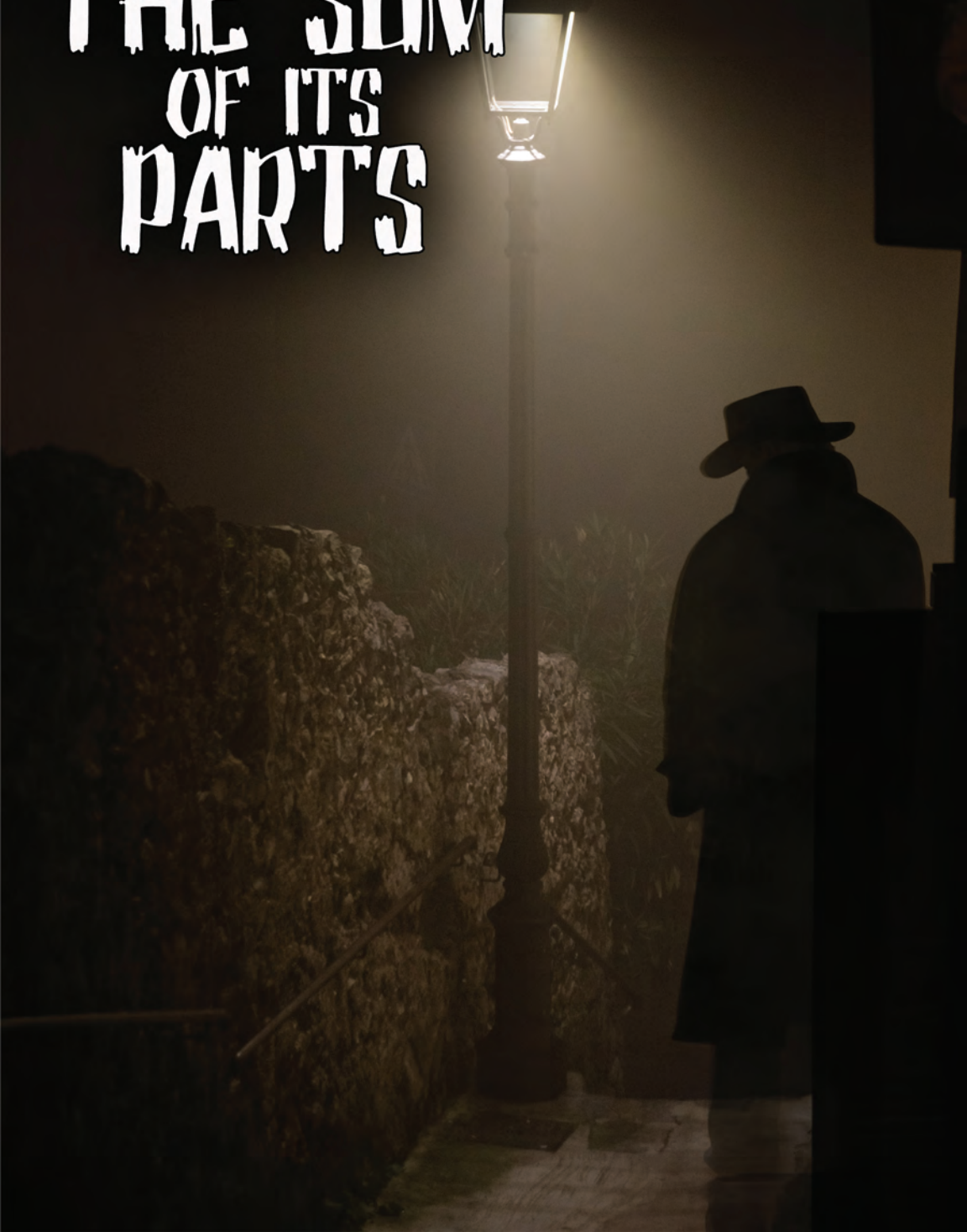


RICHARD ZWICKER

THE SUM OF ITS PARTS



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RICHARD ZWICKER

“Voodoo as I Say”
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SAMPLE CHAPTER

4

Voodoo as I Say

ONE MORNING A DARK-HAIRED WOMAN in her mid-twenties walked into my office. A flowing blue dress hung on her small frame, while her gaunt face hid under a wide hat containing enough feathers for flight. A fraying at her elbows suggested her blouse had been in the family a while. Her pale lips fluttered. In respect, I rose to my full seven-foot height, and then she spoke.

