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Opening extract from
ZOM-B: Baby

Written by
Darren Shan

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ONE

The London Dungeon used to be one of the city's top tourist attractions. It was a fun but grisly place, a cross between a museum and a horror house. It recreated some of London's darker historical moments, bringing back to life the world of people like Jack the Ripper and Sweeney Todd. It featured sinister, imposing models of buildings from the past, props like hanging skeletons and snarling rats, nerve-tingling videos and light shows, and actors to play the various infamous figures. There were even some stomach-churning rides. I visited it quite a few

times when I was alive, and always had a brilliant time.

I haven't been in the Dungeon since returning to County Hall as a revitalised, but right now it feels like the most natural part of the complex to head for.

I wander through the deserted rooms, enjoying the isolation and the gloominess. The actors are gone, and someone must have done the rounds and turned off all the projectors and video clips, but most of the lights work, and the sets and props haven't been disturbed. It's still the coolest damn place in London.

I also think, looking back, that it served as a taste of what was to come. The London Dungeon painted a picture of a blood-drenched city full of terror and murder, and the people who built it were right — this *is* a realm of madness and death. We were never more than one sharp twist away from total chaos, from demonic clowns prancing through the streets and tender-hearted but loopy scientists setting themselves up as spokesmen for God.

I thought I'd escaped the craziness when I came to

County Hall. London had been destroyed, zombies had taken over, life as we knew it had come to an end. But Dr Oystein seemed to offer sanctuary from the grim bedlam of the streets. I thought I could rest easy, make friends, learn from the good doctor, start to build a new life (or should that be *unlife*?) for myself.

That was before the doctor told me that God speaks to him.

I creep along a street that looks like it's been transported to the present day from Victorian London. I pause, imagining banks of swirling fog, waiting for Jack the Ripper to leap out and claim me for his own. That's not very likely, I know, but it wouldn't surprise me. I reckon just about anything could happen in this crazy, messed-up world.

That's what's so weird and scary about the story Dr Oystein fed us. There was a time when I would have written him off as a crank, but given what I've seen and experienced recently, I can't say for sure that he *is* barking mad. He told me he was forced by Nazis to create the zombie gene — that's probably on the

level. It's clear that he's an expert on the living dead, having studied them for decades. He's the one who gave me the ability to revitalise.

If all that and more is true, then why not the rest of it? The world has always been full of people claiming to be in contact with God. Surely they can't *all* have been nutters. If some of them were the genuine article, maybe Dr Oystein is too. The trouble is, how's an ordinary girl like me supposed to be able to tell the difference between a prophet and a madman?

I curse loudly and slam a fist into one of the fake walls, punching a large hole through it. Someone chuckles behind me.

'Now *there's* a cliché if ever I saw one.'

I turn and glare at Rage, who has followed me in from the riverbank. Mr Burke is with him. Rage is sneering. Burke just looks uncomfortable.

'Why don't you go drown yourself?' I snarl at Rage.

'I would if I could,' he smirks, then pokes his chest. 'I'm the same as you. My lungs don't work.'

I had left Rage, Burke and Dr Oystein abruptly, without saying anything, once the doctor had hit us

with the revelation that he was God's envoy, locked in battle with Mr Dowling, aka the literal spawn of Satan. I couldn't take any more. My head was bursting.

'I haven't been in this part of the building before,' Burke says, looking around.

'This was the London Dungeon,' I tell him.

My ex-teacher nods. 'I often meant to check it out, but I never got around to it.'

'I came here lots,' I sniff. 'My mum hated the place, but Dad was like me, he thought it was great. He'd bring me here, just the two of us, and we'd have a wicked time.'

'I bet,' Burke says.

'What's that supposed to mean?' I shout, thinking he's having a dig at my racist dad, implying that he liked the horrors of the Dungeon because he was horrific himself.

Burke blinks, startled by my tone. 'Nothing. It looks like it must have been a lot of fun back in the day. That's all I was saying.'

Rage snorts. 'Always thought the Dungeon was rubbish myself.'



I laugh shortly. 'That's because you're a moron with no taste.'

'Yeah,' he says. 'That must be why I fancy you.'

I give him the finger, but chuckle despite myself.

'So what do you think of old Oystein's story?' Rage asks.

I shrug and look away.

'He's off his head, isn't he?' Rage pushes.

'I suppose ...'

'Do you think any of it was real? Being imprisoned by the Nazis, inventing the zombie gene, working with governments and armies all these years to suppress breakouts?'

