different. Also, I was too fried to feel much of anything. DHS could have gone after my sack with red-hot pincers, I'm not sure it would've registered.

Me and Finn talked to DHS, FBI, CDC... the whole alphabet gamut again.

Eventually, they let me and Finn go home. "Get some sleep," the captain said. He didn't sound confident.

"Sure," I said, with the same level of assuredness.

"Hey," he said, softly. "You couldn't have done any better. Not your fault."

"Sure."

"I'm serious. Believe me. That's an order."

"Yes, o captain, my captain," I muttered, but my heart wasn't in it.

Outside, it was a gorgeous day. Just after noon. The city was quiet, at least down here. I'm sure on the outskirts, in the middle of the crazed diaspora, it was a cacophonous nightmare. Here, it was a serene, peaceful nightmare.

Finn smacked me on the shoulder. "You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah," I replied. "You?"

"Sure. Of course."

We stood there, awkward for a moment. Then, she turned to go.

"Hey. Finn," I called. She turned back. "I... I'll see you later?"

She gave a weak, beautiful smile. "Yeah. Of course."

I went home.

I couldn't bear to watch the news, but I couldn't bear to watch anything else. I compromised with myself and watched the news on mute, a glass of scotch in my hand. Then another glass. Then another. Exhausted, working my way towards drunk, I couldn't get my eyes to shut. Didn't feel sleepy at all.

The sun was setting. The images on the TV had become meaningless, just repeated bits of chaos. Trucks, and armored men, and people in uniforms moving their lips.

There was nothing I could have done.

I heard jets shrieking overhead.

