NECROPOLIS RISING

If the undead ever needed a shot of life this is it!
GARRY CHARLES - SHOCK HORROR MAGAZINE

DAVE JEFFERY
Preface

This book is a product of passion. Passion for all things dark and sinister and clamouring from thick cold earth, or damp mildewed places that abhor the living yet unleash the dead. Passion for zombie impresarios Romero and Fulci back in the day when make up artist Tom Savini worked the kind of visceral magic that the CGI generation just doesn’t get to see anymore. And finally passion for where it all really starts, in the mind of someone who isn’t – or perhaps really is - afraid to conjure dark things and put them down on paper, or type macabre words onto a computer screen.

But as much as Necropolis Rising is a product of tradition, it is very much a creature of today. The story is grounded in adventure and horror, it seeks to shock and horrify, scare and amuse but above all it serves to entertain. The idea of pitching a group of cyber-thieves against The Risen came by chance. The National Criminal Intelligence DNA Database is located somewhere in Birmingham City, UK. And seeing that Birmingham is a mere stones throw from where I was raised, it made perfect sense to fill its streets with shuffling, shambling zombies. With this city as a backdrop this book contains action set pieces that were a wicked joy to create, and scenarios that were disturbing enough to have the author think twice about keeping them in. But keep them in I did.

Those who know Birmingham City will know that there is no such place as the doomed Hilton Towers, and that I may have taken creative liberty with some of the great city’s geography. To the citizens of Birmingham I can only say it could be worse. *The Risen* could be real.

If you are reading this now, then the assumption is made that you too are smitten with the kind of passion that has made this tale what it is. And I thank you for being here. Truly. Deeply.

Now it’s time to lock the doors, bar the windows and pull up chair. And try to ignore the groans from beyond the walls. It’s just the wind, after all.

Isn't it?

Dave Jeffery
August 2010
For Thomas and Grace -
My real world.
A fist bounced off of the window, rattling the glass in its frame. Beyond the doorway, Dennis Owen, the security guard sitting at the reception desk, looked up and scrutinized the two men standing outside in the rain.

After a moment’s consideration Owen stood, moving his post-retired police gut from behind the oak paneled desk, and tucked his thumbs into his utility belt. With an exaggerated swagger the guard aimed himself at Hilton Towers’ entrance.

Standing in the rain, the two men adjusted their stance slightly. And if Owen hadn’t spent so much of his spare time numbing his thirty five years of police training eating doughnuts and reading trashy celebrity magazines, he would have recognized that the men were getting prepared to move; that they were getting ready to execute something that had been planned for some time.

“What can I do for you, fellas?” Owen said, his voice blunted by the two hundred pound per square meter safety glass.

“I hear that the tenant in the penthouse suite has lost something?” suggested one of the men. He had a scraggy beard to compliment the scrawny body lurking beneath the camouflage combat fatigues and beaten up donkey jacket.

“Oh, yeah?” Owen queried, wearing suspicion like an ill-fitting suit. “And what would that be?”

“This little guy,” the man in the donkey jacket said pulling gently on a leash in his right hand. From behind him a small, short-haired poodle padded into view and sniffed at the doors, before climbing onto his hind legs and planting his front paws on the glass. He barked twice, his tiny tail wagging furiously.

“We heard he’d been stolen and there was a reward,” said scraggy beards’ companion. He was shorter with more meat on his bones; though his face was still gaunt.

“Is that true?”

Gaunt knew it was true since he’d actually been the one who had stolen the poodle two days ago. He’d stolen the dog so that he could stand here in the rain and use it as a ruse to get this lard-ass has-been to open the fucking door so he could use the Taser he had tucked in the waist band of his jeans.

Owen hunkered down and tapped the glass between him and the mutt. “Is that you, Pepper?” he asked with a smile. The dog barked that it was most certainly him.

“Hate to rush you,” said the man in the donkey jacket, but we’re getting a bit wet out here.”

The guard eyed them one more time. Maybe his old instincts were trying to fight their way through retirement fudge, but then he was lifting his access swipe card and the door clicked open.

The two men ambled inside, the dog beside them; its tiny nails clicking against the tiled floor.

“I’ll just buzz Dr. Whittington and let him know Pepper’s back,” Owen said turning back to the reception desk. “Haven’t seen him much today. So maybe I’ll take Pepper up to him.”

“Thanks,” said scraggy beard to Owen. “But we’d like to see the good doctor in person.”

Then Mr. Gaunt coolly removed the Taser from his waist band and fired 50,000 volts into Owen’s fat, inner tube of a neck.

For a few seconds, the guard jittered on the spot, and then collapsed in a heap, Pepper sneezing at the whiff of cordite in the air. The men tethered Pepper to the leg of the reception desk after tying up their immobilized captive with Velcro straps and bundling him into his office.

Their visit wasn’t going to take long. Hell, by the time these members of the Animal Activist League had finished their business with the good Dr. Whittington no-one would be concerned with the lump of flab flapping around in the office.

The men climbed into an elevator made from highly polished, stainless steel and hit the button marked Penthouse. Once the car was in motion, the two men unbrided the rucksacks they carried and placed them carefully at their feet.

In the slow hum marking their ascent, they pulled free several items. The first was a large canister that had started the day as home to six litres of olive oil but now came with a taper attached and swinging like a long, thin pendulum. This was followed by a gas mask each and two Browning automatic pistols.

“You know that once that door opens there’s no going back?” Scraggy beard said to his companion.

“I’m not backing out, Sean,” the other guy said sternly, his eyes reinforcing his resolve. “Whittington is a fuckin’ murderer and he’s being allowed to get away with it.”

“Okay, Sam,” Sean replied. “Let’s get ready.”

The two men donned their masks and the slurping, sucking sound of their breathing filled the tiny car space, drowning out the electric motor overhead.
Sam hoisted the container to his chest, keeping it upright by hugging it to him with one arm; the other tightly clutched the Browning.

"Why can’t we just shoot him?” he asked Sean.

"Because he needs to know fear,” his colleague replied, his eyes cold behind the face plate. “He needs to suffer the way his victims have suffered.”

"Oh, he’ll suffer alright,” Sam scoffed, the noise coming through the mask as a harsh, staccato rasp.

The chime of the bell told them they had arrived on the penthouse level; nineteen floors above Birmingham City Center. The rewards for murder, Sam thought grimly as they exited the confines of the lift.

The men walked carefully down a short hallway with a single door at the end. Either side, the corridor’s walls were lined with rosewood and the burgundy carpet absorbed the footfalls from their heavy boots.

"Inhumanity pays,” Sean said bitterly.

"His times up, Sean,” Sam replied placing the canister by the door, its contents rattling slightly as it settled.

Within its metal innards the container held two compounds: iron oxide and aluminum metal powder. Separately these two composites were innocuous, but together with a lit magnesium taper as a detonator, they created Thermite; a substance that burns at approximately 2500 degrees Celsius. And inside the tin was an outer sleeve containing ordinary tap water. Sam knew that when this beauty was detonated the Thermite reaction would be so intense, you wouldn’t be able to look at it for fear of frying your retinas, and when the molten iron hit the water it would detonate like a small bomb, obliterating the penthouse and the monster that lived there.

"Okay,” Sean said behind him. “You ready?”

"Yes,” Sam said pulling a Zippo from his pocket. “We’ll have ten seconds-”

"I know the drill, Sam,” Sean scolded. “Just light the fucker!”

Sam flipped the Zippo and the flame danced in the air.

Then they heard the yelping; followed shortly by a small terrified whine.

"There’s another dog in there!” Sam said, sharply. Stowing the Zippo he raised his pistol and pressed his ear against the door.

But the door wasn’t locked; in fact: it wasn’t even shut, and Sam fell into the room with cry of surprise. And when he saw what was happening inside the room his surprise turned to absolute horror.

At first the two members of the AAL thought they had stumbled across one of Dr. Whittington’s notorious vivisection experiments; but this wasn’t the case. As their eyes adjusted to the carnage inside the suite, it became apparent that no-one had ever seen anything quite like this.

In one section of the penthouse a mobile laboratory had been established; a glittering ark of stainless steel and glass. Work surfaces glistened under spots in the ceiling and phials and flasks were stowed neatly away in cabinets of opaque glass.

But on the other side of the room Dr. Richard Whittington was eating the still whimpering remains of a golden retriever. It was lying on its side in the middle of an expensive Persian rug, its bowels and lower intestines swinging in the doctor’s mouth, its life’s blood pooling bright and red on the carpet, the ceiling; the walls.

The doctor bit down hard on the offal and the animal squealed pitifully. Still kneeling where he’d fallen, Sam raised his pistol and pumped five bullets into Whittington’s torso, each one leaving a plume of bloody mist as it exited.

The doctor recoiled from the impact, toppling onto his side, his meal slipping from his teeth and slopping onto the rug.

"Jesus God!” Sean snarled at Whittington’s prone body. “What kind of sick fuck are you?”

Whittington answered by sitting up and looking at him, and in the doctor’s eyes the men saw nothing. And while Whittington wasn’t known for compassion, his eyes were now devoid of what little humanity he may have possessed. His eyes were dead; yet his body still moved.

"I shot you!” Sam cried and, to illustrate this, he let off two more shots at the doctor’s body as it began to crawl towards him. But Whittington didn’t stop. Instead, he clambered over the coffee table, launching his gore splattered body at Sam, who was too stunned to raise his weapon.

Whittington landed, knocking Sam flat and the two of them rolled across the heavy mauve shag pile, a tangle of arms and legs, making it impossible for Sean to take a clear shot.

"Get out of the way, Sam!” he yelled in desperation; his hands wrapped around the pistol grip.

Suddenly there was a terrible cry of pain and Sam’s face came into view, his nose was gone; chewed away by the thing that was Whittington and his eyes rolled back into his head as the doctor located his neck and clamped onto it before yanking his mouth away, bringing it with a tattered strip of flesh and a tangled web of veins.

Sean watched as the arms of his dying colleague flailed in the air. Then he noted that Sam still held the Browning. And in that moment the gun went off, the bullet shattered Sean’s shin before striking the home-made Thermite
device in the doorway behind him.

The explosion drowned out the screams, ripping into the room, into the flesh of the living and the dead before consuming the mobile lab in a wall of searing flame.

Another huge explosion punched out the windows, showering the city below with powdered glass and flame and debris.

As the oxygen rushed into the room the flames raged, consuming all in its fiery wrath; purging the room of the awful things that it held only a few moments ago.

But for the city nineteen floors below, it was already far too late.

***
The room contained four people, three sitting on chairs of chrome and wood, and one standing, facing them. Behind the person at the front, a power point presentation unfolded on the stark white wall, the images an eclectic mix of building schematics and various Google Earth shots of Birmingham City Centre.

The man at the front was Kevin O’Connell, and he was an architect. Not an architect in the true sense of the word; he didn’t sit at a draftsman’s desk and design buildings of glittering steel and glass that earned him industry awards and acclaim. No, he did not do such things, but he did create, he did design and build things that had earned him far more money and international renown from his peers than any member of the Royal Society of Architects could ever imagine.

If O’Connell was considered a criminal, it was only ever in the eyes of those he had wronged. Because O’Connell was good at what he did. And because he was good, he had never been caught or linked to any wrong doing. That was why his services were always sought. That was why he operated a waiting list.

“Now listen up,” O’Connell said in a voice that had resonance. “This is the last briefing before we get this job done. The last chance to make sure it’s nailed. Up until now it’s been need to know, and now we all need to listen.”

He paced backwards and forwards, his steps slow and considered; his well-built frame exhibiting no evidence of anxiety.

But it hadn’t always been this way. Not by a long shot.

“The job is simple enough,” O’Connell said smoothly. “But the timing makes it a bitch.”

“Speakin’ of bitches, where’s Suzie?”

O’Connell eyed the large man sitting slouched in the chair directly in front of him. Stu Kunaka wasn’t slouching because he was disinterested or drunk or just plain slovenly. Stu was sprawled in the chair because it was the only way he could fit his large, muscular frame into it.

“She’ll be here,” O’Connell said, undeterred.

“She don’t need no briefin’, then?” Stu questioned with a smile. “Her bootie’s turnin’ you into a pussy cat, boss.”

“Better that than just a pussy, Stu,” O’Connell said deadpan. Only Stu could get away with the cheap shots. Not because of his size, not because of his special forces background or his ability to hurt people very easily and very effectively. But because these two men went back. Way back to a time where honour had more value to them than money.

“Let’s stay focused, Gentlemen,” O’Connell said blatantly ignoring Stu’s original question. He hit a button on the remote in his hand and the image of a building flashed up on the wall behind him.

“This is the object of our desire for the next twenty four hours. And this is why this whole operation has been organized on a need to know basis.”

“Want to tell us what that is, boss?” The comment came from a slender man of Asian decent. Amir Singh stroked his thick, silken beard as he talked. He was softly spoken which made him appear unassuming. This was part of his trade, the consummate con man; able to talk people into doing things that, in hindsight, they may never do again.

“This, Amir, is the home of the National Criminal Intelligence DNA Database,” O’Connell explained. “It holds the DNA profiles of anyone charged with a crime. In 2006 there were over four million profiles and on average it grows by 30,000 samples per month. So do the math.”

“Okay,” Amir said. “So that’s the building; so what are we stealing? Information?”

“That’s the joy, Amir. We’re not stealing anything,” a young, spotty faced guy sitting on the other side of Stu said. Gaz Clarke had to lift himself out of his seat and peer round Stu’s bulk just so that Amir could see him. His emerald eyes flitted over to O’Connell for sanction. O’Connell gave it with a nod of his head.

“The samples can not only link criminals to the crime scene, they can also indirectly link them to any member of their family,” Clarke explained. “This is not good for some family businesses; especially those who have an interest in maintaining a degree of discretion.”

“So?” Amir asked. “If we’re not stealing anything, what are we doing?”

“We’re going to stir the stew,” Clarke said with a wink. “I’m going to give it the mother of all viruses.”

“So we’re to take it out?” Stu asked not masking his surprise. “Couldn’t we do that by just hacking into their main frame and dumping the virus in the hole?”

“Sure,” Clarke said with a contemptuous sniff, “if all we were doing is taking it out! But that would be child’s play and —”

“And not what our clients want,” O’Connell butted in. “Clarke’s on board because he’s a malicious, but clever, little cyber-fucker. The virus will just keep the network busy whilst the Programme he’s created rides piggy-back
and embeds into the operating system. It’s important that it remains undetected, since then we can get it to do exactly what we’ve promised our employers.”