“My husband is a zombie.”

Gallows humor comes naturally to consulting detectives, and even more so to products of unnatural science, such as myself, but I resisted answering, *I am the monster of Frankenstein. How do you do?* Or, *who introduced you to each other? The Wolf-man?* Instead, I just said, “Please, have a seat and tell me more.” She sank into one of my two client chairs, and I reassumed mine.

“My name is Ada Kurzmann. My husband Hrolf is a good, hardworking man, but he has no patience for perceived slights. We live next door to Perodin Orchards. Have you heard of it?”

"I have." The sprawling orchard, located on the northwestern outskirts of Geneva, was the source of nasty rumors: its owner abused his workers, many of whom he imported from his ancestral home in Haiti. Most people still bought his apples, however.

"We've long considered moving because some nights the most heartbreaking screams and moans come from that orchard," she continued.

"Were you able to make out any actual words?" I asked.

"They were not in a language we understood, but there was no mistaking the pain in those utterances. Last week Hrolf went to the police. They said they'd pay Perodin a visit first thing in the morning, but two nights later, we heard the screams again. On the third night, Wednesday, my husband said he would put a stop to this once and for all. I begged him to stay home, but he was determined."

"And what happened?"

She wilted. "He never came back. The next morning, I went to Perodin, who insisted he'd never seen my husband. This time I went to the police. They assured me they had spoken to Perodin and inspected the orchard but found nothing suspect. One policeman even suggested my husband was having an affair and would return when he was ready. Even if Hrolf didn't love me, he wouldn't have done that. He considers a man's principles more important than life itself. I fear his beliefs have resulted in his living death." She stared at me, her eyes pleading. "There is no one else to turn to. Mr. Frankenstein, you understand these things. You are a monster, no offense."

"None taken." It had been two years since I'd reinvented myself as a consulting detective, taking the name of my deceased creator. Though I still turned heads with my flat top and neck bolts, a significant portion of Geneva accepted me as an authority on monsters. "Clearly, something has detained your husband, but why do you think he's been turned into a zombie? It's 1821, after all."

"That's how Perodin gets people to work for him." She saw my disbelief and added, "If you heard those moans, you'd have no doubt. Please." She handed me a pencil drawing. "This is my husband."

I looked it over. Hrolf Kurzmann had a high forehead and bushy eyebrows, raised slightly. My attention was drawn by his eyes, deep and sad. That's where principles got you, though without them you became Perodin. I extended my hand, which engulfed hers. "I'll take the case."

The first step was to talk to Perodin. I'd heard the zombie rumors but attributed them to prejudice against foreigners. Even if the rumors were true, as a Swiss and a settled family man, Hrolf didn't fit the profile of the supposed victims. Still, as I stood outside the small one-story building that served as his store, something unnatural hung in the air that couldn't be blown away by Lake Geneva's blustery winds. Before going inside, I wandered along the ten-foot-high concrete wall that surrounded the property.

"Hey, you!" someone said with a heavy Creole accent. He was a squat, dark-skinned man with black, bristly hair and biceps that filled his sleeves. A thin mustache and a narrow tie gave him an aristocratic air.

"I was admiring the height of your wall," I said. "I'll bet you don't have a problem with apple theft. Are you the owner?"

"I am. You can find any kind of apples for sale inside my store."

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you."

His frown made it clear he didn't want to talk to me. "I sell apples, not conversation."

"I wasn't intending to pay for your words. Do you know Hrolf and Ada Kurzmann?"

He scratched his neck with long fingernails. "They own property abutting mine. Have they complained about me again? I can't help it if some of my workers sing at night. Many are far from home. I can't deny them the right to express themselves."

