

THE QUARRY

Dead Man Walking

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The Pampil residence was a shotgun house, a one-story, two-door house, one in the front and one in the back that looked like the barrels of a shotgun. A little thing New Orleans was famous for. Like the rest of the neighbourhood there were no dull colours anywhere. Royal purple on the walls and bright yellow windowsills, lifted above dry grass. Even as the sun set the colours stayed bright from the lights in every house and lamppost.

Jackson woke up as soon as the sun had set. It was an instinct at this point. Something inside him forced him to life as soon as the sun's glare had left his room. Grumbling, he crawled out of bed and headed straight towards the bathroom. He took a long look in the mirror above the sink and winced. Grey skin was torn wide open in places along his face and neck. Bright, glowing green eyes stared at the mirror from sockets that were bigger than they should be and there was nothing beneath his left elbow, just a stump.

He grabbed a skeletal arm from his bedside table and placed it by his elbow. A horrible shrieking noise came from the stump as green mist came out and wrapped around the arm. The

shrieking got louder, then suddenly stopped as the mist pulled the arm into the socket and smacked it into place. He wiggled the boney fingers and flicked the hand twice.

‘Thanks Billy,’ he muttered under his breath. This was the first day he would use a borrowed hand. He put on a black blazer and suit pants with a white dress shirt. Only things that matched with his skin and eyes. There was a knock on his door.

‘You headin’ out?’ said a voice. Jackson opened the door to see his brother, Jean-Paul standing there. He nodded, leaving his room and closing the door behind. As they stood in the small hallway, Jean-Paul held out his hand. Jackson grabbed it, pulling him into a hug. After that he said goodbye to his father and left the house. This was a daily routine for him ever since he started working at Lafayette. He may be one month dead but that was no excuse for not chipping in on the rent.

It was a normal night for Trafalgar Street. Some boys in gang colours chilling on a backdoor porch, a boy practicing his trombone late into the night while the neighbours gradually lose their mind at the same tune constantly being played, slow, loud and painful. Jackson reached the streetcars station and waited, listening as an argument broke out between houses. There was a man with headphones rapping loudly to himself and another man, unwashed and breathing heavily. The streetcar came clanking in, completely empty.

As the car approached Lafayette Cemetery, Jackson picked his head up, looking out. Jackson had been working the midnight graveyard shift ever since he came back. From there he could see a batch of tourists and a guide, one of the ghost tours the city had. Standing at the entrance, there was no way around them. With no other option, Jackson walked through them, in the middle of the tour guides speech.

‘You see folks, back in the day, they had to bury quick, but the people weren’t always dead. So they tied some string on their toe connected to a bell and if they were still alive and thrashing, it’d start ringing. It didn’t always work cause—’ He stopped, eyes wide, as Jackson forced his way through. He walked past them as quickly as he could, hearing some of them gasp. He thought he heard one of them trying to say something to him, but chose to ignore it as he moved on.

He went into a small shack, grabbed a flashlight, punched his card into a clock on the wall and then went on his nightly patrol. It wasn’t the most exciting job in the city. There was the odd stranger trying to break into a crypt, but they tended to run for the hills the second they

saw the 6'5" dead man stomping towards them. He was offered the job partly out of sympathy, partly because a living corpse patrolling your graveyard really keeps the weirdoes away.

Jackson had a quiet night before finishing his shift. He said his goodbye to the next guard and walked back to the streetcar stop, heading home. He waited for the next pick-up, just him and a skeleton wearing sweatpants, a worn-out hoodie and a pinstriped fedora, taking a long drag of his cigarette; smoke billowing out from his eyes and chest. He looked at Jackson.

'S'up man?' he said. His voice sounded like he'd been gargling gravel and whiskey then got run over, chest first, with a busted down car.

'Hey, all good.' Jackson replied, thumbs up. He examined the skeleton a bit more.

'Does that even do anything for you?' he asked. The skeleton put out the cigarette in the palm of his hand.

'Not anymore,' he replied. With that the morning trolley came clanking by the stop. The conductor had Boney M's 'Rasputin' playing at full volume on a personal radio beside him.

Jackson still had an appointment with his witchdoctor in Frenchman Street before he could turn in for the day. He stopped by his home to rest, check on his dad and pick up a few things. His dad was sitting on the couch watching TV, giving Jackson a nod as he came in. Jackson nodded back and stood behind the couch. He immediately scowled as soon as he saw who was on screen. Celebrating his forty-eighth year as dictator of Haiti was another corpse, more rotted, the skin a dark sickly green, the face unmistakable: Francois Duvalier, better known as 'Papa Doc'. The news feature was on the 'Haitian problem' and if he was connected to it. Throughout the whole world, the only places where the dead were coming back had a Haitian Diaspora.

Papa Doc was always known for practicing voodoo. In fact, he was the man who revived the practices for the people of Haiti, but how far he had gone into Juju, its darkest, blackest side, nobody was expecting. He had gone from sucking the life out of its people metaphorically to physically. Yet the world would never do anything. It didn't matter how many people he had killed in sulfuric acid baths, or how many bodies he had defiled. Not as long as he was aligned against Cuba and Dominica.

Jackson looked down at his father. His face was still and unmoving, but Jackson could see the sadness in his eyes. His dad turned to look at him as he spoke.

‘Your Mother named you. She knew we shouldn’t stay there and she wanted something that sounded American so you would fit in,’ he scoffed. ‘Should have got better at English first.’

Jackson was fourteen when his family left Haiti. He couldn’t remember a single detail. Not his mother’s face, or where they lived or how she died. Whenever he tried, there was a green mist blocking the image and then he’d feel cold, so cold his body demanded he stop thinking. He placed his right hand on his father’s shoulders. His dad stopped for a second, before putting his hand over it. After that Jackson told him where he was going, grabbed what he needed from his room and went back to the station.