“Which is what?” Amir asked.
“Access the data and manipulate it. Alter results, muddy the waters; and plant our own material. What better way to take out a rival than have them convicted using their DNA profile?”
“Sounds like sci-fi bullshit,” Stu said.
“Yes?” O’Connell queried. “Well it’s sci-fi bullshit that will earn this outfit 100 million.”
“What about the security?” Amir asked. “I’m no computer expert but even I know about firewalls and anti virus software.”
“We have a man, who can,” O’Connell said. “At our word he will deactivate the firewall for thirty seconds, and let the dummy virus and the Programme in. The virus will be quarantined, but by then our Programme will be replicating the system. But we will have to manually implant the virus from a terminal inside the NCIDD building, bypassing the state of the art external firewall.”
“100 million,” Stu smiled. “That’s some pay cheque. Who’s funding this gig?”
“Who do you think?” O’Connell said
O’Connell nodded. “That’s our employer for the next twenty-four hours.”
“Jesus,” Clarke muttered.
The Consortium. It shouldn’t be able to exist, but it did, an organization comprising some of the most influential and esoteric bosses the crime world had to offer, an international criminal council presiding over a clandestine empire.
“If we pull this off,” O’Connell said, “it will be used as a model worldwide. A franchise that will be worth billions.”
“And if we fail?” Amir asked.
“There is no “fail”, Amir,” O’Connell’s reply was as cold as steel. “If you have any reservations then you stow them in dark places. There’s no backing out. There’s no failure. The Consortium has the names of all involved on this job. That was part of the deal; part of their investment. It comes at cost, you got that?”
Amir nodded unhappily.
“The money is secured and ready to be wired to our offshore accounts. I’ve a lot riding on this gig,” O’Connell announced. “There’s no going back. And there’s more to lose than professional reputation.”
Clarke opened his mouth to reply when the door to the room crashed open with such force the door handle left a dent in the back wall. O’Connell, Kunaka and Amir wheeled, producing an assortment of hand guns, all cocked at once; filling the room with thick, multiple clicks.
Suzie Hanks marched into the room, her body lithe and graceful, and her pretty face tight, and angry. She pulled a lock of blonde hair from the corner of her mouth; oblivious to the guns trained on her.
“Jesus, Suzie!” O’Connell said at her approach. “We could’ve shot you! What happened to the secret knock?”
“Fuck the secret knock,” Suzie said heading for O’Connell’s laptop and punching at the keys. “We’ve got a problem!”
***
“Shit,” O’Connell spat the word across the room. The others looked up at him.
They were all huddled around the laptop which Suzie had clicked onto the iPlayer. The images on the screen could have been straight from a big budget Hollywood movie. Armored personnel carriers were pulling up and discharging troops onto the streets, each man carrying a rifle, their faces hidden behind gas masks. The camera panned, following a squad of soldiers as they ran to a high-backed truck and began pulling free rolls of razor wire. The whole scene was one of organized urgency.
“Assessment?” O’Connell said to Stu.
“Containment,” the big man’s reply was simple and final. “Something big is going down.”
“If you guys could be quiet for a second,” Suzie hissed, “maybe we’ll get to hear what’s going on.”
On screen, the camera had found a female reporter who was standing in the rain, her hair lank and her shoulders shrugging off the water.
“The true nature of this crisis is not exactly known,” the woman was saying. “All we can confirm is that there has been an explosion at Hilton Towers and as we speak the City of Birmingham has been cordoned off by the military; no-one is being allowed in, or out, of the city. As most in Birmingham will already be aware, Hilton Towers is home to Dr. Richard Whittington who has achieved a fair amount of adverse publicity due to his pro-vivisection stance in the late seventies. Over the past three decades, his staunch advocacy of such practices has made him an active target for animal rights extremists in the UK.”
The reporter paused as a huge lorry drove past, taking the opportunity to drag her damp fringe out of her eyes before continuing as the big engine receded.

“Dr. Whittington is no stranger to controversy. His alleged involvement in MOD experiments with biological weapons in the seventies were uncovered by our investigative team only last year; leading to a Government denial of the existence of such a program. Whatever the speculations surrounding Dr. Whittington and his nefarious scientific activities, the facts are: tonight he is quite possibly dead and Birmingham City is effectively locked down.”

O’Connell’s eyes narrowed and his hands balled into fists. Standing by his side Stu Kunaka allowed a smile to play on his lips.

“You wanna say “shit” again, boss or shall I say it for ya?”
“An examination of the book and its authors would suggest quite a conservative agenda. (I also accept that the final mix of contributions will also determine this). I think there is a real danger that this book will only serve to fuel the divide even further.”

Professor George Mitchell sat back in his office chair, hit the “save” key on his keyboard and smiled. There, that’ll put them in their place, he thought. There was nothing more satisfying than reviewing a book proposal from some young upstart and rubbing it, tearing it to pieces the way a fox savages a hapless rabbit in a field.

More often than not, the authors were fresh out of University, a first degree now an apparent badge of office for some; recognition of their intellectualism. Sometimes the proposals came from seasoned academics or professional rivals, and behind the battlements of anonymity Mitchell loved to scupper any potential publication; not because it was not viable, but because it was not viable, but because he could.

And his opinion was valued by the major academic publishing houses. A poor review meant no deal; no credibility.

Over the years this had certainly proven to be a beneficial position. Especially for young, female PhD students eager for publication and willing to do anything for a chance to have their work recognized. Such prestige led to major research grants and scientific accolades. One night at the mercy of Professor Mitchell was but a small price to pay.

Because: the cost of refusing his advances was professional suicide.

Academia had given him a good life; a six figure salary in Birmingham University’s Faculty of Health, and young women by the semester load. It didn’t bother him that they did what he asked under duress, or for personal gain. As long as he had them, as long as he had control over them, then this was all that mattered.

Mitchell rubbed his eyes and stifled a yawn with a cupped palm. Late nights were par for the course these days. What with work and ill-gotten sex it was small wonder his marriage had survived the ten years that it had. Marcia had left him for someone in agriculture; a Scotsman who reeked of manure. No accounting for taste, he’d mused at the time. It had been so long ago he had neither the inclination nor the motivation to recall the details of it. He hadn’t cared then and he certainly didn’t care now. Marcia was a dim memory who wrenched him away from his ordered life as a University Professor. And the women who he lured into bed with promises of rapid career progression gave him impetus. For a while, he had hidden behind this emotional façade; incapable of giving affection. But this had recently and incomprehensibly changed.

Because, at fifty nine years of age, George Mitchell had fallen in love.

Mitchell was in love with Amy Childs and this was a pure and simple fact. But it was a love that was totally unrequited since Amy Childs didn’t know of his affections. She had been his secretary for little over three years and in this time he yearned to have her; not in the way he sought intellectual and physical dominance over his students, he just enjoyed her purity, her simplicity. She held no stock by intellect, she merely enjoyed - accepted - her place in things.

At 25 she was thirty nine years his junior but her presence - her vitality - made him feel young again. And when he considered her beauty, the way her dark hair fell upon her pale and delicate skin, or how the light danced in her ice blue eyes, he didn’t conjure cold, calculated images of sex for the sake of base gratification and degradation, instead he thought of tenderness and a yearning for his devotion to be a reciprocal entity; beheld and reflected in the eyes of this beautiful, delicate creature.

It was the only thing that terrified him, the thought of Amy rejecting his advances. And such was his fear of losing her, he was content to be near to her, drawing comfort from the smell of her perfume (Flora by Gucci, he’d bought a bottle and kept it at home, a reminder when she wasn’t near) and the sight of her slight frame as she sat opposite making notes, snatching glimpses of the rise and fall of her small breasts, longing to reach out and touch her.

There was a noise just outside the door of his office. A small noise, a little like nails scratching against the wood.

“Amy?” he called out, relishing the sound of her name on his lips. “Amy, are you still here?”

The scratching noise stopped.

Must be imagining things, he thought, with mild disappointment. He recalled Amy asking him if she could leave early; something about not feeling too good. He remembered wishing that he had the courage to reach out and stroke her pale cheek, and take away her hurt.

Mitchell turned his attention back to his review. It was overdue. The authors didn’t deserve his punctuality, only his contempt.

The handle on his office door turned until the mechanism clicked. He looked up as the door swung inwards and
his heart began to thud in his chest.

Amy Childs was standing in the doorway, her exquisite, unblemished face alabaster in the stark office lights. Her hair was damp, as though she’d been outside in the rain and two buttons on the plum coloured blouse, accentuating her slim hard body, were open from the waist up, revealing the perfect “O” of her navel.

“Oh, gosh, my dear,” Mitchell said softly, pushing his chair away from the desk. “You feel it too?”

He edged towards her. “Look at you,” he whispered. The poor creature had a confused expression on her face; her pale eyes staring, and when they locked onto him he saw something inside them, a deep seated hunger that so desperately needed to be sated.

Quivering, Mitchell stood in front of her - over her - and brought his hands up to frame her chin, her skin was as ice, surprising but not deterring him from the moment where he made a thousand images and wishes come true, stooping to place his lips and stroke them against hers. He felt her mouth open, drew his tongue across teeth whiter than her skin and plunged it deeply into her mouth.

Amy Childs removed his tongue with a bite that was as efficient as a bear trap.

Mitchell reeled, the pain bright, but numbing his senses as he staggered backwards, his chest a bloody “V” where gore streaked from his mouth.

His feet tangled and he fell, his head making contact with the desk, putting the lights out for a while. And when he came to, mere moments later, dazed and confused and unable to move; he found Amy Childs straddling him, her skirt hitched, her blouse open and bloody in a mocking parody of coitus. He tried to scream but it was ineffective, he found himself choking on the gush of blood running down his throat, its iron taste gagging and making his belly burn. But by this time Amy was bringing her white face, splashed with dark blood into view. The hunger in her eyes was still there and shortly before she clamped her mouth over his lips began chewing, Professor George Mitchell dismissed his intellect and went mad.

Not that Amy would have noticed. She was too busy eating.

***
“So what now?”

It was Stu Kunaka who asked the question, but they had all thought it. This was a job that was dependent on precision timing. This current problem was about as welcome as holes in a life raft.

“I need an appraisal and recommendations,” O’Connell said. “And fast.”

“We can still plant the virus if we can gain access to the NCIDD building,” Clarke offered.

“Our man who can isn’t in the building until 8am tomorrow morning,” Suzie said curtly. “And now the city is locked down he isn’t getting in there.”

“Are we saying this thing is off?” Amir asked.

“It can’t be off,” O’Connell said coolly. “There’s no such thing as extenuating circumstances with The Consortium. There’s only the job - and getting it done.”

“But no one is getting in,” Amir protested. “The place is crawling with the military.”

O’Connell nodded; his face impassive, calculating.

“Stu?” he finally said.

“Already on it, boss,” the big man said reaching for his phone and walking away from them with the tiny handset rammed to his ear.

“What are you thinking, O’Connell?” Suzie said with a puzzled frown.

“The military has freedom of movement. Which now means getting into the city may be the toughest part of this operation,” he explained.

“How are we getting inside the city?” Clarke asked picking at a crop of ripe spota on his chin.

“Stu’s working on it,” O’Connell said; his demeanor upbeat, all traces of uncertainty shelved. He was doing what he did best. He was planning, he was thinking - building a way to dodge the curveball and turn it to their advantage.

Sure, what he had in mind wasn’t perfect. But he knew if they could get past the cordon it would definitely work.

“You want to enlighten me?” Suzie’s face suggested a degree of irritation. Her smooth forehead was now furrowed and her mouth adopted a pout that had O’Connell yearning for a moment alone with her, a moment of intimacy where he could hold her to him and stroke the nape of her neck in the way that made her giggle and sigh in one hit.

But Suzie would never show her feelings for him here. Here there was only the job and getting it done. Her professionalism was one of the many things he loved about her.

She shouldn’t have turned out so organized. As a woman Suzie should’ve turned out a mess. When O’Connell had first met her she was high on coke and threatening to throw herself from a multi-storey car park. He’d watched, fascinated as her magnificent body teetered on the parapet as she yelled curses at the twinkling, smog-hazed lights of the city skyline.

Much of it was aimed at Toby Hanks, her father, a man who enjoyed too many evenings reading his little girl bedtime stories about monsters before clamping a hand over her mouth and proving that the real monsters are sometimes the very people in which we place so much trust. Suzie’s mother often lay in a stupor downstairs in their lounge as Toby Hanks lay in bed with his “little girl”, telling her never to talk about their “little secret”.

O’Connell had found all this out on that night; watching her on the multi-storey, a symbol of beauty and rage and self destruction. And on that night he made a promise that had stopped her from jumping. That night he promised this beautiful, coked-out-of-her-brain woman that he would make things right.

At the time she’d laughed. But what he promised to do, in exchange for her climbing down and talking to him for a few more minutes, was that he would find Toby Hanks and bring him to her and make him beg for forgiveness. And then, O’Connell assured her with unerring conviction, he’d put a gun to her abusive father’s head and put a bullet in his brain.

At first Suzie thought he was joking, and then she saw his deep brown eyes: unwavering, honest and mesmerizing. If anyone ever asked her when she’d fallen in love with Kevin O’Connell she would’ve said it was the moment she saw those eyes; and the truth living within them.

“Hey,” Suzie’s voice slapped him from his reverie. “Stay focused, O’Connell.”

“I am focused, Susan!” He tipped her a wink, knowing how much she hated being called her Christian name. “Stu, tell me we’re on.”

The big man clicked off his phone and walked back to the group.

“You bet your fuckin’ Porsche, we’re on!” he laughed.
The same room – a different plan. It was two hours later and the crew were standing in a semi-circle checking each other over.

Their clothes had been replaced by green military fatigues; O’Connell adjusting the packs on the webbing lashed about his shoulders and waist.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Clarke said doubtfully as he rolled the cuffs of his tunic up several times before he could find his arms.

“Don’t fret, Clarkey,” Stu jibed. “You might grow into it.”

“We ain’t all fat fucks like you, Stu,” Clarke grumbled.

“Knock it off,” said O’Connell sternly. “I’m going to run the brief, and I want you to listen up. This is a new plan and it has holes. I don’t want any of us falling through ’em, got that?”

The silence told O’Connell that they’d all gotten it pretty good.

“We’re using the uniforms to move around. Stu has called in some pretty big favours tonight and got us enough kit to walk the walk. Downstairs we’ve got us some serious transport to make the going a little easier.”

“What you got us, Stu, a tank?” Clarke scoffed.

“I didn’t have enough time,” Stu said with the kind of seriousness that came with honesty. “So we’ve got a Mastiff six wheel drive; carries six, fully armored.”

“Isn’t that a little like overkill? We’re supposed to blend in, not go on a ram-raid.” Suzie said pointedly to Kunaka, earning her a scowl from the big man.

“We’ve got to prepare for every eventuality, Suzie,” O’Connell interjected. “If we get rumbled, we may have to force our way through.”

“And a roadblock ain’t gonna stop no Mastiff, missy,” Stu growled.

“Armour as thick as your head, then, I guess,” Suzie sniped, turning away from him.

“Let’s stay focused,” O’Connell said tactfully. “The plan is this: we get into the city, appraise the easiest route to our target, then use the explosion as leverage to gain access to the NICDD building. We’re a squad sent to protect and lock down a potentially exposed, strategic target. From there we plug into their mainframe and Clarke will deliver our package directly into the system. Then we get the fuck out of there the way we got in. I’ll try and plug gaps as I go; so stow your questions because I haven’t got all the answers for you right now.”

“What’s the time frame?” Clarke asked.

“We go now,” O’Connell said, “while there’s still confusion in the air. We’ll use it to slip through the cordon.”

“And if we can’t blag our way through?” Amir queried.

Squatting down, Stu patted the hold-all at his feet.

“Then I guess we have to use a little persuasion,” he said.

“What you got in there, cowboy?” Suzie said with a caustic air.

“Men!”

“Okay,” O’Connell said after picking up a rifle. “Be ready to move in five minutes.”