"Hrolf Kurzmann visited you Wednesday night and hasn't been seen since."

Perodin scowled. "Twice this man has complained about noise, but both times it was during the day. It doesn't make sense to come at night. I work hard and I'm a sound sleeper."

"I hear some of your workers keep busy at night, however."

"Some apple grinding is done then. This country's growing season is ridiculously short, so we can't waste any time." He glared at me. "Any time at all."

"Perhaps I could talk to some of your workers. I'm always trying to improve my Creole."

He bristled at my joke. "I can't help you."

I nodded. "In that case, I'll buy a bushel of apples."

Perodin reluctantly led me through his store. The interior reeked of his sweet, slightly spoiled product. Filled bags stood in rows on shelves that lined the wall. According to the signs, there were rubinettes, marigolds, and berner rosens. Attracted by their distinctive yellow, I bought a bag of arlets. It would take me a month to finish them, but I could offer them to clients.

I didn't leave with Hrolf Kurzmann, but I hadn't expected to. I needed to find out if the concrete wall was there to keep thieves out or workers and Kurzmann in. Night was the time to do that, and Igor was the man to help me.

• • •

Igor lived in a narrow, ramshackle house whose rent I subsidized to ensure he didn't end up in the street. While working for me, I could trust Igor with my life. Left to his own devices, however, his carousing often left him in such a state of depravity that it was hard to distinguish between his head and his hunchback.

As I opened his front door, a precariously placed flowerpot from the second-floor window glanced off the side of *my* head, the resulting lump ruining its flat symmetry. Miffed, I picked up a piece of the pot and discovered a telltale length of string attached to the door. I stalked into Igor's bedroom, the tossed wilds of his

blankets offering glimpses of his head and right leg. My anger dissipated. He was the closest thing I had to a friend.

"Not much point in buying perennials if you're going to smash them after a couple of days," I said, holding the broken pot under his nose.

"That's my security system." He yawned. "It also doubles as a wake-up call."

"What if no one comes in?"

His head emerged from the blankets, his hair sticking straight as hay in all directions. "Then there's no point in getting up."

"Why don't you get the lock fixed?"

"Thieves keep breaking it. What do you want?"

I added "get Igor a better door and fix his lock" to my mental list. That would be easier than getting him out of jail if one of his flowerpots killed someone.

"Do you ever frequent Perodin Orchards?"

He grimaced. "I stay away from those apples."

I mentioned his usual fee, however, and he agreed to help me.

• • •

"If I come out of this with a belief in zombies, I'm holding you responsible," Igor said as we walked carefully along the wall. Shards of glass stuck out of the top like supplicating hands. The stars were out but no moon, offering just enough light to show we couldn't see much.

"We've encountered werewolves, vampires, and ourselves. Would meeting zombies make a difference to your worldview?" I asked, my body lurching forward as I stepped into a small hole.

"It might. I've pretty much freed myself of empathy, but even I might feel sorry for a zombie, unless he tried to eat me. Then all bets are off."

Igor liked to make himself sound harder than he was. In truth, he had been devoted to Victor Frankenstein. That devotion shifted to me after my creator's death, despite my indirect complicity in it.

I knelt and bid Igor to climb onto my shoulders. I then stood up and raised him to the top of the wall. "Mind the broken glass," I said. He swore, saying he minded it very much, then landed on the other side with an "oof!" I tossed over a rope, which he tied to a nearby tree trunk. I then pulled myself into the orchard.

Inside, each twisted tree looked like an angry old man standing his ground. I was struck by the silence. If Perodin had men working tonight, they were being quiet. For the most part, I preferred night, as it obscured my monstrous features and I felt almost normal. As Igor was a nocturnal tavern crawler, I figured he felt the same way. The darkness and silence inside Perodin's orchard gave us ample opportunity to imagine, however, and I found myself longing for the limitations of reality.

"Let's go," I said, pointing to a barn-like building I could make out in the distance. We walked, stray apples squishing under my feet. The barn was about two hundred feet long and a hundred feet wide. I pulled on its broad metal door but couldn't budge it. The building had randomly placed tiny, barred windows, like the eyes of a spider. We saw nothing through the grime. At least, I thought it was grime.