Jackson got off the streetcar just before the French Quarter, New Orleans’ most famous neighbourhood. He walked around it, headed to Frenchman Street through Decatur. He caught a familiar face on a street corner. Hunched over an instrument made of a mop handle, three washing lines and a half cut bucket was ‘Vulture’ Andrews in a tattered and worn out wool coat, a big rucksack by his side. Grey skinned, one eyed, with massive buck teeth protruding from an exposed jawbone and balancing on his only leg, his appearance got one or two twitchy glances as he belted out Bessie Smith’s ‘Devil’s gonna get you.’ He used to be big in the Quarter and Frenchman Street’s clubs, but his old fans were as dead as he was. He didn’t remember his name, the few friends he had that were still alive or even the songs he was famous for. Nothing but muscle memory had brought him to his second home but he wasn’t allowed to play the quarter anymore. ‘Scared the tourists’ they said.

Jackson gave a sigh and walked straight to Frenchman, trying to push the whole scene out of his mind. Unlike the Quarter, Frenchman street only came alive at night. If the Quarter was where most tourists went to get their drink and music, then Frenchman was where the locals preferred to head. It may not have been as famous, but it still had everything that the world thinks of when you say New Orleans. Narrow streets, colourful buildings and balconies decorated with Christmas lights. He walked past tattoo parlours, cheap deep-fried food joints and closed bars before he finally reached his destination: Marinette’s Voodoo shop.

There were two sides to Marinette’s shop. At the front was a fake as can be tourist trap, fake charms and voodoo dolls. In the back was the real workshop. There were a dozen tables and desk scattered around the room. Some of them had jars of herbs and animal parts, while other had blocks of wood that Marinette was carving into masks and talismans. On the walls were the sigils of the Loa, Voodoo gods and spirits. For Jackson, Marinette had set out the

signs and tributes to the Ghede, the barons of the dead. At the centre of the room was, according to Marinette, the most important tribute she could offer for Jackson: a bowl of white rum with herbs simmering inside it, a favourite of Ghede Nibo, the Loa of unnatural death.

Marinette didn't even look at Jackson as she spoke, pacing around her office, grabbing Jars and books.

'*Sak pase?*' she said, crushing something in a mortar and pestle. 'How are you?'

'*M ap viv.*' Jackson replied. 'I've been better but I've been worse', but literally meaning; 'I am alive.' She chuckled at that.

'*Ki sa kit e jou ou renmen?*' she continued. 'What happened in your day?' He placed a hand on his chin as he spoke.

'*Te ale nan travay. Le sa a...*' He spoke slowly, stuttering. '*Mwen te... Moun... moun... Shit!*' he muttered under his breath and looked down at the ground, scowling. The word's meaning left his head as soon as he spoke them. He used to be fluent when he was alive. More than anything else on the body, your mind isn't meant to last past death. The salves, talismans and blessings could keep Jackson from rotting but none of them could stop his memories from fading. Marinette hoped constantly testing his memory would keep it fresh. Well, fresh as can be.

Her face softened as she looked at Jackson. She sighed and grabbed his skeletal hand.

'How's Billy-Ray's hand working out for you?' Jackson shrugged. He rotated his wrist with an audible click.

'It's working. Can't say I know how well. Never used someone else's arm before,' he said. She scoffed, then continued asking him questions: anything rotting off? Does it still feel like you're breathing? No wounds getting bigger? After making sure there was no trouble with his un-life, she gave him two bottles, which he put in his coat, and a Gris-gris, a type of talisman.

He bid '*a pi ta*' to Marinette, went to the front counter to pay for what she gave him and left the shop, going back to the streetcar stop. On the way back he saw the skeleton again from the streetcar, same station, still smoking. The thought he had been fighting since he saw Vulture Andrews finally punched its way through. *That's you someday*, it said. *Nothing left to rot, no more family, no more memories. Just a bad habit you can't remember starting.* He closed his

eyes and rushed off the streetcar on the next stop, trying to out-run the thought or find something else to put his mind on.

He walked from a stop he'd never seen before; letting his feet take him wherever they wanted. Trying to shut off everything but the urge to walk, he found himself walking towards the music of a second line parade. The sound made him focus again. There were no events or parades, or everyone would be there, he thought. So it must be a jazz funeral. He stopped. It would be wrong for a dead man to go to a funeral. It's a time to grieve and move on, not horrify mourners. He turned around; letting his instincts guide him home. As he turned a corner, there on a lamppost was a bouquet of flowers and a picture beneath them: his. His thoughts went back to that night.

He was coming back from Frenchman's street. As he turned the corner, he heard screeching tires, followed by a blaring police siren close by. Suddenly, a worn-out green Sudan shot out from the corner, slamming into him, arm first. He flew out, hitting the concrete hard, scraping the left side of his face. It wasn't slow as his world faded. He took one look at where his arm should be and saw the bloodied stump. The reality of what happened hit him. It was like the nerves of his spine had exploded into barbed wire and were quickly making their way up his brain stem. He struggled to breathe, gasping for air and spitting out blood. As he lay there, failing to catch his breath, snap! The world went dark.

When he was forced back to life the blackness turned to green. He saw six figures, blurred, looking over him. They were tall, strange... inhuman. His vision went sharp white as he jolted upright, suddenly back in his room. He saw his family and a woman he didn't know standing in the doorway. Her eyes were wide open. He huffed and panted, feeling wind rushing through his neck and out a hole in his cheek. He looked at the stump that was once his arm, mouth agape. He turned back to the doorway.

'Why am I still alive?' he asked the women. She closed her eyes, and slowly shook her head.