***
Take that you undead bastard,” Darren Doyle screamed as he emptied the magazine of his Heckler and Koch machine pistol into the oncoming zombie horde.
Several figures span around, some taking rounds to the head, others the chest, blood and flesh splattering the air in thick gory wads.
But still they came, the room filling with their mournful groans. He tried to reload but he was out of ammo. There was no way out of here, no way back. There were just too many of them, all yearning to grab him, hold him; eat him.
“Ah, fuck it!” he muttered in resignation.
And then Darren Doyle paused the game.
On-screen, the undead pixel army stopped in mid stride, their tide of terrible lament receding, allowing silence to wash in behind it.
“Should’ve gone for that bastard arms cache after all,” Doyle appraised after taking a long slug from the can of beer that he’d retrieved from a stained coffee table next to him. He grimaced. The beer was warm and flat. Christ, how long had he been playing? He peered at the Michael Meyers clock on the wall of his bed-sit. The LED readout told him he’d just emerged from another six hour straight, cyber bender.
You need to get a life, Daz.
It was Gerard, his brother’s voice that had now taken residence in his head. Doyle reviled his brother’s piety more than the zombies frozen on the screen in front of him.
He’d not seen Gerard for over three years. Last time it had gotten pretty ugly. Words had been exchanged, booze fuelled of course. Doyle couldn’t remember that much about it. But he guessed it involved his brother telling him what a waste of space he was, how he’d never amount to anything. It usually did.
The irony was that they used to be close; driven together by the need for survival. Their parents had split when Daz and Gerard were four and eight respectively. And the years that followed were an acrimonious exchange between warring parents who used to screw each other as opposed to screw each other over. And as in all wars there was crossfire and the two kids were caught in the middle, doing the only thing they could do: keep their heads down.
Since their mum and dad had shrugged off their responsibilities, so Gerard had put them on; making sure that his little brother had some stability.
And this continued, even when their gran took them in and raised them while her son - and their dad - continued as though the world impinged on the next trade union club or snooker hall or any place but home.
But somewhere it all got worse, it all got skewed. Time marched on and boys became youths and the world grew broad and enticing. Gerard yearned for it and sought it out, and suddenly a little brother became a big mill stone that he just wanted to leave behind to gather moss.
Initially it was only for a short time, but to Daz these moments were deep cuts, carving into his psyche. And these wounds festered, eating into the wall he’d built around his feelings of insecurity. Before long, as Gerard turned his focus to new horizons, so Daz began to turn to himself. And insecurity began to manifest as rebellion; truancy and alcohol and drugs coming in quick succession. Before anyone had realised, Daz was twenty-eight and slumming it in a cramped bed-sit, with only an Xbox and a giro for company.
But fuck it! Unlike his parents, unlike his brother, the games machine was at least constant, at least reliable. And it helped him to lose days; replacing alcohol and drugs as his new addiction of choice, his new way to just bail from life.
A huge crash from the bed-sit below yanked him from his reflections. It was followed by another, this time he felt the threadbare carpet vibrate under his bare feet.
“What the fuck was that?” he moaned at the TV. The gallery of gory faces stared gormlessly back at him, declining to comment. They didn’t have to, Doyle already knew the answer. It was his tempestuous neighbors and their feckin’ tempestuous relationship.
Two people, one disagreement, countless bottles of booze and, by the sound of it, another night of bedlam. There was a loud pop and the bright tinkle of shattering glass and then a short, sharp scream. A series of shuffling footfalls ensued as though something was being dragged across bare floorboards.
Doyle made a decision to be pre-emptive. He smashed his foot down onto the floor boards three times.
“Shut the fuck up and learn to communicate, you morons!” he yelled.
For some reason, Doyle found the resulting silence more disturbing than the argument. Then the shuffling noise was back.
And something else. It was faint, drifting though the floor but its presence had his eyes flitting towards the TV screen and the hairs of his neck began to do a jig. Someone was groaning.

It wasn’t a groan of pain, or of love making. It was discordant and feral, like the growl of a hungry animal.

Doyle turned off the TV.

He held his breath, listening out for that groan (growl). But what he heard was an even more unsettling noise: the click and squeak of a front door being opened. He heard it in surround sound; partially through the floor and also drifting up the stairwell.

And after the squeak ended the slow dragging noise started again; the shuffling punctuated by the thud of a foot landing on the steps.

Then the groaning came again; amplified and given a hideous, ethereal quality by the stairwell. With each slow and deliberate footfall the groaning became louder and thicker and closer, until Doyle could see shadows shimmering in gap between his front door and the thread bare carpet.

He jumped as something struck the other side of the door with enough force to make it rattle in its frame.

The sudden surge of adrenalin; the bright, insistent need to scream consumed him and for one horrible moment he almost gave in to it. Instead he clamped both his hands over his gaping mouth, his fingers creating dark divots in the flesh of his cheeks.

The shuffling on the landing, the wavering shadows at the door-hem held his eyes. He felt a twinge in his right calf as the muscle protested and he lifted his foot to head off cramps.

The noise from the landing began to recede, the footsteps now moving away from the door; away from Doyle. He allowed his hands to fall away from his mouth and placed his foot firmly back onto the floor.

And onto the TV remote.

The room was suddenly alive with sinister music and the pervading din of the pixel undead, now re-animated and lurching towards him on the screen.

Doyle stooped for the remote, grabbed it and hit all the buttons until the TV went blank and silent. But whoever was outside had heard the cacophony and had returned to the front door; bringing with it the slow labored footsteps and that deep growling moan.

“Oh, shit,” Doyle whispered as the pounding on the door started up again. It was a full sound, deep and dull and Doyle realised what was happening shortly before the door bowed inwards bringing the frame with it in all its splintered glory. The person lying on the floor had been butting the door with his head!

It was a man, Doyle was sure of it. The size of the guy gave it away. And as the figure clambered slowly and awkwardly to his feet, Doyle gawped in horror.

Oh, his face was livid with blood and death; a three dimensional parody of the creatures he’d been battling in cyber land for the past six hours. But somehow worlds had collided and Darren Doyle was caught in the fallout, and he was not alone.

He shook off his terror enough to back away, the thing before him straightening until its buckled twisted frame wavered. Doyle noticed a black tee shirt sporting an image of an old Smith’s Meat is Murder album cover. Somehow, Doyle knew that if this thing had ever endorsed such doctrine in the past it was now about to make a radical U-turn.

It began to shamble towards him, arms outstretched and mouth dribbling blood and saliva onto its shiny new training shoes.

“Stay away from me!” Doyle yammered.

The zombie neighbour kept on coming. It had cocked its head to one side as if listening to his cry, but its eyes were yellow and vacant, peering out from the windows of oblivion.

The zombie was between Doyle and the door. He had to think fast, try not to lose his cool. His mind began to adapt. This was a game; he only had one life left and no ammo. What could he do?

He searched frantically about the bed-sit, trying to find anything to use as a weapon. Instinctively he peeled left, an attempt to circumvent the man-thing, and this action brought him into the kitchen area, a Formica haven bristling with strewn cutlery in desperate need of a wash.

The zombie followed his movements, its utterances both mournful and sinister.

Doyle made a grab for a bread knife, its blade dull with shitty smears of Marmite. The zombie was slow, but in the small space of the bed-sit it didn’t really matter, it was close to Doyle as he turned to face it.

Over its shoulder Doyle saw the sanctity of the front door-frame, the jamb a splintered route to freedom.

He lashed out, and the zombie walked into it, the knife carving a line into its cheek and congealed blood fell as chunks of jelly.

He ducked underneath outstretched hands and on his way past jammed the knife into the things side, repulsed by
the feel of the blade grating against its ribs. He left the knife behind him, his focus now the exit and thoughts of escape.

But in this hasty exodus, Doyle got clumsy. His foot caught the felled door, and he careened into the frame, his collar bone shattering on impact, causing him the cry out, his momentum spinning him out onto the landing where his back caught the stair rail producing a bar of white hot pain that crumpled his right leg and sent him lolling to one side.

It was Harold Lloyd, it was Buster Keaton, it was Darren Doyle bouncing and rolling down a flight of harsh concrete steps, the bones in his body popping like a sheet of bubble wrap in the hands of a toddler.

He smashed onto the landing below and lay there, semi conscious; his breathing shallow and his eyes cruelly focused on the stairs.

In his woozy state he saw a hand appear on the ruined door jamb of his bed-sit and watched as the zombie extricated itself onto the landing. It turned to face him and without pause began its slow, lumbering decent.

Doyle should’ve been horrified at the fate he was about to endure, but his view of the event was third party. It wasn’t real was it? Not the pain, not the creature now standing over him filling the air with its putrid, butcher-shop reek. Any moment now it would all end; underscored by two words in bold red letters.

*Game over.*

***
Sitting in the back of the Mastiff that Kunaka had acquired on the strength of a phone call, O’Connell looked at Suzie Hanks. She didn’t return his gaze. He’d upset her. He knew this because he knew her; every nuance in her emotional arsenal, and every inch of her delicate body. He’d made a gaff. And now she was letting him know.

After their briefing, O’Connell had placed a hand on her arm and steered her to another part of the room. She sensed something immediately. His eyes never lied to her. She loved the way they never tried.

“What is it?” she asked bluntly.

“You can bail from this, Suzie.” O’Connell’s reply was cautious; testing the water.

“Bail?” she quizzed, but knew what he meant. “As in not go?” Incredulity coated her words. Her top lip turned white. “And why would I want to do that?”

“You probably wouldn’t,” O’Connell sighed. “But I thought I’d give you the choice.”

“I’ve made my choice. I’m part of this team. My name’s in The Consortium’s hat just like everyone else’s.”

She caught something in O’Connell’s face; it was fleeting but she spotted it with ease.

“What?” she said sternly.

“You’re not known to The Consortium,” he admitted sheepishly. He could take out a guy twice his size, without hesitation or regret, but right then he couldn’t look into her eyes.

“Why?”

It was such a small and simple word, but the answer was big and so complex he paused to get things straight in his mind.

“I wanted to -” He stopped and changed direction, “I needed to make sure that you were…”

“This isn’t about me at all is it?” she interjected with uncanny accuracy. “It’s about you.”

His shoulders sagged with resignation. He couldn’t deny that his decision not to inform The Consortium of Suzie’s involvement was to make sure she would be safe. Safe from the job, safe from those who would stop at nothing to get the job done. And safe from the retribution that would most certainly follow should they fail. O’Connell wanted to protect the one thing in his life that he held above all; the purity of one person’s commitment to another. From the second Suzie had climbed from the parapet at his insistence, O’Connell couldn’t help but protect her. Maybe it was because of her old man, maybe it was because it was in his nature to protect what he considered vulnerable, or what he cared for dearly.

O’Connell knew that he would give his life for Suzie Hanks, but she would never let him do it. Her nature was that of strength and resolve and pride. It was this latter element that had taken a pounding. O’Connell had tried to keep her safe, and had only succeeded in making her different. And for Susan Hanks this was a painful act, an act of betrayal. Seven years of ritualistic abuse at the hands of her daddy had made her different. She didn’t want reminders; she wanted inclusion.

“I did it for the right reasons, Suzie,” he whispered reaching up to touch her arm. She allowed the action but didn’t respond to it. Her eyes were cold with hurt.

“It was wrong,” her words were without malice yet this somehow made their sting far more potent.

“Yes,” he conceded. “I’m sorry.”

“You can say it again when we’ve done the job,” she said turning away.

His arm stayed in the air for a few seconds before he allowed it to drop to his side, redundant for a while.

“Hey, boss?”

O’Connell blinked away the memory and saw Clarke’s spot blasted face wavering into view.

“What is it, Clarkey?”

“How come I only get a pistol?” the younger guy grumbled.

“The weapons are a last resort,” O’Connell said, his tone cautious. “It’s unlikely we’ll be needing them. So don’t fret, okay?”

“Well, if these things are just for show, why can’t I have one of those rifles?” Clarke said in a petulant tone.

“Because you’ll probably shoot yourself,” Amir grinned next to him. “Then you’ll be no good to anyone. If you ever were.”

“My mother loves me,” Clarke said pulling a disgruntled face.

“She clearly doesn’t love you enough,” Amir replied.
The A38 splits Birmingham City in half. As the primary access route, the road is often congested and sluggish and doesn’t stop being as such until the early hours of the morning; where it becomes home to taxis ferrying clubbers and late night revelers back to the surrounding suburbs.

Because it was the main road into the city, it was likely to be fortified to the hilt. As such O’Connell instructed Stu to avoid it. The Mastiff approached from the market town of Bromsgrove, using a sequence of rat runs that made the passengers feel as though they were constantly turning either left or right every few hundred metres.

The view inside the cramped space was limited, the level of patience amongst the passengers, equally so. Suzie continued to keep herself closed off and Amir and Clarke sniped at each other. In this atmosphere O’Connell felt the first stages of doubt begin to churn in his belly. He stamped it out immediately, the way a vindictive child pounds upon a redundant toy. This wasn’t the time or the place for hesitation.

That was the sort of thinking got you caught. Or worse.

"Talk to me, people!"

Colonel Mark Carpenter walked through the Operations Room. Until an hour ago the room had been part of Birmingham City Council’s Social Care Offices. Now it was home to the MoD rapid response team who had stripped it out and filled it with their own monitors and computers. Ahead, the six personnel operations team took to standing to attention at his approach.

"At ease!"

Carpenter was fifty-five years old and for well over thirty eight of these years had served his country with tours in the Desert Storm Campaign, Bosnia and Afghanistan. Experience and high rank meant that the respect of others came easily to him. He had nothing to prove and no reservations about making sure that the mission was completed with nothing less than total success.

But this current situation was different. It was different because he was reliant on external intelligence networks. Something significant had occurred and information was shady at best. And when Intel was unreliable missions tended to fail. Lives were often lost.

And that would not do.

"I’m listening but hearing nothing, people!” Carpenter said briskly. “I want to know what’s going on and who is responsible! And I want that information now.”

His steel blue eyes pierced the room before locking onto a young Corporal.

"What’s happening, lad?"

"An explosion, Sir,” the corporal replied, shrugging off his nerves. “We believe the source was the Penthouse suite of Dr. Richard Whittington; most likely the result of an extremist cell of the AAL.”

"I could have gotten that from any news channel on the way in,” Carpenter snapped; but he addressed it to the room. “What do we know of Whittington? What’s his current security status?"

"He’s no longer live on the grid, Colonel.” This came from a young woman, her pretty face made severe by the way her dark hair was pulled back and clamped into a bun.

"God, thought Carpenter, was I ever that young?"

"What was he working on when he was live?"

"Bio-weapons division,” the woman said. “Several projects, all top secret. But one of them is off the grid.”

"Explain,” Carpenter said.

"Codename L.I, Sir,” she continued, un-phased. “Whittington was working on something that got him fired by the MOD and all his access privileges were subsequently rescinded. It appears that he was working outside his brief.”

"He must’ve had a project team,” Carpenter surmised. “We got names?”

"He was operating alone. There are reports - rumours - that all his research disappeared.”

"Stolen?"

"Destroyed,” the woman replied.

"So what was Whittington doing now? Who was funding him?"

"Recent Intel suggests that the doctor was a consultant for Phoenix Industries.”

"Remit?"

"Science technology. Whittington appears to have been on their books since leaving his MoD position in ‘84.”

Carpenter nodded and turned to a large soldier standing to his right.

"Harte, we need a representative of Phoenix Industries here. Get someone. Bring them here naked if you have to.”

"Yes, Sir,” Harte said with a snappy salute, and hurried off.

"So what’s going on in the target zone?” Carpenter asked the room. “And tell me we’ve commandeered CCTV
monitoring from civilian access?"

"CCTV monitoring is ours, Sir," the Corporal piped up. "The city centre is quiet, no sign of activity."

"That's an issue in itself," Carpenter observed. "Where are the people?"

"Probably taking cover," the Corporal suggested. "Maybe waiting for us to go in and get them."

"No one's going anywhere until we know what we're dealing with," Carpenter retorted. "What's giving us concern?"

"This, Sir."

The female operative sat down at her work station and began typing on the keyboard in front of her. The VDU flickered and an image suddenly appeared. It was grey and grained, the flare of sodium street lights creating deep shadows, the cobbled pavements wet with spring rain.

"This is Brindley Place," she explained without turning round from the monitor panning left to reveal a canal flanked by a series of bars and eateries. Save for the street lighting all the buildings were dark.

"What am I looking at?" Carpenter said leaning forward.

"Take a look at the tow path, Sir."

Carpenter was close enough to her shoulder to smell her perfume. Against regulations of course but he was prepared to let it go given what was unfolding on the grey screen in front of him.

On the path separating the restaurants and bars from the canal, bodies lay strewn and still. Many were dressed in suits; the garb of business. Some were men, some were women, but all were twisted, backs arched; arms and legs contorted into implausible shapes.

"They died in agony," the woman said flatly.

"Indeed," Carpenter agreed. "But what killed them?"

At this point in time, no-one could offer any answer. And even if someone had any notion, no matter how remote, they would never have had chance to voice it. Because: the next moment the door to the small operations room flew inwards to allow a short, stocky man to march towards the Colonel.

The newcomer was dressed in black fatigues and sported a blonde marine regulation hair cut; shaved to reveal a money box scar on his crown.

The marine stopped short of Carpenter and offered the Colonel a salute almost as smart as the soldier's appearance.

"At ease, Major," Carpenter said. "What brings you here?"

"Looks like somebody made a mess, Colonel," the Major replied as he stood down. "And I'm here to clear it up."

***

Major Edward Shipman was simply a soldier. As such he saw things in simple terms. It was a doctrine that had served him well in his fifteen year career. Sure he'd navigated Sandhurst with some trepidation. He was, after all, the son of a sheet metal worker, he was never going to have an easy time in such an auspicious institution. But his cunning, resolve and the simple brutality he exhibited to potential antagonists served him well during his forty-four weeks of officer training. Such aptitude for covert practices meant his career in special ops was pretty much sure fire, though he hadn't sought it out.