"This looks more like a prison than a place to store apples," I said.

"Or a torture chamber," Igor added.

We circled the barn but found no other entrance. I was about to suggest we make one, when the slow clump of heavy footsteps froze us in place. We watched a shadowy, bare-chested figure walk right past us. Once he was about thirty feet away, Igor exhaled heavily.

"You know why zombies never get anywhere in the world? They're not curious."

"Well, we are," I said, and we quietly followed him, maintaining a thirty-foot separation. Several times in the dark I stumbled over the uneven ground, once crashing to my knees, but it didn't matter. Our leader paid us no mind.

After about ten minutes the man vanished behind one of the taller trees. As we got closer, I kept expecting him to lurch

into view, but he didn't. Igor circled the tree in question. In front of it, the ground sloped gently downward.

"How does a zombie vanish into thin air?" he asked.

I backed away from the tree, looked up at its branches, then in front of it. My eyes fell on a large pile of brush and limbs. "This doesn't look random." We dragged away the limbs and were hit by a belch of hot air. Beyond that was an iron-grated door and a tunnel. Peering inside we saw pinpoints of light and heard what sounded like the distant hum of machines and the banging of picks.

"I suppose you want to go down there," said Igor, without enthusiasm.

"I definitely don't want to go down there, but if Perodin really is using zombies, I have a feeling this is where they'd be."

Igor shook his head. "Me too."

The entrance opened into an eight-by-five foot tunnel and, fortunately for us, the ground was more dirt than rock. Using the walls as guides, we made our way down. About two hundred feet in we encountered our first flickering torch, mounted on the wall. It illuminated lines of wheel tracks.

After walking ten minutes, we saw in the distance a more concentrated light, beckoning like an ocean promising suffocation. The hum of machines, which had seemed so uniform, now sounded disjointed and random, a cacophony of grinding, hissing, and puffing, as well as ticking of pickaxes on rock.

Further down, the cavern opened onto an enormous room. The light of torches and several smelters danced, animating fifty stolid, plodding workers. Shadows, flickering light, and encroaching darkness twisted the images and grafted the impression of life onto the lifeless. Were they mining gold, silver, or diamonds? I couldn't tell, and they didn't seem to care.

"We can't overcome all of them," Igor whispered.

"We may not have to, if they really are zombies. They have their orders, but not the will to deviate from them. As long as we don't interfere, they should ignore us."

He looked at me with skepticism. "And what are we going

to do if we see Kurzmann? Say, *Congratulations on your new job. Nice colleagues?*"

"No, we're going to interfere."

We approached the horde. As predicted, the workers paid us no heed unless we bumped into one. This happened several times, with them so intent on their tasks and we unsure of our direction. I intentionally touched a few and sniffed their breath, but they were neither cold nor smelled of rot. Instead, they reeked of sweat. Some wore only rags, while others were absurdly overdressed as if for a night out that, without warning, turned into months of forced labor.

We shouted out Hrolf's name, but that got no reaction until one figure pushing a rock-laden barrow froze. I would not have recognized him. His hair was longer than in the picture, his body thinned and his sad eyes vacant.

"That is my name." His low, monotone voice seemed to scrape his vocal cords.

"We're here to rescue you," I said, motioning for Igor to come over to us.

Hrolf remained motionless. Did words have meaning to one with no will? That he knew his name showed he retained some memory. "Your wife is very worried."

His eyes flickered slightly, as if weighing an idea he couldn't quite grasp. His gaze drifted from my eyes to my body.

"I have no wife." He turned and resumed pushing his wheelbarrow.

Igor stared. "If that was Kurzmann, either he's changed or the man who drew his portrait is the worst artist ever."

"This place would change anybody."

"He was eating you with his eyes."

I wasn't sure. "He can look all he wants."

I picked up Hrolf and threw him over my shoulder. That got his attention, as well as everyone else's. He let out a strangled groan that shook me to the core, while the dead eyes of every other zombie turned toward us.

