

# OFF THE DEVIL'S CLOCK

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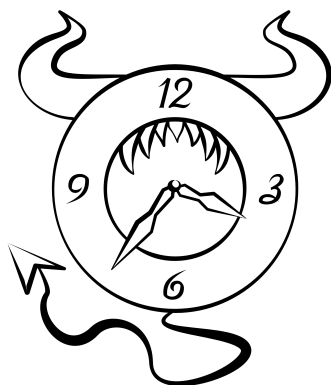
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H ell is overcrowded these days. Not with freshly dead souls—those were in short supply in my district—but with reapers. A new one moved into my corner of the fire and brimstone lot and she's a real piece of work. She should've gone into haunting with the way she creeps about, wailing like a banshee. Hiding in her room all the time, she'll never fill the devil's quota for souls.

Which leaves me picking up the slack.

The end of the month is nearing, and my district's number of souls harvested is low. Again. It doesn't matter how hard I work to compensate for the slacker's laziness; we won't fill our orders. Boss Man will have a few words about that, but I couldn't care less at the moment. I've been working overtime for the last week. I'm tired, cranky, and need to escape the ash-laden air to breathe for an hour without the pressure of work.

I slip on my sandals and pick up my hellhound's harness and leash. At the sound of the rattle of Smoke's chain, she comes running, her nails clicking on the stone floor. Her silky fur is short and glossy black, with a few white markings on her paws and nose. Bright, excited brown eyes meet mine.

"Walk?" I ask.

It's Smoke's favorite word. She barks and drops her chest to the ground, tail lifting high and waving like a flag in a windstorm. Act one of her "getting out the door" dance. High-pitched and short barks follow for act two. Act three involves her front paws pounding out a jig like one of those Irish step dancers.

"All right. Hold still." I hold open the harness.

The beast follows my command. She doesn't twitch until I have the buckles in place and the leash fastened.

Her encore is putting her nose to the crack of the door and its frame, as if she's going to burst through the moment I open it.

She doesn't though. Stepping outside, she finds her stride beside me.

Summer is nearly gone, taking with it the oppressive heat and humidity common on the East Coast. There's a light breeze, enough that, even as Smoke and I walk at a brisk pace, I don't work up a sweat. Only

a few scatterings of clouds glide gently overhead. In all, it's a beautiful day for someone to die.

I shake the thought away. Not today. Not now. For the next hour, I'm strictly off the clock.

With the day so lovely, I pass plenty of mortals on my walk. Families with strollers, other dog walkers, ambitious runners. Some wear masks to protect against the disease all the mortals are afraid of.

You'd think a pandemic would have business booming for a reaper. It doesn't. Not for me, anyway. See, when everything shuts down and people barricade in their homes, harvesting opportunities for reapers specialized in abrupt or accidental death drops. Fewer car crashes. Fewer drownings. Fewer people falling off cliffs, down stairs, in front of buses. You get the picture. Unless you're a reaper in a hospital benefitting from the illness, which I'm not, you're not seeing much action.

Though I try not to focus on the souls shining in the center of each mortal's chest, they snag my eyes and have me itching to grab my sickle. Yet, even if I had wanted to work, none of the passing mortals are viable harvest candidates. Each too young. Too few underlying conditions. Too careful about where and when they step.

Part of me begrudges that. Unexpected opportunities to sneak in a harvest wouldn't be a terrible thing. The other part rejoices that those lives will continue another day.

I get it, my job sucks. More often than not, people curse the work I do.

*Why did he have to die? Why now? Why like this? Is she going to heaven?*

There's about a thousand more questions mortals ask after I do what I'm paid to do. I don't have those answers. Nor can I say what

happens to a soul after I've harvested it. That information is above my paygrade.

Smoke's ears perk forward and her steps slow. Smoldering brimstones, she's caught the scent of a candidate.

It doesn't take more than a second to pick him out of the handful of mortals around me. The jogger is in his mid-forties. Husky, though not morbidly so. What brown and gray hair he has left is shaved close to his head. The sunlight reflects off his scalp. He's dressed in ugly black shorts and a gray shirt that's darkened with sweat.

It's obvious that jogging isn't his favorite pastime, but I admire the effort he's putting in. Unfortunately for him, the telltale signs are there: face red with exertion, steps shuffling, sweat pouring down, and panting breaths. Being a reaper, I can sense the fatty deposits built up in his arteries. It's the perfect setup for an unexpected heart attack.

Smoke's tail starts wagging, and we pick up the pace as we approach. My hands are clammy as they reach behind my back for my sickle, a weapon only another reaper can see. It has a short handle, only two feet long. At the end, there's a long, curved blade. A blade sharp enough to cut straight to the soul.

I'm hoping, though, that he's one of those skittish mortals who dives off the sidewalk when passing another mortal in the name of social distancing. I really wasn't intending to work at the moment and wouldn't mind an excuse to avoid the paperwork another harvest would bring.

But the gap is closing and there's no sign he's swerving off course.

I pull the sickle free. My heart is thumping. With excitement? Regret? Greif? I never could tell which.

Five feet now. Three more paces. I raise my arm and—

My toe jams against an uneven portion of the sidewalk. I lurch forward, letting go of my sickle. It clatters to the pavement with a noise

only I can hear. Smoke skitters away in surprise, but I keep hold of her leash as I right myself.

The jogger spares me only a glance before shuffling past.

Smoldering brimstone, my toe is throbbing. A glance down confirms I cracked the nail and busted open the skin. Yeah, I should've known better than to walk these crappy sidewalks in open-toed shoes.

Blood is welling up under my toenail, threatening to drip all over the pavement. Walk over, I guess.

I peer over my shoulder at the jogger who'd slipped away. At his pace, I could still catch up. Take his soul.

Instead, I collect my sickle and take another route home. After all, I am off the devil's clock.

# AFTERWORD

The inspiration for this short story came from two things: an event and an idea.

The event: I took my dog on a walk while wearing sandals and stubbed my toe, which began to bleed.

The idea: What if I took mundane, everyday "events" and added a fantasy twist?