It had sought him.

A nameless/faceless operative in the higher echelons had heard "good things" about his work in Bosnia - where he covertly trained Serbian rebels into an effective militia; right under the noses of their Croatian oppressors - and within ten years Shipman was now out of the UK more than he was in it; not that anyone would be able to find his name on any mission or op sheet.

"I presume you have information for me, Major," Carpenter said.

The two officers were sitting in an office just outside the main operation room. It was small and the air was heavy with the sickly smell of industrial air freshener.

"I have an update from our Intel network, Sir."

"Drop the "Sir" bullshit, Shipman," Carpenter said without animosity. "What you got that you can't show our ops team?"

Shipman fished inside the pocket of his fatigues and removed a data flash-stick. It was bulky, black and hexagonal, and encrypted to the hilt.

He pushed the stick into the USB port on his smart phone. After typing in his password the tiny screen yielded its secrets and he handed the device to the Colonel.

Carpenter scrolled down the digital page, his face grim. Opposite, Shipman watched his superior, his expression impassive. Patient.

"Dr. Whittington has been busy since he left our arms," the Major said.
“So it seems,” Carpenter conceded. The screen flickered again and the Colonel read out the heading on the page. “The Lazarus Initiative,” he said. “Was this one of our projects?” “It was never on record. It was mooted by Whittington in the eighties,” Shipman confirmed. “But it was deemed too expensive. And morally compromising for the MoD.” “So save my eyesight, Shipman,” Carpenter said placing the smart phone on the desk. “Whittington suggested that what he could create was a soldier that couldn’t die.” “That’s bollocks, isn’t it?” Carpenter said. Shipman’s neutral expression suggested otherwise. “Whittington hypothesized that if a soldier was killed, how could we make the body continue fighting? Continue killing?” “It’s hard to believe such a thing is possible.” Carpenter’s skepticism kicked in for a while. “Click onto the video link at the bottom of the page,” Shipman instructed. “This clip was taken from CCTV footage thirty minutes after the explosion at Whittington’s apartment.” Carpenter did just that, and couldn’t believe what he was watching. It was footage of Broad Street, the entertainment hub for over a million visitors a year. But there wasn’t any bustle or signs of revelry. As with Brindley place, the bar fronts were dark and uninviting. But there was some movement. A lone figure ambling in the middle of the road: a middle-aged man. His legs were bowed, as though they wouldn’t be able to support his weight, and his right arm was missing above the elbow. The camera suddenly zoomed in on the man’s face and Whittington had seen enough death in his lifetime to recognize it immediately. This was, without question, a dead man walking. “My God, did Whittington actually do it?” Carpenter muttered in awe. “Not with our money,” Shipman said coldly “Meaning?” “We can assume that Phoenix Industries have funded Whittington’s research. Now the experiment has escaped from the Petri dish.” “So what are we saying here, Major?” “Birmingham is infected with the offshoot of Whittington’s Lazarus Initiative,” Shipman explained. “So we can only presume that those inside its radius are infected. The way the Initiative works is academic but the symptoms are a painful, agonizing death. And then…” the Major stopped as though he couldn’t quite bring himself to air his thoughts. “Then, what?” Carpenter asked looking at the screen as the dismembered man bumped into a lamp post. “Re-birth,” the Major whispered. *** The Mastiff slowed before coming to a complete stop; its big engine growling. From his position in the back of the truck O’Connell sensed that this was pre-emptive. He talked into his headset. “Update, Kunaka?” “Road block: four hundred metres. Instructions?” “Let’s go and say ‘hi’,” O’Connell said. “Good luck, people.” His hands closed upon the SA80 sitting across his lap. “I thought that was just for show?” said Clarke, his voice trembling slightly. O’Connell didn’t reply. *** There, my darling. Do you feel my touch? Do you feel my love?” Crispin Miller’s hand trembled as it moved over Heather Monaghan’s soft linen night dress, his fingers tracing small circles on the milky white skin of her exposed sternum, before nestling under the gown’s neckline and cupping her small breast. “I love you so much,” Crispin whispered into her ear, his fingers stroking the pert nipple of her left breast; a nipple that was not so much stiff and erect in response to his adept touch, as the fact that Heather Monaghan had been as dead as a nail since the day Crispin Miller had first met her. She wasn’t as beautiful then as she was now, of course. Then she had been damaged, the result of soft, yielding
tissue meeting the harsh plastic of a dash board at sixty miles per hour. Her death had been as instant as his love for her, when he saw the photograph Heather’s grief-stricken husband had brought into Miller’s Funeral Home Ltd several days ago.

Mr. Monaghan was wheel-chair bound; an added penance for driving slightly over the limit on the night of the accident that turned his good natured, fun loving spouse into the rag doll that had hit the windshield with such force twenty of her teeth had exploded. Monaghan’s melancholy - his guilt - was a palpable entity, and he wore his grief like fragile armour.

“Make my lass handsome again,” Monaghan had wept, handing Miller a 4x4 glossy picture of his very beautiful, very dead wife.

It was a portrait, taken during better times; times when she’d been living and breathing and enjoying what life often gave those who embraced it without question. Heather was facing camera, her green eyes framed by doe-lashes, her smile accentuated by white teeth and her skin, flawless porcelain.

Oh yes, Heather Monaghan was a sight to behold, but when the linen covers were thrown back revealing her ballooned black and blue face and eyes pulled into slits by terrible, swollen eyelids, lesser men would have wept along with her grieving spouse.

But Crispin Miller could see beyond the dreadful wounds. He had seen Heather’s potential, vowing to give her back her beauty.

And enjoy a few intimate moments along the way.

Crispin was used to his oddness. When he questioned it (which wasn’t that often) he used the cliché that the blame lay with his parents.

Miller’s mother and father were in their late forties when he came along. As the only son of older parents, his values were often traditional and by default obsolete. This was to become worse when Miller was six years old and his father died of a stroke. His mother’s grief morphed into over protection and dependence. In Georgina Miller’s need for emotional equilibrium, she blunted her son’s emotional and social development.

As such, he was always targeted by the local dimwits. His mother laughed off his complaints telling him it would be God’s retribution that such people would ultimately face.

His earliest recollection of bullies was running headlong through a wood in an attempt to evade the three boys who wanted to pass some time by kicking the shit out of him. The memory was still very clear. Because it was the same afternoon that Crispin Miller became fascinated with death.

In those woods, he’d stumbled and fallen, just missing the carcass of a dead badger. It had been there a while, its snout frozen in an endless grimace, its paws pulled taut by rigor mortis. There was little sign as to why the animal lay dead in the wood; there wasn’t any blood or indication of trauma. But the serenity he found in the scene would stay with him for the rest of his life, and somewhere along the way Miller lost the ability to differentiate the desire for life over death.

He was an awkward child, an outsider and as such his relationships with others were often superficial, if they existed at all. Where there were opportunities, Georgina Miller would snuff them out lest it lead to her son leaving her alone. Should Crispin attract any female attention, his mother would place little doubts in his mind.

“Careful, Crispin, that one’s got her eye on you!”

And she would follow this with stories of how no matter how much time, how much love you gave out, people would always leave you alone and desperate in the end. By the time he went to college, this had become Crispin’s doctrine.

With no inclination to forge relationships, Crispin’s real passion was sculpture, and in his hands clay was under his command. He excelled at creating figures frozen in time, burlesque images of those he often revered but found, in reality, difficult to connect with. All he needed was a photograph, and this is what he often did. But being caught taking clandestine photographs of young women didn’t go down too well at Art College. People just didn’t understand his rationale, not helped by his aloof nature. And after a while he gave up trying, accepting his expulsion as another example of how the world had failed him.

He bummed around for a few years until the death of his mother gave rise to a chance meeting and a subsequent new sense of direction.

He was devastated at her death, this being another reminder at how people always bailed out in the end. It was a skewed view, born from selfish ends, but with no other perspective, Miller lived by its injunction.

Miller had spoken with George Hedges, the funeral director, to fill in the awkward silences often associated with funeral parlors; where grief and remorse ferment with the sickly stench of funeral wreaths. He spoke of loss and his desire to rebuild life from death and Hedges, a reedy man with a kind demeanor that extended beyond his fee, smiled and asked Crispin how he intended to do such a thing.

So Miller told the funeral director of his talent for sculpture, and the potential to marry his skills and the funeral
trade began to take shape as easily as a piece of inert clay under Miller’s deft finger tips.

Under Hedge’s tuition, Miller learned the trade. When he saw his first corpse - that of a woman in her mid-thirties who had come off second best when she collided with a garbage truck - this fledgling mortician was overcome with the same sense of peace that had befallen him in the wood near his home, all those years ago. And from that point on, Miller fell in love with death.

It was only a matter of time before this was to develop into something far more sinister.

Mr. Hedges passed away two years ago, but not before imparting his wisdom and knowledge, and Miller had set up his own establishment with his old mentor’s endorsement.

Now Miller was alone with another creation, another lover upon which to lavish his affections. Heather had been painstakingly rebuilt, crafted into the beautiful creature she was in life.

Miller had positioned her in his office, sitting at a table, the flowing nightdress she wore belonged to his mother. Sometimes he wore it himself, on the anniversary of his mother’s death: just to honour her memory.

Miller increased the urgency in his hand, his delicate fingers squeezing Heather’s cold, embalmed breast, feeling her nipple against his palm.

‘You’re so beautiful, my sweet,’ Miller breathed as his free hand unzipped his trousers and fondled himself. He longed to look into her eyes, but the glass wasn’t quite good enough and the illusion would be spoilt, and Miller would not be able to maintain his perverse fantasy.

His breath was fast and heavy, and he rested his cheek on Heather’s firm shoulder calling her name over and over until he came hot and wet against her hip.

The usual emotions followed the release, ecstasy, and the pangs of guilt and self loathing; the latter squashed under a heavy layer of faux, distorted conviction. And just to make sure such notions remained buried, Miller covered Heather with the table cloth, turning her into a gingham ghost, sitting at the now bare office table.

After a few moments, his mind turned to his final job of the evening: the embalming of Mr. Charles Richardson, ready for his long walk in the morning. It was an hour’s work, draining the body of blood and replacing it with formaldehyde solution. Then he would pay his Heather another visit, where the love making would become more intimate.

Miller went through to the preparation room, where Mr. Richardson lay, covered with a plain white sheet.

“Hope we weren’t too noisy, Charles,” Miller said cheerily. “She’s a little vixen, that one!”

Charles Richardson moaned in response.

Miller froze, his mind immediately telling him that a dead person could not possibly do such a thing. Just like a dead person couldn’t bring a gnarled hand out from underneath the crisp sheet and begin clawing at the material until it fell upon the tiled floor with a whispering hiss.

And then, as Charles Richardson sat upright, naked and exposing the livid purple, post mortem “Y” carved into his chest and abdomen, there could be no denial. Richardson’s mouth opened and his dentures collapsed with a loud click. The cry that came from his long dead vocal cords was low and pitiful and his neck creaked as it turned, jerking like some malfunctioning robot in a ropey 50’s sci-fi movie.

As Richardson brought his eyes to bear, Crispin Miller wet his pants. He wasn’t aware of it, he just wished that he’d finished the embalming process and removed those eyes.

Miller backed away as the reanimated corpse slid its legs over the side of the surgical table, inched forwards and then planted both feet on the floor. As he stood, Richardson’s innards could be heard slopping around in his abdomen.

Gravity always wins.

Miller fell back into his office as Richardson began lurching towards him. Slamming the door, the undertaker fumbled with the key in the lock, turning it with such force the shaft snapped in the tumbler. Then he drew the deadbolt across the top and bottom of the door.

Richardson could be heard outside, slapping twin palms against the other side of the door. Miller continued to stare incredulously at the two inch thick barrier keeping him safe from his unlikely assailant.

How was this possible? Was this his penance for his kind of love? God’s retribution, just as mother had said?

So many questions, but they were all cut short by a sudden small noise behind him.

The sound of movement. The sound of material slipping onto the floor.

A gingham table cloth for instance.

Miller turned slowly, his heart pumping, the muscles of his arms and legs shivering and reluctant.

He shouldn’t have been surprised to see Heather Monaghan standing and facing away from him, her hair tied up exposing the nape of her exquisite, delicate neck. But he allowed a gasp of pure horror to escape from his lips, and her head jolted towards the sound, the sudden movement dislodging one of her prosthetic eyes; launching it across the table where it bounced against the far wall before skittering across the plush carpet to stop at his feet.
Crispin heard the voice of his mother reaching out to him from a dim, dark past. “Careful, Crispin; this one’s got her eye on you!”

Miller began to giggle, and as Heather came to him, her arms outstretched, her hands searching, his giggle turned into laughter; uncontrollable, belly-aching laughter.

From behind the door Richardson beat a frenzied tattoo upon the wood.

Miller doubled over, helpless and Heather fell upon him, her mind focused on nothing but her lust to sate the terrible eternal hunger in her belly; her strength, easily subduing Miller once the hysteria gave way to pain.

She gorged on him, ripping open his throat with ease, biting off the fingers that had first lovingly re-created her, and then violently violated her at a time of vulnerability, just to sate base need.

Had Heather not lost the ability to engage in abstract thinking, she may have enjoyed the irony that tables had been turned; that Crispin Miller was now an object of her desires.

She would enjoy him as much as he’d enjoyed her. And contrary to Marcia Miller’s doctrine, Heather Monaghan wasn’t planning on leaving Crispin alone any time soon.

He had far too much to offer.
Slowly, Kunaka approached the road block, his eyes fixed, his brow marred by three deep lines.

Up ahead there were seven troopers and one huge barricade. The soldiers were wearing biochem masks and steel helmets; their boots planted shoulder width apart and regulation issue.

The barricade was far more makeshift: a portable barrier made up of two concrete blocks planted both side of the road, and bridged by a striped horizontal pole.

What the road block lacked in conviction, the arsenal protecting it gave greater credence. Each trooper sported an SA80 and parked to one side of the barricade was a Challenger 2 tank, its 120 millimeter cannon aimed towards the city.

“These guys are packin’ some serious shit, O’Connell,” Kunaka whispered into his headset. “I think there could be a biochem alert in play; they’ve got masks in situ.”

“Ok,” O’Connell’s voice fizzed in his ears. “We’re taking enough risks without adding to ‘em. Get your masks on, guys.”

As the Mastiff approached, one of the soldiers stepped forward motioning for it to stop with a wave of his hand.

Obediently, Kunaka pulled the truck up short and a Corporal came over to the window. The big man wound the window down in readiness. He noted that the Corporal had his finger outside the trigger guard of his SA80, and pointing down the barrel.

Safety’s off. A bad sign. It meant the guards were prepared.

Expectant.

“What’s your business, soldier?” the Corporal said, peering up at Kunaka through his face-plate. His voice was raspy, his breathing accentuated by the filter hanging like twin tin cans from his chin.

“Special orders, Corp,” Kunaka said, his lie momentarily hidden by a mist of carbon dioxide settling on the inside of his visor. In his lap, his hand curled around a high powered pistol.

In this game a lie was only going to get you so far. But you still needed people to play. Sometimes people were reluctant. Sometimes they needed persuasion.

“I’m going to have to clear that,” the Corporal said turning away slightly to confer with his headset. “What’s your TAC number?”

Kunaka told him. It was made up on the spot; a blase response since the high power frequency jammer O’Connell was currently activating in the back of the truck wasn’t going to allow the Corporal to relay it to Jack Shit.

“Echo Bravo eight to command, come in over,” the Corporal said into his radio.

A burst of static told him that command wasn’t listening. He repeated the call in but the outcome was the same, a fizz of static and little else.

The Corporal turned back to the truck where Kunaka waited; his thumb stroking the Browning’s cold steel.

“I’ll need to see some papers,” the Corporal sniffled through his filter.

Kunaka shook his head. “Sorry Corp, but this is a Special Ops initiative. There are no papers.”

Inside, Kunaka breathed a sigh of relief. Outside he remained cool, like a soldier ready to execute his orders.