"Time to leave," I said to Igor. When I said "leave," my voice jumped an octave and stretched the syllable because Hrolf had bitten my arm. I dropped him with a punch, but instead of pursuing us, he rose to his feet and returned to his wheelbarrow. The others went back to their tasks. But when I took a few steps toward Hrolf, all dead eyes were on me again.

"Let the police handle this," said Igor. "They might even believe you."

I agreed, and we slowly retreated from the mine. Though backward glances didn't reveal anything, the clump of heavy footfalls was unmistakable.

"Do you think this is an escort?" Igor asked.

"Not to anywhere we want to go."

We increased our pace, but stumbling in the flickering darkness, we failed to shake our pursuers. I am not the fleetest of foot, but it would be embarrassing, or worse, to be outrun by zombies.

When we reached the opening of the mine and ripped away the branch cover, the wall of stars energized Igor, who left me in the dust. I found him cursing by the wall, unable to scale it by himself.

"They're right behind you!" he yelled, as I staggered up to him. In a single motion, I hoisted him to the top of the wall. As I looped the rope over it, I felt hands grabbing me. Soon I was surrounded by dead-eyed, expressionless faces. Fists rained down on me like anvils. I heard Igor screaming, though it might have been me.

• • •

I woke up on a table, like the one Victor Frankenstein had used when he'd brought me to life. Then, I'd been filled with curiosity. This time I was filled with the will of Edgard Perodin. He stood over me like one of his trees.

"You work for me now," he said. "Only Perodin Orchards matter. You will labor in my mine until you die."

I recalled a time when I was barely aware of Perodin, and another when it was important to stop him. I also remembered how I'd questioned my sense of worth and, as a creation of Victor Frankenstein, my right to be. All that was irrelevant now. The world made sense, and though I could not feel it, I knew the beauty of order and simplicity.

One of Perodin's laborers led me back into the mine. There was nothing to say as we walked through the flickering darkness. When I joined their cheerless ranks, the horde of workers offered no acknowledgement. I dug, smashed, hauled, and smelted, unquestioning as a machine. Only the growing ache in my muscles informed me of time's passing. I noticed Kurzmann occasionally and recalled I had been hired to save him. I also knew I would die in this mine. These and every other fact in my head were like trees in a picture I couldn't alter. At some point I was led out of the mine for another injection and a few hours' sleep.

Then I dug, smashed, hauled, and smelted.

Days passed like the wind.

At some point above the clatter and hum of work, I heard my name. I looked up to see Igor approaching me. Three staggering men flanked him.

"I went to the police," said Igor. "But either Perodin is paying them off or they don't listen to hunchbacks. I didn't know what to do, so I got drunk." He motioned to his colleagues, cowering from fear or drink. "Then I found these men to help. Another thing. The police were right about Kurzmann. He ran off with another woman. The Hrolf down here isn't our man."

I stared.

"And you can stop fantasizing about devouring me. That's not going to happen."

"I will not eat you," I said. "But you cannot obstruct my work."

"That's a problem because I cannot allow you to stay," said Igor.

He told his fellow carousers to grab onto me. Somewhere in my mind I recognized the humor of the scene, these fearful

drunks contrasting with me and Perodin's work crew. There was no place for a laugh, however.

"Leave or die," I said.

Other workers circled my would-be rescuers. A Haitian placed a filthy hand on one of the drunks' shoulders. The drunk slapped it off. It was replaced by two others.

"You can't pay me enough to do this," the drunk stammered. He ran back up the tunnel, soon followed by the other two.

Igor looked at me and frowned. Even four men could not drag me out of the mine.

"I won't leave you down here!" he screamed, leaving me down there.

• • •

When I next woke up from the floor of the barn, Perodin stood over me.

"Igor is a problem. Kill him."

I felt clarity.

It was early morning as I walked three hours to Igor's house, one foot in front of the other. The streets of Geneva stirred with silent people, eyes down, on their way to work. Horse carts clattered, birds tweeted, smoke drifted from factory chimneys. Igor was difficult to locate at night, but most early mornings found him passed out in or near his bed. As I often visited him, no one would question my presence.