'Those are undeniable facts,' Burke says quietly. 'I discussed Dr Oystein with my military contacts when I was leading a double life. Everything he told us today checked out.'

'What about his direct line to God?' Rage jeers.

Burke sighs. 'That's where we hit a grey area.'

'Nothing grey about it,' Rage says cheerfully. 'The doc's a lunatic. I don't believe in God, the Devil, reincarnation, nothing like that. Even if I did, his

story doesn't ring true. The all-powerful creator of the universe teaming up with a brain-hungry zombie? Get real!

'Many prophets were outcasts of their time,' Burke murmurs. 'They were mistrusted and feared by their contemporaries, mocked, abused, driven from their homes. Christ was crucified, John the Baptist's head was chopped off, Joan of Arc was burnt at the stake.'

'Yeah,' Rage says, 'but they were human, weren't they? They were alive.'

'Lazarus,' I say softly, the memory coming to me out of nowhere. 'Jesus raised him from the dead. The first zombie.'

Rage starts to laugh, then considers what I've said and frowns. 'You think the doc's telling the truth?'

I pull a face. 'How the hell do I know? It sounds crazy, but ...'

'I don't do *buts*,' Rage says. 'It's a simple world as long as you don't let others complicate it for you. The doc's a genius, no one's denying that, but he's mad too. I respect him for the Groove Tubes, bringing the Angels together and all the rest, but I'm not gonna

pretend there wasn't steam coming out of his ears when he started telling us about his cosy chats with God.'

'So what are you gonna do?' I ask.

'About what?'

'This war he wants us to fight. The Angels versus Mr Dowling and his army of mutants. If you don't believe God's on our side, or that we're fighting the forces of darkness, where does that leave you?'

'Right where I want to be,' Rage smirks. 'In the thick of it all.'

He walks up to the plasterboard wall I punched and studies the hole I made.

'We're built to fight,' he whispers, rubbing together the bones sticking out of his fingers. 'We were reborn as perfect killing machines. I always wanted to join an army. I had it all planned. I was gonna give myself a couple of years after school to see the world, have some laughs, sow my wild seeds.'

'Oats,' Burke corrects him.

'Whatever. Then I was gonna join the French Foreign Legion or something like that. Go where the

battles were, test myself on the field of combat, maybe become a mercenary further down the line, hire myself out to whoever paid me the most.'

'You don't believe in loyalty to a cause?' Burke asks diplomatically.

'Loyalty's for mugs,' Rage says.

Burke looks disappointed. 'Then you're not going to stay with Dr Oystein?'

Rage frowns. 'Weren't you listening? I want to be where the action is. Dr Oystein's five cans short of a six-pack, but if he's gonna start a war with the clown and his mutants, I want to be there when they clash. So, yeah, I'm his man if he'll have me.'

'You're going to stay even though you think Dr Oystein is mad?' I gawp.

'Of course,' Rage says calmly. 'War's in my blood. I want to be a warrior and Oystein's offering me the best fight in town. Why would I turn my back on the chance to go toe to toe with an army of mutants and their diabolical leader? Hell, if we win, I might end up saving the world from the Devil — how ironic would that be, given that I don't even believe in the bugger?'

Rage turns to leave.

‘And what if the Devil makes you a better offer?’
Burke asks.

Rage looks back uncertainly.

‘What if Mr Dowling asks you to join him somewhere down the line?’ Burke presses. ‘Would you consider a proposal from our enemy?’

‘Might do,’ Rage nods. ‘Offhand I can’t think of anything he could offer to tempt me, since money doesn’t mean anything these days. But never say never, right?’

‘You’d sell us out?’ I shout.

‘In a heartbeat,’ Rage says, then flashes his teeth in a merciless grin. ‘God, the Devil, forces in-between . . . It makes no difference to me. I’ll go where the going’s good. Right now I’m best off sticking with Dr Oystein. But I’m not in this game to save the world or what’s left of mankind. I’m just a guy in search of some kicks to pass the time before my tired old bones give up the ghost.’

Rage cocks his head and grunts. ‘If the doc’s right about us being able to survive for thousands of years,

that's a lot of time to play with. I'll need a lot of kicks. Maybe spend a century working for the good guys, then a century for the villains. Or take on the whole lot of you together — Rage against the world. Wherever the opportunity for the most excitement lies, that's where you'll find me.

‘Take care, folks. And watch your backs.’

Then, with a laugh, he's gone, leaving Burke and me to stare at each other in open-mouthed disbelief.