But he couldn’t really believe they were getting away with this. These guards were either sloppy or they had a clear remit. The tank aiming its cannon towards the city skyline underpinned this statement. These guys were more concerned about letting people out than stopping people going in. This was about containment. And it made him uneasy. Containment was an interim strategy; it bought the brass time while they came up with a solution. More often than not that solution was to neutralize the threat.

He looked at the swatch of light marking the city skyline and clucked his tongue, his mind falling back to a time when the world was far simpler; where the world was about right and wrong and being safe.

He is suddenly back in Kingston, his Grandpa Joe sitting on the porch, the rocking chair making the paint-peeled boards creak as he watches the nebulous black clouds gather on the Atlantic’s wavering horizon. Stu Kanaka, six years old, peering up at his gramps, amazed at how someone could be that old.

“The devil’s comin’, my boy,” Gramps says as the first roll of thunder comes in from the sea. “An’ he got his eyes and mouth wide open fer us today.”

Kunaka nodded behind his face plate, the city had replaced the sea storm; but Grandpa Joe’s words still had a hold on him.

The Corporal appeared to mull this current situation over for a long moment. “You guys have got to be crazy to go in there,” he finally said. “But I’d be crazier still if I let you in without sanction from my CO. Your team will have to stand down, until I contact COM by cell.”
Stand off, Kunaka thought. The Corporal was doing the right thing; he had his orders after all. Now Kunaka had a job to do.

The Browning was now out of his lap and in Kunaka’s mitt. He flicked off the safety.

But before he could do anything, Grandpa Joe’s long distant prophecy came back with such potency it left Kunaka hesitant.

Because, without warning, all Hell broke loose.

***

“So, tell me, Shipman, if Intel gave you this, what can your team do about it?”

Carpenter handed the smart phone back to the Major who was now pressing keys, the tiny screen imprinting a bright white square upon each of his brown eyes.

“My orders are simple, Colonel,” Shipman replied softly. “Retrieval.”

“Retrieval?” Carpenter echoed. “And what do you plan to retrieve?”

Again, Shipman passed the smart phone to his superior. An image was on the screen, a photograph of a youth, possibly late teens. It was difficult to tell, Carpenter was of an age where all kids and young adults looked the same.

“Who is he?”

“Our target,” Shipman said.

“Don’t play games with me Major,” Carpenter warned. “This is still my COM and you will give me straight answers. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sorry, Colonel,” Shipman said, though it appeared forced. “His name is Thom Everett. He is nineteen years of age and the only child of Pauline and Arthur Everett.”

“Should I know these people?”

“No, they are civilians and unimportant. Until now.”

“So why now?”

Shipman leaned forward, his fingertips pressed together to form a diamond.

“Approximately nine and a half thousand people per square mile live in Birmingham, Colonel. The fallout from the blast that released Whittington’s Lazarus Initiative is estimated at three miles. No mathematician is required to tell us that for a significant amount of the local population death has come.”

It was a grim yet fantastic statistic. Carpenter shook his head in disbelief.

“What are the chances of survival?”

“My mission is codenamed Necropolis, Colonel. The City of the Dead. I guess my superiors were less than optimistic when they received the initial brief.”

Silence stretched out, it seemed poignant given the horrendous nature of their discussion. But silence never gave out solutions.

“So what has changed their initial appraisal?” he asked, but the answer came shortly after Carpenter said it. “This boy?”

“We have Sir Alan Coe, the CEO of Phoenix Industries, in custody,” Shipman said. “Not a happy bunny, but better than being in the pot. Sir Alan denies knowing anything about Whittington’s activities, of course. Even went as far as suggesting that the good doctor was a maverick. Couldn’t explain where Whittington was getting his funding from. The brass believes him though. Rationale? He wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize his knighthood. Can you believe that?”

Carpenter said that he could believe that, he could totally believe that. “He must’ve given up something,” Carpenter guessed. “Off the record?”

“Of course,” Shipman said with a wry smile. “Isn’t it always the case? Coe told us that Whittington had approached Phoenix Industries with his research and they turned it down.”

“Ethics?”


“Meaning?”

“Whittington’s research evidence was unreliable. His animal tests had varied results. Sure the Lazarus Initiative worked on some subjects. But others died and stayed dead. But one or two appeared to be immune to the process altogether. Coe fervently denies that such experiments were escalated beyond the animal phase, and tested on human subjects, with Phoenix Industries’ knowledge or consent.”

“Yet such a comment shows that he had knowledge that this was exactly Whittington’s intention,” Carpenter said astounded.

It was Shipman’s turn to nod, a small thing, barely noticeable. “Ten percent of the local population are about to face the apocalypse, Colonel. And the boy, Thom Everett has the potential to be their saviour.”
“He was tested?” Carpenter was now agog. The scale of this news was remarkable. “How could this happen?”
“This is where Coe hides behind his assumed ignorance,” Shipman said. “All he says, off the record, was that
Whittington found a test group and covertly applied his research. The boy survived, deemed immune.”
“And his parents?”
“Did not feature in the equation.” Shipman’s reply was blunt.
“And you’re going in there to get him?”
“That’s our mission,” Shipman conceded. “The boy is the only known person to have survived the process. The
brass have considered worse case scenario, what if one of The Risen escapes the cordon? We could be looking at
widespread contagion. The boy is our only hope of finding a way of containing it.”
“The Risen?”
“It’s what the brass chooses to call the infected,” Shipman mused. “It’s better than the alternative; less dramatic, I
guess.”
“So how is it spread?” Carpenter asked quietly.
“Come and watch the CCTV monitors,” Shipman said. “You’ll see first hand.”

The chaos at the barricade began with one of the troopers yelling a warning.
“Corp, we have movement, ahead!”
Kunaka noted that there was excitement to the voice, the cork coming out of an hour of expectation, wanting
something, and not wanting something, to happen.
“Wait here!” the Corporal ordered Kunaka, and headed off to the barricade, where all of the troopers were now
facing the city, rifles poised.
“O’Connell, over?” Kunaka said into his short wave.
Kunaka briefed him, his words clipped as he watched the drama unfold outside the Mastiff’s windshield. But he
needed to establish what was riling his camouflaged colleagues, so pulled a pair of night vision binoculars from the
dash and jammed the onto his faceplate.
His vista turned to a speckled green fog. In the foreground the soldiers remained with their backs to him, all
attention drawn to a flare of lights several hundred metres ahead.
Vehicles. Lots of them. A mechanized armada moving towards them and at speed.
The more vehicles that came into view the more Kunaka was drawn to the portentous words of Grandpa Joe,
words of storms and devils and hunger. This wasn’t so much an armada as an exodus. The superstition of his
childhood threatened to settle on him like a huge, hungry parasite, feeding on rational thought; he fought against it,
and drove it back into the deep rooted darkness, where, for now, it sat brooding, waiting for its time in the light.
Then, from the Challenger, a bull horn ripped through the night.
“Attention, oncoming vehicles! You are ordered to pull over immediately! This is your last warning! We are
authorized to use deadly force! We will fire upon you! Repeat, we will fire upon you!”
Deadly force. No-one was getting out of the city; that was crystal. In the dark, the parasite threatened to stir but
the sudden, staccato sound of a high caliber machine gun rippled through Kunaka’s thoughts, he looked up and
watched the Challenger’s co-axial chain gun pumping 4,000 rounds per minute down the street, an incongruous
sight, a terrible sight, a signal that the world had suddenly changed.
Through his binoculars, Kunaka observed the Challenger’s target - a large articulated Eddie Stobart truck - come
apart, it’s front grill peeling back in a series of bright flashes, its front tires shredding, pulling it sharply to the right
and into a row of terraced houses. Through the binoculars, it seemed as though all this were happening elsewhere.
The Stobart wagon rolled once, metal and canvas flapping, then ploughed into the houses with a dreadful, distant
crash. There was a small explosion as a gas main ruptured, a fiery plume blossoming skywards. The roar of the
explosion followed shortly afterwards, dull and final.
“Stu?” Not Grandpa Joe this time, it was O’Connell’s voice in his ear. “What the hell’s happening?”
Stu told him.
Small arms fire now, peppering the night. Nothing was stopping this exodus, Stu was now certain of this. So, it
seemed, were the troops at the barricade.
“120 mm!” the Corporal yelled. “Put a hole in the road! Slow ’em down, for Christ’s sake!”
He can see more than the armada slipping away into the night, Stu thought. He can see his stripes going with
them. Desperation’s driving this man and nothing good will come of it.
Smoke from the burning buildings drifted across the road, a thick black mass in the viewfinder. All the time
Kunaka tried to fight off the memory of the Kingston storm clouds. Without warning the dense smoke parted.
Waved aside by a larger, denser mass. Another wagon, big - though not like the Eddie Stobart truck - but towing a long thick cylinder.

“Oh, Jesus,” Kunaka breathed and instinct had him slamming the Mastiff into reverse, accelerating with such velocity the truck wavered slightly in the road. He used his mirrors to ensure he didn’t collide with parked cars. He used the windscreen to make sure he was putting enough distance between the Mastiff and the inevitable.

The Corporal screamed for the Challenger to hold its fire, but the muzzle barked, spitting a 120mm armour-piercing shell into the cabin of the oncoming truck.

The Corporal screamed for the Challenger to hold its fire, but the muzzle barked, spitting a 120mm armour-piercing shell into the cabin of the oncoming truck.

The oncoming petrol tanker.

The conflagration was big, the cabin obliterated, the container punctured and igniting 3000 gallons of unleaded petrol that came as a burning, blistering wave, consuming all it touched, causing Kunaka to close his eyes for a second.

Troops ran, flames licking at their clothes, the masks melting to their faces, suffocating them with molten, bubbling rubber and plastic.

The remnants of the truck smashed through the road block, the Challenger 2 cast aside, spinning into a garden where its munitions erupted, tearing the vehicle and crew to pieces in a series of spectacular explosions.

Breathing heavily, Kunaka stared at the devastation in his windshield. It had been some time since he’d seen such carnage. He never thought he would see it here; not on the streets of the UK.

How fragile it all is, this life we have. It was Grandpa Joe again, and this time Kunaka nodded an accord.

“Update? Over.” O’Connell said in his ear. “Stu? Are we at war out there, over?”

“Fuck knows,” Kunaka replied honestly. “But we’re clear to proceed. Repeat: we are clear to proceed. Over and out.”

The Mastiff moved forward. Its 6x6 drive would make easy work of the debris, just so long as he steered clear of the burning puddles in the streets. It was only Kunaka battling his reluctance to go any further that made the next part of the journey slow going.

***

Shipman had barely suggested that Colonel Carpenter take a look at the CCTV screens in the ops room, when muted shouts of alarm came from next door.

There was a rapid knocking on the door to their temporary office, and the young woman from the COM burst in without waiting for authorization to enter.

“Sir! Sir! You’ve got to see this! It’s a nightmare!!” The woman’s face was ashen; her eyes dull with disgust and disbelief. Carpenter had seen her expression before: in the black and white faces of the jury at the Nuremburg war trials. He watched the full footage at Sandhurst thirty years ago, and the eyes of those judges, the unmitigated horror at man’s inhumanity to man was alive and well in this young woman.

“Easy, soldier,” Carpenter said, coming to the door, but the woman had turned away to vomit in the hallway; her small frame pumping out more than most would have thought possible.

The other five soldiers in the Operations Room were huddled around the VDU, their faces grim and pale, three of them had the drawn look of people trying to hold onto the contents of their stomach. The other two had dark smears on their tunics.

At the Colonel’s approach the Corporal glanced up, his eyes haunted by the images on the screen.

“They were dead,” he muttered. “We were sure of it, Sir.” His voice had a lilt to it, as though he were fighting back tears. “But they can’t be.”

Carpenter was watching the screen. Brindley Place again, the bars, the canals; but the buckled bodies were no longer strewn amongst the tables and chairs; no longer sprawled on the tow path.

They were walking.

Their limbs fixed and twisted, their gait slow and unsure, their faces vacant and dead. Yet they were still walking.

Although Carpenter knew of Whittington’s experiments, had seen the lone figure ambling through Broad Street and colliding with a lamp post, seeing a group of dead-but-not-dead people shambling along was something different. Here he could see the potential; here he could see the scale of what could happen if this terror Whittington had released upon the world escaped the cordon.

But the CCTV gave up its final terrible treasure; a shape was amongst them, a figure that moved differently; its limbs flailing, dark splashes arcing into the air.

Someone alive. Someone being eaten alive!

A face broke free of the shapeless mass, mouth open in a silent scream, man or woman it was hard to tell, one cheek had been ripped off; the bottom lip was gone exposing bloody teeth, one of the un-dead was gnawing off an ear. Then, mercifully, it was gone, lost amid the biting tearing throng.
“This is what we can expect if the Lazarus Initiative gets loose, Colonel,” Shipman said bluntly. “Those who aren’t eaten alive will become zombies if bitten.”

“Timescale?” Carpenter asked. There was anger inside him now. Such things were not warfare. Whittington was the harbinger of un-death; a devil in a white coat.

“Half an hour from bite to rebirth,” Shipman answered.

“Find that boy,” Carpenter whispered.

“Finding him is the easy part,” the Major replied. “Whether he’s still alive or not is another matter.”

***
The blow to the head has left him dazed, confused; the blood rushes in his ears like a fierce, rampant torrent. It is a visceral, feral sound but it is reassuring. It means that he is alive. He will come to realize it soon enough but for now he listens to it, relishing its pulse; its rhythm.

The darkness grows bored and moves on, becoming a murky grey; the shade of dawn light; the colour of consciousness. Sounds now, no longer internalized, no longer base: the fizz of electricity somewhere nearby; the insistent blanket rustle of the wind buffeting the air, the flapping of papers, the trickle of water. Dawn light relents; he feels pain; it is bright and real and reviving. His head pounds, his ankle throbs.

With the pain comes the feint flicker of awareness and the first conscious thought.

“What the fuck happened?”
Thom Everett pulled himself upright, his head protesting at the unexpected movement. He winced, his eyes folding shut and bright spots flickering behind his lids. 

“Shit. Shit. Shit!”

His throat was thick with dust and his tirade brought with it a series of hacking coughs that wracked his body and sent fresh bouts of pain through his temples.

He lifted his hands and checked himself over. He could feel the egg-sized lump on his scalp almost immediately; nestling in his blonde, dust peppered hair and sticky with blood. He brought his hand away and wiped the spots of tacky gore on his trousers.

His trousers. Roberto Cavalli, now ruined. A memory - he was going out, meeting a gorgeous Asian girl - was her name Wei Lin? - taking the girl who could be Wei Lin for a linguini and a bottle of Dom Perignon at Simpsons; then hopefully back here for some eastern promise, soft sheets and firm body; a perfect night.

There was a time when things were far from perfect. And that time wasn’t so long ago. Six months, in fact.

It seemed longer but good times have a habit of blunting the bad; the times of living in the hell hole that was Clydesdale Tower.

Clydesdale, a thirty two storey, 90 metre monstrosity of white paint and dull steel, rising from Birmingham’s Chinese Quarter. A place of notoriety; a place under constant covert surveillance by West Midlands police, where hepatitis carrying junkies taped their used needles under the banisters in the stairways, just for an embittered laugh; or embedded hypodermics in the elevator buttons ready to impale the helping hand of some witless health care professional.

Yet despite this, Thom had been initially grateful for his nineteenth floor flat because no matter how shitty it was, it was Utopia compared to living with his mum and dad.

His mum, Joy, was anything but joyful. She was a quiet woman who occasionally elevated her mood to surly for special occasions. But she looked after him well enough, going through the motions, parenting by numbers. She had her moments, the occasional joke, an evening of high spirits, usually after a few Christmas Sherries; a nod towards the woman she once was, the woman before becoming Mrs. Arthur Everett.

Arthur, Thom’s father was an artist of the vilest kind. He worked on people and created monsters. Arthur Everett was a bullish, ignorant bigot; Birmingham’s finest - and then some - a man who did what the fuck he wanted, when he wanted, and to whom he wanted. He brought out the worst in people with such little effort he was like some kind of poison, his mere presence corrupting humanity from the inside.