Igor was my friend and did not deserve to die, but the logic of killing him was unassailable. He would not give up. I had killed others—an innocent girl, Victor's fiancé, his friend, and indirectly, Victor himself—and in the past these actions had made me doubt the value of my existence. But today it was just information.

Yet as I stepped up to Igor's front door, something made me glance up, then turn the knob and brace for impact.

• • •

I was again on my back, this time in a hospital, my ankles hanging over the mattress. I felt woozy, but in the haze, I noticed something that had been missing: my will. Across from me was a disheveled Igor, snoring in a chair. I tossed my pillow at him.

"Ow!" he said, as he stood up and stretched, not that he was ever going to stand up straight. "I don't sleep well in chairs. Give me the floor any day."

"You give yourself to the floor just about every night. What happened?"

"You destroyed another of my plants. Did you forget it was there?"

"No." Yet something Perodin had not been able to control made me open that door. "What did the doctor say?"

"That you were pumped up with some drug. He wrote it down." Igor pulled a note from his pocket. "Tetrodotoxin. He also said you had traces of something else in you that might have diminished its effect slightly."

"Victor put all sorts of stuff into me."

"The doctor wrote the name of that down, too." He dug through every pocket he had, plus his waistband. "Must have lost it. Anyway, the tetrodotoxin is what made you obey Perodin. You need to stay here another twenty-four hours to get it all out of your system."

"What I need is to get Perodin." I swung my legs onto the floor. My gown caught on the frame, exposing my lack of clothes.

"Mother of God," Igor said, turning away.

• • •

After I got dressed, a horse cart whisked us to the police station. I showed them the injection holes in my arm and the doctor's report, and this time they listened. Three policemen accompanied us to Perodin's Orchard. A clerk summoned the owner to the store. When he saw me and Igor, his eyes widened, and he denied everything. He couldn't stop me from leading him and the police to his mine though. After we located

the captive workers, Perodin sighed, then yelled, "Tear them ..." But before he could finish the sentence, I got him in a bear hug and placed my hand over his mouth. His workers, needing more complete instructions than that, continued their toil. Perodin's zombie exploitation had played out. As he was cuffed and led off the orchard, I couldn't resist a final question.

"Do you feel any remorse?"

He glowered. "About being caught?"

"No. About robbing men of their will and forcing them to do your bidding."

"I did my workers a favor," he said. "Hundreds of people labor in factories, bemoaning their lot. To what end? I gave them a goal, they achieved it, and felt a sense of accomplishment."

"You robbed them of what it means to be human," I said.

He laughed. "What does that mean?"

I was still working on that question, but I was more than willing to share my provisional answer.

"Having the right to hate people like you." I walked away.

It was a theatrical closing line, but as I thought about it later, it wasn't the existence of people like Perodin that most bothered me. Nor was it people like Kurzmann, supposedly a principled man who'd been able to rationalize abandoning his wife for someone else. Dealing with morally questionable people was my job. Because of my past, it was also my life. But Perodin had given me one more thing to question. I'd like to think a reserve of strength rather than diluted tetrodotoxin allowed me to choose getting crowned by Igor's flowerpot. Had that not happened, I would have done whatever nefarious deed the orchard owner had commanded. A frightening thought, but what unnerved me more was how much I enjoyed and missed the complete lack of conflict I had as a zombie.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Zwicker is a retired English teacher living in Vermont, USA, with his wife and beagle. His short stories have appeared in *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, *Stupefying Stories*, *Dragon Gems*, and other semi-pro markets. Two collections of his work, *Walden Planet and other stories* and *The Reopened Cask and other stories* are also available. In addition to reading and writing, he likes to play the piano, jog, and fight the good fight against what he used to call middle age.

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The monster of Frankenstein reinvents himself as a consulting detective, confronting Dracula, The Invisible Man, the Wolf-man, zombies and more! No case too monstrous.



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