When he wasn’t speaking his ugly mind, Arthur Everett was communicating with his fists. Thom’s mum had been the main target in the early days. Thom stepped into her carpet slippers when he was old enough to question some of his father’s vitriol. It started at 10 years of age when Arthur Everett, the last bastion of bigotry began to talk bout “niggers” and “rag heads” and Thom told him that his teacher said that such words were racist and the product of an ignorant mind.

Arthur Everett’s big face turned bright red, his big, beer-fuelled belly baulked with outrage from beneath his Rule Britannia tee-shirt. And he knocked 10 year old Thom off his feet with a massive blow to his head, the stars he saw staying with him for a good half hour afterwards.

After this Arthur Everett declared open season on his son. The physical abuse came thick and fast, disinerited but contrived, always open handed, never fists, and, other than the original assault, to the body, where it could not be readily seen.

Joy Everett always tended to her son afterwards, an ambiguous affair beginning with words of comfort and ending with hints that Thom was perhaps antagonizing matters. He hated her for this, it was the reason why he never visited her now; even though Arthur racist, bigot, dip-shit Everett was now maggot fodder in Rowley Regis Cemetery, a
coronary saving the world from one less moron

So at eighteen, Thom left his mum to it, and moved into Clydesdale Tower; his own place - his own space, and as
time ticked on, his world became smaller; helped by the odd mugging or two, once in the elevator, another time in
the stairwell. A mobile phone and a wallet later, Thom was looking elsewhere for new premises. And he was still
looking when he found Dr. Richard Whittington.

He was in a bar, bombed on Polish lager when Whittington said that he had a “proposition” for him.

“I bet you have,” Thom said through a fog of booze. “Move on, guy. I’m not that kind of fella.”

“Nor am I, my good man,” Whittington had said, his small eyes intense behind his even smaller spectacles. “This
is a business deal. Nothing sordid, but it has to be between us.”

“What do I get out of it?” Thom had asked.

“Can I buy you a drink and explain the details?”

“Sure, you can,” Thom replied. “Make mine a double.”

Their discussion lasted one hour and twenty minutes, and in this time Thom agreed to “assist” in Dr Whittington’s
“ground-breaking research” in return for indefinite, rent free accommodation in Hilton Towers and a cool, mouth
dribbling one hundred thousand pounds.

“For that kind of money I’d go through hell,” Thom said downing his last drink of the discussion.

The first ten days of Dr. Whittington’s experiments weren’t quite hell; but they were close enough.

He couldn’t remember much of it, just sketchy images and occasional flashbacks. Whittington had given him
something, a concoction that had tasted like vomit. Then the world winked out for a while. Three days, in fact,
Whittington had informed him later.

Some of the memories had to have been nightmares, part of the dreamscape he’d sunken into whilst under
Whittington’s mind-bending cocktail. Some images were of blood and madness and thoughts of irrepressible
hunger.

Then all was well. An apartment to enjoy and more money than Thom could spend. Oh, and the girls. Whittington
knew some great girls, everything catered for; all part of the deal. All part of what Whittington consistently referred
to as “The Initiative”. Now it was only a blood sample every three days. A small price to pay to reap such lofty
rewards.

A sharp pulse of pain brought Thom’s mind back into focus. He scanned his apartment. Before he blacked out it
was decorated with the spoils of opulence. Large leather sofas, a huge TV; built in stereo that had been pumping out
AC/DC while his head had been full of Wei Lin, naked and beautiful and wanting.

Now the room about him was jaundiced by the emergency lighting. In this half-light Thom could see the
devastation about him: chairs over turned, the Italian leather suite exposed to the rain blown in through the blown
out windows. A standing lamp had fallen across his right ankle and the limb throbbed dully.

Groaning, he pushed the lamp off of him. The wind howled through the living room and fresh rain splashed his
face, running down his chin, rousing him.

“Hello!” he called out. “Can anyone tell me what’s going on?”

Only the wind answered his calls. He gave it a few moments more then headed to the front door, folding his right
leg behind him to protect his ankle and using the dear discarded furniture as support.

As he approached the door he heard a sound; a shuffling noise as though someone were dragging their feet over
soft carpet.

He pulled at the door handle but it appeared to be jammed.

“Hello? Is there anyone there?” he cried, staving off his desperation to be free of the wind and the rain and his
devastated room.

The shuffling stopped and a pitiful moaning sound started; followed shortly by another.

“Hey, guys!” Thom yelled. “I know it’s a bummer, but don’t lose it, okay? Give me a hand with this door, would
ya? Or at least go get me some help!”

Without warning there were several thumps against the door, fists pummeling the oak panels.

“That’s the spirit, guys!” he yelled with delight. “I’ll try and yank on the handle to help you to help me! Can’t tell
you how grateful I am.”

His saviours didn’t reply. They continued their determined pounding on the door, the din becoming more urgent,
frenzied even and the moaning accompanying the slaps and thumps was reminding him of something and it wasn’t
thoughts of rescue or the good times, it was of mindlessness lust and irrepressible hunger.

His mind refused to yield its secrets, but it was made up. Thom didn’t want his front door open any more; he
wanted it to remain closed, thank you very much, and despite how painful and cumbersome it was, proceeded to pull
an armchair and butt it up against the door.

He then sat down heavily, the seat of his expensive trousers becoming damp with rain water, the hand-beating
cacophony now behind him.

Uncomfortable? Yes. Unsettling? Why, as sure as God made little apples. But still a damn sight better than having that door open.

***

Shipman sat in his Jackal scout car, his breathing thick and even through the biochem filter. He wasn’t alone. Three of his team was with him, all experienced in special ops via numerous excursions in the SAS, all ready to execute their orders.

His orders.

He’d worked with them for several years. Connors, the driver, was a quiet man with loud red hair. He had a mild Scottish accent, typical of those native to Dundee. His penchant was for jokes, most of which were poor but occasionally welcome to lighten the air on ops.

Keene, sitting behind Shipman, was a mild mannered mountain of a man, who was born in Dudley in the Black Country. The only thing that ever irritated him was when someone called him a Brummie. And if anyone was going to do that it would be the short, stocky black guy sitting next to him.

Honeyman was constantly ribbing his colleagues. Most of it was good natured, without any intent. But on occasion Honeyman wasn’t beyond launching a critical assault on his squad mates. It had landed him in hot water before, but Shipman wouldn’t have they guy any other way. There wasn’t a weapons expert like him.

Connors pushed the Jackal along the A38, a succession of heavily manned road blocks lifting readily and easily. The lack of outgoing vehicles was a potent portent as to effects of the Lazarus Initiative. Whittington was the new Frankenstein and like Shelly’s fictitious Doctor, the monster was loose and beyond the control of the creator.

Tin gods don’t make good men, Shipman mused dourly. That’s why people like Alpha Team existed. To make amends, to put things right.

To tidy up the mess.

Alpha Team traveled light. The Jackal - open topped with a single heavy machine gun mounted at the rear but able to complete a 360° sweep – was traditionally designed to carry three personnel but Shipman’s had been adapted with a rear seated platform to support an extra person. Each man carried a C8 carbine with M208 grenade launcher secured underneath its muzzle. High powered, but the men were weapons in their own right; all experts in close quarters combat honed over extensive tours of duty.

Shipman knew where to find Thom. It wasn’t covert surveillance that had identified his whereabouts, it was simple detective work; the power of deductive reasoning. That Whittington lived in Hilton Towers’ penthouse suite was common knowledge. So why was he paying out for another apartment? Room 409 to be exact - the room directly below the penthouse?

Thom Everett had somehow survived the Lazarus Initiative, which made him vital as a control in future research. Whittington had to keep him sweet, keep him close-by. But to the populous of the UK Thom Everett was the cornerstone of finding a way to stem the terrible tide threatening to consume them all.

The reports were already coming in of those inside the target zone trying to escape. There had been collateral damage, and there would be more until Alpha Team netted Thom Everett and brought him back so that the Cone heads could work on him and develop an antidote for those who had been bitten. And a method to inoculate the masses against further contagion.

The Jackal sped on through the night, the wind slurping in Shipman’s ears, his face plate covered in a moist film from the drizzle above. The streets were littered with abandoned vehicles, some in the middle of the road, so that the car had to navigate its passage, but still maintaining its pace. Other cars were parked on the pavements. And here and there, some vehicles had ploughed into the fascias of shops, spilling goods and glass out onto the street.

It was all a bizarre and eerie sight, and Shipman found himself wondering if there could ever be any way back from all of this. Had science created the beginning of the end?

They peeled off the A38 at Colmore Circus, putting them in the shadows of The Sentinels, the ominous structures of Clydesdale Tower and Cleveland Tower.

Something caught Shipman’s eye: a shadow falling from the sky and it landed ten metres in front of their vehicle where it exploded like a small, wet bomb.

“Jesus God!” Connors said, swerving to avoid the glistening mass in the road. “Was that a civilian?”

Before anyone could reply another entity hit the road, and this time there was no doubt. It was a woman and her skirt flapped furiously as she fell from one of the buildings overhead. Her body hit the unforgiving concrete and burst open like a balloon filled with water.

“They’re fuckin’ jumping!” Honeyman said in disbelief. As if to confirm his thoughts, another body smashed into the ground to Honeyman’s left, spattering the vehicle with gore.
“Get us away from the buildings!” Shipman ordered. “We can’t afford to have someone hitting the vehicle. It’ll kill us all.”

“Sir!” Connors agreed, but just as he slammed his boot down on the accelerator, something happened.

Either side of the street, from out of the shop façades and the abandoned vehicles, people began to emerge. A huddle at first, then bigger groups; a small stream before the flash flood. But there was something about the growing, flowing throng, something about the way they moved. Other than the fact they were walking, there was no sign of life; they moved as one, automatons in a gigantic, organic machine.

“We have multiple contacts,” Connors yelled.

“Nothing wrong with your eyesight then eh, Connors?” Honeyman jibed standing and cocking the heavy machine gun. He panned the muzzle, making sure that the targets were keeping their distance. Several automatons dropped to their knees next to the bodies of the jumpers and began shoveling chunks of meat into their eager, hungry mouths.

But the mass had only interest in the Jackal, and its occupants. The thong stopped for a few seconds, Shipman looking into their yellowed eyes; the twilight within them, the death.

There were so many different people, the young, the old, those in between; from all walks of life, but united in death. Shipman spotted a woman, her left breast exposed, her dead, bloodied hand still clutching a small, vanity mirror. The glass was a web of cracks. Next to her was a man without trousers, his genitals swinging in a pendulum motion. Next to him: another man, his body part dirt part putrid flesh, his mouth, clogged and blackened with soil, his mourning suit moldered and ripe with post mortem juices.

It was a passive moment, where the enormity of what may lie ahead for mankind should they fail was underscored in triplicate.

Then, as one, the zombie horde opened their collective mouths and groaned. And began to move.

“Orders, Sir?” Honeyman called from behind the gun.

“Clear a path, Honeyman!” Shipman shouted as twenty or so zombies began to gather ahead of them. “Shoot to kill, Sir?” the gunner asked with a wry smile.

“Just get on with it, soldier!”

The blast from the gun was loud in the dead, desolate streets. The muzzle flashes flickered in the shop windows; spent cartridges tinkled incongruously as they hit the sidewalk.

Shipman observed the tracer fire as the heavy machine gun spat its fury into the crowd, literally shredding the undead, a few incredulously stood their ground before the shells punched holes into their skulls, knocking heads from shoulders the way wooden balls take out coconuts at a fairground shy.

And then there was the blood, a great spray - dark and copious - painting the street, the glass, the grey stonework. It pooled under the bodies as they collapsed, but those who had not been hit in the head either climbed back onto their feet, or wallowed in the bloody mire, like the drowning swimming against the tide.

From his seat at the front of the Jackal, Shipman pumped bullets into the skulls of those that Honeyman had missed.

Then Alpha Team was moving again, its urgency to put distance between the living and the dead matched only by the need to find the youth with the potential to put an end to it all.

***
Suzie Hanks found Kevin O'Connell to be a man of surprises. This notion came very early on in their relationship where the man who had promised to kill her abusive father, pulled up in an Aston Marten, James Bond style. He invited her out on an impromptu date. She half expected a grand casino to be waiting at the end of their car journey, but instead there was a Learjet.

“Where are we going?” she’d asked incredulously.
“I told you: on a date,” he’d replied smiling broadly.

They were in the air for two hours and ten minutes before landing at Madrid Barajas International Airport; clearing passport control in five minutes flat.

O’Connell hailed a cab and told the driver to head for the Museo del Prado; Madrid’s prestigious museum and art gallery, where the world’s finest collection of European art stood for the admiring public. The taxi had covered the 15 kilometers within ten minutes and Suzie gasped at the museum’s ornate facade, with its multiple archways and expansive courtyards.

Here they sauntered through high white halls and galleries, exploring ancient works of beauty, exploring each other’s likes and dislikes and finding that by the end of the afternoon, their world had become one; united and indistinguishable.

It was in one of the galleries that Suzie found “The Triumph of Death” painted in 1562 by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. She stared at the painting’s themes of Death culling mankind with macabre fascination; the way one feels guilty watching someone’s misery at a distance: the dazed people standing by their over turned car, the woman crying on a park bench. Bruegel’s oil-on-panel rendition showed flames and bodies and Death on a killing spree, but she found its colours and texture beautiful.

“Do you like it?” O’Connell had asked, placing his arm about her delicate waist.
“I love it,” she’d replied.
“Do you want it?”

This had taken Suzie by surprise and she’d looked up at him with a wry smile. She could see by his face that he meant it.
“Yes,” she breathed, almost intoxicated by those damned eyes of his. “But I want you more.”
“You have me,” he replied and her stomach churned and her heart missed a beat and she felt a yearning to have him touch her, have him inside her; and she didn’t feel revulsion or guilt - the legacy of her father’s kind of love - she felt only the purity of O’Connell’s total commitment to her. And a need return it in kind.
“I want you to make love to me,” she whispered beneath the Bruegel painting.
“And I will,” he said gently. “Once you have this painting on the wall of your apartment; we will make love under it.”

“Why wait?”
“Because: I want you to be sure. I want to prove that you’re not making a mistake; not taking a chance with me.”
“I know that now,” she said.
“You think you know,” he urged. “But people wear masks, Suzie. I wear a mask to do what I do. But, not for you - never for you. I need you to know this for sure.”

And so she waited. The painting arrived two months later, secreted behind a print of a white orchid - her favourite flower, of course - and no matter how many news channels she searched, she found no report of it being stolen. But she knew it was the real thing. She knew because O’Connell had told her he would get it.

That evening he came to her apartment and, true to his word, he had made love to her, gently, a lover consumed by his passion for her, and under the shadow of the The Triumph of Death they learned about the Triumph of Life; their bodies cavorting, hungry to share each other, explore each other, their wants and desires encapsulated by their caresses and their utterances of pleasure beneath the canvas landscape above.

And in the post-coitus calm that followed, they lay huddled together, thanking parapets and fate for bringing them together.

***

Three years later, Suzie Hanks was looking at an image that reminded her not of love-making and the soft speech of lovers; it was more like the Bruegel painting languishing on the wall of her apartment all those years ago.

“It’s like a scene from Hell,” Suzie whispered into her headset as she squinted through her portal. There was sadness in her voice. And no one inside the truck disputed her assessment.

Kunaka was moving through the blasted street, the Mastiff’s armour plating illuminated by the flames all about it,
although the blaze had lost most of its intensity. Several tenements were now sheathed in dancing flame, palls of smoke rising into the night sky.

The detonation of the tanker had stopped the exodus in its tracks. Suzie counted the blaze-blackened carcasses of ten cars and three larger trucks. Most of the vehicles had been cast aside by the explosion, lying on their sides or on their roofs. Those that remained in the road were carefully nudged aside by the Mastiff’s powerful shell.

“What the fuck is going on, O’Connell?” Clarke said peering through his own observation slit. “Are we at war, or something?”

“We’re on a job,” O’Connell said gruffly. “Let’s not get side tracked.”

“Side tracked? Are you blind?” Clarke said in disbelief. “We nearly got ourselves totaled.”

O’Connell’s arm snaked out, his fist wrapping around a swatch of material just below Clark’s throat. He dragged the youth towards him, their visors almost touching.

“You want out?” O’Connell growled. “Well how about we kick you out here and you can explain to an army patrol how you’re roaming around an exclusion zone in a stolen uniform. Or maybe you can explain to The Consortium why they shouldn’t put a bullet in your head.”

O’Connell’s rage simmered below the surface. He hadn’t lost it yet, hadn’t let the beast consume him as it had once, the last time he’d allowed it to take control, the time he killed someone with his bare hands. No he hadn’t lost it yet, but he was close.

He felt a hand close over his upper arm, the gentle squeeze upon his taut muscle, a comforting hand. Suzie’s hand.


With these three words Suzie Hanks tamed the beast, sending it back to the dark place, where it would skulk in shadow until roused once again.

O’Connell released Clarke and the youth slumped back in his seat, panting with fear and exertion.

Suzie rubbed O’Connell’s arm, her eyes on his, the message clear. Keep it together, O’Connell; the job’s relying on you. I’m relying on you. He nodded, giving her a watery smile.

Atonement.

O’Connell turned back to Clarke, the younger man’s sulky demeanor belying his age.

“Look, Clarke,” O’Connell said, his voice now soft and persuasive. “This job is reliant on us all doing what we’re here to do. What we’re being paid a fortune to achieve. You’re an integral part of this and I need you to hold it together, okay?”

Clarke’s face remained surly, but O’Connell saw something surface in the youth’s eyes: the sense of pride that O’Connell had stripped away had returned. Clarke blinked a few times and then nodded an accord. After a few more seconds he asked,

“Now do I get a rifle?”

Just as O’Connell began to chuckle, the Mastiff stopped with a sudden jolt and pitched everyone sideways.

O’Connell’s head hit the overhead racks hard enough for him to see stars; Amir landed heavily on the floor jarring his right shoulder.

Suzie managed to grab hold of some webbing for support, unlike Clarke who missed it completely and fell on top of Amir in a tangle of arms and legs.

Just as the curses began to rise from his displaced, disgruntled passengers, Stu Kunaka’s distressed voice flooded the truck.

“Boss! Boss! Get loaded; we got some strange shit happenin’ outside.”

Still groggy from the blow to his head, O’Connell went to his observation portal.

What he saw there cleared his battered brain in an instant.

***

At first O’Connell thought he was suffering from a vile hallucination, a result of post head injury trauma. But his colleagues confirmed what he already knew: what he saw through the window was as real as sin.

There were people milling around the streets, too many to count. But there was something wrong in the way the crowd behaved; the way it shuffled through the stark streets as one aimless mass, mouths yawning, heads tilted as though neck muscles had just given in for the night.

But it was the eyes that gave him shivers that no living person had ever given him. Because in an instant he knew that these people weren’t living at all.

“You seein’ this, O’Connell?” Stu said shakily.

“Yes,” O’Connell replied as the crowd turned its many heads towards the Mastiff. “And I guess we’ve just been seen too.”

“What the fuck’s the matter with them?” Clarke said. Suzie noted that his hands were trembling against the wall of
the truck.

“Who knows?” Amir said, sounding amazed. “But this is why the place is locked down. They look like a bunch of
zombies.”

“They _are_ zombies,” Stu confirmed over a burst of static.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Clarke muttered. “Don’t go all supernatural on us now, Stu. There’s no such thing as
zombies. Believe me, I love zombies; but that ain’t going to make ‘em real.”

“Take a good look at ‘em and tell me there are people out there that shouldn’t be breathin’ let alone walkin’
around,” Kunaka retorted.

Clarke examined the crowd again, easier to make out now it was shuffling towards their vehicle.

It was when he saw a man wearing only pajama trousers with an autopsy “Y” stitched into his abdomen that it
really hit home.

“Okay, this is some seriously freaky shit now,” he hissed. “We’ve got to get the hell out of here.”

“Get us moving, Stu,” O’Connell said. “The NICDD building is still a click north east.”

“You don’t mean that this is still going ahead?” Clarke whimpered. “Are you out of your mind?”

Something struck the side of the truck; something heavy but yielding.

“These guys want in,” Amir said.

“Of course they do,” Stu muttered through the static. “The Devil’s hungry tonight.”

“You need to work on your damage limitation skills, Stu,” Suzie said sourly.

Another zombie rammed the truck with a sickening thud.

“Let’s get going, Stu,” O’Connell ordered. But the truck remained stationary, allowing the zombie crowd to
thicken around it; an armoured island in a sea of the starving undead.

The truck began to sway under the weight of them. Even through the dense steel plating, O’Connell could hear
their desperate, frenzied groans.

“Stu! I said get us out of here!” O’Connell yelled.

But all that came through the head set was the discordant sound of static.

***

Stu Kunaka stared out of the wind shield, his face a mask of incredulity and fear. He could face any man - any
enemy - but what lay beyond the glass was the image of his childhood fears.

Zombies were real and he knew this to be true. Grandpa Joe had told him stories about them when he was
younger; stories that kept him awake for three nights in a row until Momma and Poppa had forced Grandpa to
retract his story.

But Stu had never forgotten the tale and simply refused to believe it as anything but a statement of fact, despite
the scorn from his parents. This continued until well into his teens when he decided to go to a voodoo ritual where a
zombie was raised. Why he’d done this was simple enough, he needed to purge the images conjured up by his
Grandpa. He thought it would help, but it hadn’t.

Not at all.

He’d kept his ear to the ground and waited for the next rumblings of a gathering. It was easy to find out if you
knew where to listen. And Grandpa Joe had certainly taught him to do that. And it didn’t matter that in the interim
he’d researched the process, reading that the ritual involved not so much ancient magic as modern science; the
introduction of a powder containing _tetrodoxin_ from a puffer fish, secretions from the Haitian _Bufo Marinus_ - or tree
toad - were administered to a victim by the Bokor, the voodoo sorcerer. Each element was complicit in paralyzing a
person and putting them into a trance-like, suggestible state by administering the compound _datura stramonium_
when they “woke from the dead”.

He’d snuck into the event, following the procession until it had stopped in a woodland clearing. Here he’d hidden
behind a piece of brush and watched the ceremony, devoid of the pomp depicted by Hollywood, but he’d felt a chill.
Sure, the Bokor (a large woman with eyes fogged by cataracts) had made incantations under her breath, but overall
the ceremony was a sedate, albeit grisly, affair. The man who was to be made undead was a local pedophile, his
penance for violating the daughter of a renowned family. The man was forced to drink a concoction containing the
potion that would render him immobile and rob him of free will. He was placed in a coffin and buried in a pit for
half an hour before the family raised him and allowed him out of the coffin. And there he stood for all to see, a
family slave for as long as his body could endure. His terrible punishment for his terrible crime.

But Stu had questioned it all; concluding that perhaps this was mere hokum and superstitious nonsense. But he
saw the Bokor staring at him as though the brush wasn’t there, as though reading his thoughts, reading his very soul.
And she merely smiled and said words that had remained with him to this very day.

“If you do not see death here then be glad of it. For one day it will visit the unbelievers many times over.”
And it seemed that day was upon him, the look on the zombie’s face during the ceremony was there in everyone outside. They had been caught up in bad magic, and they were about to pay the price.

“Stu! Get back in the zone, that’s an order!”

It was O’Connell in his ear. His boss. His friend. But it wasn’t enough to suppress years of tradition and superstition now bubbling through Kunaka’s psyche. These feelings came as a raw and primordial flood, paralyzing Kunaka with the most potent substance known to man.

Fear.

***

“We’ve got to do something or we’re dead,” Amir said.

“It’ll mean going outside!” Clarke shuddered.

“Stu! Will you snap out of it, man?” O’Connell yelled, but Suzie recognized resignation on his face. “He’s gone for a while,” he said shaking his head.

“Fucking fat lot of good that’s gonna do us!” Clarke bleated heatedly.

“I have to get to the cab,” O’Connell said firmly. “I need you guys to cover me.”

“Or so help me I’ll feed you to ‘em myself!”

“Okay! Okay!” Clarke said grabbing the weapon. “You made your point.”

“I hope so,” O’Connell said sternly. “Because I’m through with your bullshit.”

O’Connell made for a hatch in the roof of the Mastiff, pausing only when Suzie caught his arm.

“You up for this, O’Connell?” she asked. He could see the worry in her eyes.

“You just watch my back, Suzie,” he said with a grim smile. “Just make sure that Young Rambo there doesn’t shoot me.”

“I got you, no worries,” she said softly.

“With that at anything that looks dead and pull the fuckin’ trigger. Or so help me I’ll feed you to ‘em myself!”

O’Connell grabbed hold of the youth for a second time; and now there wasn’t any holding back the beast. “Yes, that’s right! And I need you to be a man, Clarke - you got that?”

Aim for the head,” Clarke shouted after him.

“What?” Suzie asked over the hideous din emanating from outside.

“Shoot ’em in the head - it kills ’em outright,” Clarke explained to Suzie’s quizzed expression. “Ain’t you ever watched a George A. Romero movie?”

“Just get your ass on the roof, Clarke,” Suzie said, finally losing patience. “We got work to do.”

***

In the remnants of room 409 of Hilton Towers, Thom Everett was not having the best of evenings. He was still very much the focus of attention to the things that were on the other side of his front door. They continued to thump and crash against the wood whilst making that God-awful groaning noise.

He had tried being quiet, hoping that they would grow bored; he’d tried yelling and thumping the door back. But the response was the same relentless, mindless din.

As he sat propped up in the chair, Thom was just wondering if his predicament could get any worse when he heard something sizzle nearby.

Scanning the room, his mind trying to tame his expounding sense of panic, Thom couldn’t see anything untoward. But what he couldn’t see he could feel. Despite the wind buffeting the room, Thom realised that the temperature had risen a few degrees. At first he thought it was his imagination but then he heard the fizzing again followed this time by a loud cracking sound that pulled his eyes to the ceiling.

To his horror the white paint work was blistering and fast becoming a web of rents and fissures.

Dr. Whittington’s apartment was directly above him. Thom had been in that apartment, witnessed the makeshift lab in one corner of the room and the unmarked bottles of liquid kept in there. Dr. Whittington’s apartment was now ablaze and the heat of it was eating its way through the infrastructure; eating its way towards him!

“Christ on a bike,” he muttered woefully as a loud pop signaled the overhead bulb giving in to the heat.

He had to get out of here. And he had to get out of here now.

The thuds against the door told him that this wasn’t going to be easy. But then again, he’d learned a while ago that surviving a life full of shit seldom was.
No sooner was O’Connell on the roof of the Mastiff he was overloaded with the scale of the adversity all about him.

Smoke mingled with rain, fogging his vision, but he could see that many of the taller buildings about him: the Rotunda at Digbeth and the bubble wrap blisters of the Bullring Shopping Centre were burning. Even in the few seconds that he assessed his surroundings three explosions rocked the city.

Then he was back in the here and now, the Browning in his hand. He ducked low, moving forwards towards the roof of the cab.

“Stu?” he called into his com-link. “Stu, I’m on the roof. Hang in there! I’m coming to get you.”

O’Connell waited for a response but nothing came. He checked behind him and saw Suzie climbing from the hatch and steadying herself against the sway by dropping to one knee.

“Clarke,” she said into the hole. “Get out here you chicken shit!”

“Suzie, look out!” O’Connell yelled.

Suzie turned to see two hands appearing over the edge of the roof; dead fingers probing for purchase finally latching onto a series of rivets and using these to haul up their deceased owner. In moments a large, balding head came into view, dead eyes seeing only fresh, living meat to quell its terrible hunger.

Suzie’s eyes widened as the face of this creature rose like a dreadful sun, its mouth a cavern, oozing purple goo, its tongue lolling and writhing like a separate, living thing.

O’Connell raised his pistol but felt something grabbing hold of his leg. He looked down to see a fly blown hand clutching his fatigues. He beat at it with the Browning as the corpse of a young man dressed in a moldering University of Birmingham sweatshirt tried to drag him over the roof edge.

Suzie, meanwhile, observed with disgust as the bald zombie crawled ever closer, its quivering lips raising a terrible memory: her father leering over her, probing, hurting, violating, his head bouncing off of the My Little Pony mobile hanging over her bed, telling her to be quiet, be quiet, because that’s how little secrets escape. And flash forward twenty years, to the place where she’d nearly ended it all, a three tier car park, midnight and deserted save for her father kneeling at her feet with O’Connell’s berretta rammed into his temple; begging her to forgive him, not to put him down like the dangerous animal he was. And O’Connell had cocked the weapon, moving his feet slightly to avoid the pool of piss spreading out from Toby Hank’s knees; waiting for his lover to say the word.

But as much as she wanted to, as much as Suzie thought that she needed to, she never gave consent; she never put an end to her fathers miserable existence, because in the space between life and death there is the power to do the right thing and in that instance she harnessed that power and did what was right for her. And though part of her craved for his death, she gave him mercy.

The bald zombie was close enough to reach out and grab her, his hand curled his fingers, each one a hook of dead flesh, mere inches from her purloined army boot, but all she could see was that face - that leer - and suddenly instinct took over. Suzie raised her SA80 and discharged half the magazine into that open, dribbling mouth.

The head came apart above the upper jaw, a pomegranate purple plume splattering the roof of the truck. Speckles landed on her visor and she pawed them away with her sleeve.

Then she was free, the trance-like state shattered by the cathartic sound of her gunfire. She brought the gun to bear, the BCU sweatshirt zombie clambering towards O’Connell took several bullets to the shoulders before one shattered its skull; popping one eye from its socket en route. The corpse fell backwards into the throng below. And a great melancholy moan filled the night air.

Suddenly Amir was with Suzie, a shot gun at the ready. He braced his shoulder against its kick and ripped off two rounds in quick succession, the 12 gauge opening the chest of a zombie wearing a West Mercia police officers’ uniform, the force knocking it back for a few steps before it retraced them again. Amir took aim at PC Zombie’s head and disintegrated with his next shot.

“Do what you have to, O’Connell!” Suzie screamed above the clamoring moans. “We’ve got your back!”

“Didn’t doubt it for a second, babe,” he replied warmly.

O’Connell turned back to cab, and began to crawl.

***

“You hearing that, Sir?” Connors shouted at the sound of gunfire nearby. Not even the rushing noise of the wind could mute it.

“I hear it,” Shipman confirmed. “SA80’s and a Benelli M4 trench gun; standard tactical issue.”

“We going to check it out?” Keene asked. “Probably some of our lads in deep shit.”

“No doubt,” Shipman conceded. “But we stay on mission. There’s more at stake here.”

They all knew it, and despite their instinctive reservations at leaving their own behind, they didn’t argue with the Major. They swallowed it and kept focused.
The Jackal approached the town centre, heading for the luxury apartments situated near the Symphony Hall and the National Indoor Arena. To access the site Connors would have to veer off road and head through a pedestrianised zone. There were far more direct routes but that would lead them into potential dead ends, loading bays and multi-storey car parks for example, which was nothing short of strategic folly. They needed open spaces, places that would allow them to move - and fight - at speed.

Since their encounter with the jumpers at Clydesdale Tower, the unit had kept up their speed. They had seen plenty of zombies en route, and it would have been so easy to become ensnared in the cramped Birmingham streets by the sheer numbers alone.

“ETA to target zone?” Shipman asked Connors.

“Ten minutes,” the driver said. “I’d like to get as close to the entrance as possible.”

“Hey, Connors, save your chat up lines for the ladies,” Honeyman mused.

“Stow it,” Shipman said sternly. “We lose focus here and we lose a lot more than the mission.”

“Sorry, Sir,” Honeyman grumbled. But had Shipman looked there was something in Honeyman’s eyes that said that he wasn’t sorry at all.

***
As O’Connell edged towards the cab, he prepared himself for what lay ahead.

It was possible that Kunaka had been caught off guard and was now at the mercy many unfettered, undead teeth.

O’Connell was reviled by such a thought. Not least because: Stu Kunaka was far too noble a man to depart this life in such an unceremonious fashion. To go out fighting - on a field of battle – yes, O’Connell could have seen that happening at one point in their lives.

But this? No, no-one could have ever foreseen this happening.

He’d known Kunaka for over ten years; serving with him in the marines for much of this time. They did several tours together; the usual places, some not-so-usual places too, until their careers were cut short.

“DD”, that’s what the army called it. Dishonourable Discharge. O’Connell called it something else: Getting Screwed. Not as snappy as “DD” but far more accurate.

It had happened in Bosnia in the June of ’95, and it started with a covert op and Kunaka and O’Connell were on point. Their Captain was Joseph Wiggets, a young man who had all the qualifications, and, on paper, pulled strategic clout. But on the ground he was a sticky thinker, hesitant when under stress.

Both of them had seen such officers before, but never one like this, his arrogance outweighed common sense; paying little heed to the experience of those about him.

Then one day he nearly got someone killed. They were ambushed by Croatian troops, pinned down by heavy machine gun fire. Rather than call in an air strike Wiggets ordered two privates to charge the nest. They declined stating that it was suicide and O’Connell and Kunaka agreed with them. O’Connell had tried to reason with Wiggets, suggesting that maybe an air strike was a better option given the odds. And after some persuasion it appeared that Wiggets had finally succumbed to common sense. The Captain had called in the strike; the machine gun nest was obliterated under a barrage of 5,000lb bombs dropped by two F15’s.

Back at camp Wiggets placed the two privates on a charge for disobeying a direct order. And later that evening O’Connell was reprimanded for questioning the orders of a superior officer. After this Wiggets had made it plain that O’Connell and Kunaka would be under observation, and he’d be waiting for either of them to put one step out of line. Wiggets advised them instead that they keep their heads down and drop any ideas of reporting his transgressions. He was an officer after all, and he had friends.

No sooner had Wiggets said this, O’Connell knew that the officer was maverick and reckless and there would be someone prepared to bail him out. Someone high up in the chain of command; a nameless, faceless entity, an uncle or step-dad who would stand over him like a dirty guardian angel, always ready to clean up his mess. Wiggets wasn’t arrogant because he was inexperienced; he was arrogant because he was protected. So, on and off the battlefield, Connell and Kunaka kept their heads down.

This is how it was for some time. Until the day that Wiggets murdered a young girl by the name of Jasna Maric.

***

On the roof of the driver’s cab O’Connell assessed the best way to gain access. From his vantage point he could see that there were baying zombies, four rows deep, in front of the truck. He gauged that whilst it was going to be unpleasant to achieve, the Mastiff would make short work of getting clear.

All he had to do was get to Kunaka. And hope that he was okay.

More gunfire from behind told him that Suzie and Amir were holding firm. Reassured, he lay flat and inched towards the edge of the cab, which would place him above the passenger seat. A noise to his right made him turn suddenly. A female zombie was scuttling up the grill of the truck, trying to gnaw crazily at the windshield. Without hesitating O’Connell blew her brains out with his Browning.

But by her actions, the zombie had shown him that Kunaka was still very much alive; at least alive enough to attract the attentions of an undead groupie.

He leaned over the rim, the zombies were ten feet below, hands reaching up like a forest of undead trees. There was little hope of getting the door open. O’Connell had no choice but put out the passenger window.

He used the remaining contents of the Browning’s magazine, same spot - at point blank range - punching a small hole in the toughened glass, then turned the gun over ignoring the muzzle-heat against his palm, using the butt to tear a hole large enough for him to get an arm through and activate the automated winder; quickly yanking his arm out of the hole before he got it trapped. Glass fell onto the upturned faces of the zombies below; sugar sprinkles for the bitterness.

With the window down, O’Connell called for cover and Suzie and Amir, his good Samaritans; his good soldiers, carved some space with steady fire from their weapons, driving the crowd backwards allowing O’Connell to
clamber into the cab. Once inside, he raised the window, a ragged “O” climbing into sight like the blackest of moons.
When he turned finally to look at Kunaka, O’Connell found he was staring into a face from the past.

***
In room 409 of Hilton Towers, a large chunk of blistered plaster fell from the ceiling; landing on the plush carpet.
Smoke and heat began to seep in through the gash it had left behind, the joists and boards proving little protection from the inferno still raging in the suite above.
“Great,” Thom said sardonically. “Fuckin’ grade “A” great!”
His options were limited. Stay and choke to death on acrid smoke; or be burned alive. Oh, and let’s not forget the potential of getting crushed as the upper floor gave in to the awful damage being inflicted upon it.
Balanced against this was leaving the room and saying “Hi!” to the moaning, groaning duo in the corridor outside which Thom considered to be about as safe as staying where he was.
But at least there would be a chance he could get past them. It was a gamble but he would have to wait until the last possible minute. He’d have to wait for his apartment to start filling with smoke, anything to mask him, to give him some kind of edge.
He looked down at his smudged white shirt - Charvet of Paris - and ripped off the pocket with three huge tugs. As thick purulent smoke billowed in from above, Thom rammed his make-shift mask over his mouth and nose and got to his foot. With effort he braced his back against the chair and heaved it clear of the door. Then, he ducked low, his eyes now stinging from the smoke, his brow moist from the heat.
From overhead, a sudden flaming cataract spewed into the apartment, the carpet fibres sizzling in a spreading pool of fire. It took seconds for the room to ignite in a searing wall of incandescence. The apartment was filled with the noise of it, and Thom screamed as the intense heat became almost unbearable. Forgotten were the figures in the corridor, his fear of them, what they may do to him. All he could think of was getting the hell out of that room; away from that blazing, burning sensation on his skin.
He scrabbled with the door handle, yanking upon it with all his weight, burning his hands on the scorching metal, screaming in pain and frustration, and suddenly the door was wide open.
What happened next took mere moments, but was destined to feel as though it was an eternity.

***
Shipman’s Jackal mounted a curb to avoid an Evening Mail delivery van overturned with one of its back door slapped against the tarmac. Several paper blocks were strewn across the street, turning to grey pulp under the fine rain.
Connors pulled the car back onto the road once he’d navigated the obstacle, and wiped his visor to aid his vision. Through the watery smears he noticed a slash of colour on the horizon; a disparate red and blue swathe that appeared to oscillate as he watched it stream through the streets ahead.
And he wasn’t the only one to have seen it.
“Pull up, Connors!” Keene cried out over his shoulder, causing the driver to hit the brakes hard. The Jackal skittered on the wet tarmac for several metres before coming to a halt, and from their seats, Alpha Team watched the event unfolding before them in disbelief.
Three hundred metres away, a river of red and blue poured through the narrow streets. Shipman could see people in blue and white tunics, others in claret and blue; the colours of Birmingham City and Aston Villa football clubs; milling together in their thousands, in life staunch rivals yet in death drifting through the wet streets as one shuffling brainless mass; scarves hanging limp, hats off kilter, eyes filled with nothingness. Their ambling feet came as an incessant hiss; competing easily with the rain’s downpour and the ever present, woeful moans had replaced passionate soccer chants.
“Shit! It’s derby night!” Keene said astounded. “Blues versus the Villains.”
“Wonder who won?” Honeyman said with a grim smile.
“Not us, that’s for sure,” Connors said. “They’ve just cut us off. We need to find another route.”
“Shit!” Shipman whispered.

***
It was raining the night that Captain Joseph Wiggets shot Jasna Maric. He watched her bleeding to death in the mud of a small village 10 kilometers from Sarajevo, while the street dogs sat waiting for her to die. She was seventeen and had threatened to report his unwanted advances. So he shot her like a rabid animal. And then he took her out into a water logged field, placed a soviet-made Makarov pistol in her hand and reported her as a Serbian Croat traitor who had tried to kill him.
But unknown to Wiggets there was a witness. There was Stu Kunaka.

O’Connell had been out on patrol, a six hour stint, checking perimeters and making sure they weren’t being probed by Croat forces. They shouldn’t have been there, it was meant to be a discretionary operation.

Once he’d got back the village, O’Connell had sought out Kunaka. He found the big black guy sitting in his room, staring out into space, and the look he held was one of disbelief and despair, one of not knowing what to do.

“What’s up big guy?” O’Connell had asked. And Kunaka had told him what he’d seen.

“You have to report it,” he told Kunaka. “Covert or not, it’s an illegal shooting.”

“It’s his word against mine, man,” Kunaka muttered, O’Connell sensing the hopelessness in his friend’s voice.

“A fuckin’ squaddies word against a Sandhurst officer. A protected officer at that! Who do you think they’ll believe?”

Sadly, O’Connell knew the truth of these words. It was slim pickings no matter how they looked at it. Kunaka would either have to say nothing and live with it, or report the incident and pay the price of an unsubstantiated claim. And riling Wигgets for a second time.

It was at this point that O’Connell made the decision that would so spectacularly back fire that both he and Kunaka would be leaving the army with a red “DD” stamped on the cover of their buff military file.

“How about if we even the odds?” he suggested to Kunaka.

“What do you mean?” his friend replied hopefully.

“What if it were the word of two squaddies against one Sandhurst officer?”

“You mean lie?”

“Just say I was there too and saw it all.”

“I can’t let you do that,” Kunaka said.

“And you can live with it? Saying nothing?”

Kunaka had turned away from him then, the troubled expression, that look of crippling helplessness and confusion, setting up camp and appearing as though it planned to stay for a while.

If O’Connell had allowed it to do so.

***

And this was the expression that O’Connell saw on his friend’s face as he sat in the Mastiff; staring out as a hundred hungry zombies gawped back at him.

“Stu?” O’Connell said.

Kunaka didn’t respond.

O’Connell grabbed the big man’s shoulder, shaking it so hard O’Connell could hear his friend’s teeth chatter.

“Kunaka!” he said sternly. “Get back in the zone! We’re in trouble!”

“Grandpa Joe?” Kunaka asked the wind shield.

“No, Stu, it’s me: O’Connell! And I need you back here with us, now!”

Kunaka turned to him, his eyes wide but dull. “They’ve come for me, O’Connell. Just like the Bokor said they would. It’s Judgment Day. It’s time to repent.”

“You repent on your own time, marine!” O’Connell snapped. “You’re getting twenty-five million for this gig. Now fucking drive this truck or let me do it!”

At the sound of his words Kunaka blinked his way out of his fugue. His eyes had some of their sparkle, but they were some way off returning to the light.

Just as O’Connell felt as though Kunaka wasn’t moving, one hand found the wheel and the other the gear shift. Then Kunaka revved the mighty engine.

“Suzie! Amir! Get below, we’re moving out!”

“You mean that dip-shit has finished scratching his ass?” Suzie said caustically in his ear. “Hope it was worth it!”

“Just get in, sister,” Kunaka growled. “I’m moving in ten seconds.”

“I’m surprised you can count that high,” Suzie griped. There was one more gunshot and then the sound of the hatch slamming shut.

“Okay, we’re in!”

“Get us out of here,” O’Connell ordered and the Mastiff powered forward, the row of zombies disappearing from sight, dragged under by the sheer force of its movement. The revving engine covered the hideous sound of bodies rupturing under its twenty-three thousand five hundred kilogram chassis, but the wheels still slipped on the carnage splashed upon the tarmac.

Within seconds they were free, O’Connell taking a second to peer into his side mirror through the hole in his window. He watched the crowd of zombies recede and wondered what Kunaka had meant by “repent”.

Then the moment was gone and his mind was back on the job.
“Take the next left,” he instructed. “Our target is at the bottom of the street.”

The Mastiff turned into a quiet side road flanked by a row of offices for a few hundred yards. This then yielded to a small plaza on the right leading to a large, unassuming brown building. The plaza was quiet and the windows looking down upon the cobbled square were dark.

“Park right outside, Stu,” O’Connell said, holding onto the dash as the truck’s suspension bounced up the curb and raced over the series of heavy cobble stones.

As Kunaka pulled up, they both noticed that, as with the windows on the upper floors, the entrance foyer was in total darkness.

Then they saw something else, something that thrilled and chilled their hearts in equal measure. The doors to the foyer were no longer sitting in their frames. They were instead lying on the steps leading up to the building, ripped off of their hinges and discarded.

“They’re inside here too?” Kunaka whispered.

“Maybe,” O’Connell replied. “But either way we have to go in. Are you with us?”

Kunaka nodded. “Yes, boss, I’m here.”

“Then let’s be bad guys,” O’Connell said, opening the door.

***

“Time for you to do something other than whine and play chicken, Clarke,” Suzie said as she felt the truck roll to a stop.

Clarke eyed her with contempt, unwilling to be drawn. In reality he was grossly intimidated by both her beauty and her forthrightness. Such qualities he often associated with cerebral paralysis whenever he spoke with the opposite sex. As such he avoided it as often as he could, preferring to mix with safer, less confrontational company. Computers, for instance.

His penchant for hardware and soft ware had come early, his natural intellectual prowess nurtured by his parents - respectable, middle class people; teachers at two highly respected private schools in the Midlands, and totally neurotic to boot. The Clarke’s kept their only child so close to them they became complacent and missed a lot of the little nuances in his personality. How he grew very bored very easily, for example, or how he staved off ennui by sitting at his laptop apparently immersed in a school project, when all along he was dismantling the software, just seeing how it all worked. And then putting it back together. Making it work better. Faster.

Then the boredom crept in and Gaz Clarke sought out far more thrilling ways to fend it off.

He’d started small, hacking into school websites, planting spoof information on people who pissed him off, the bullies - brain dead pupils and sadistic teachers - and creating simple viruses that paralysed the system during SATS weeks and GCSE results times, watching the aftermath with a pervasive sense of power. From there, Clarke became more inventive, more adventurous. At seventeen he hacked into several bank accounts, just to see if it could be done. When he was eighteen he’d found a window in the FBI data base, using his Universities IPS address, landing the whole faculty system in hot water. And it was this issue of systems that could detect instances of hacking that encouraged him to design the Programme he would be uploading today. He called it the Mimic virus. Its premise was simple though its design was the result of three years of intensive research and programming. Now it was complete it would form the basis of a multi-million pound franchise.

So, sure, he felt isolated growing up and his retreat into his cyber-shell had done little to improve his social skills with girls, but he had plan, an end game and it was drawing near. By the time he walked away from this job he would be able to have any tight butted, big breasted bikini clad woman he chose because money was power and he would have more than he could spend.

They’d called him a geek at school. Soon he’d be a geek with a fuckin’ Ferrari.

Suckers.

“Will you move your ass?” Suzie was beyond impatient now.

“I’m getting in the zone,” Clarke said grumpily. “And you’re not helping.”

“Not helping?” she spat incredulously. “No. Not helping is cutting three people loose while you skulk down here like a scared rabbit.”

“This job isn’t happening without me,” he replied to the floor. His embarrassment was exposed by the mottled red rash creeping up his neck. “You’d do well to remember that.”

Suzie said nothing for a few seconds. It was a token victory that left Clarke with a glimmer of pride.

“Well, it looks as though you do have a pair of balls after all,” she said. “Now you just have to prove that you know what to do with them.”

“Suzie? Over,” O’Connell said in her headset.

“Go ahead, O’Connell.”

“Our target has been breached. We could have hostiles inside. We’ll be proceeding with caution.”
“Don’t we always?” she quipped. “See you in two. Over and out.”
Amir snapped several cartridges into the Benelli and nodded to the redundant SA80 lying at Clarke’s feet.
“You’re going to need that,” he said.
Tom Everett’s senses were in free fall.
He could feel the blistering heat at his back, blasting him forwards as the wind from the shattered windows of his apartment rushed towards the low pressure of the corridor outside. He could hear the whoosh and crackle of the flames, the splintering and spitting of timber and glass under intense heat, merging together with the awful groans from the doorway and forming one chaotic cacophony as the taste of the fumes filled his mouth but still finding room for a scream as he saw the things barring his exit.

Time stalled, making the event seem even more surreal, even more perverse; slowed down to the point where every detail was painted upon his memory, despite the primordial drive to survive the inferno crisping the hairs on his neck.

There were three people. Two of them, a man and a woman in their late fifties, were naked, the man’s belly hanging down over shriveled genitals, the woman’s nipples pointing at her knees, a web of silver stretch mark traversing her ample thighs. He recognised the other as the security guard from the foyer - Dennis, or something like that - but the last time Thom saw him, Dennis what’s-his-face didn’t have a purple tongue lolling from his mouth like a dog locked in a car on a warm day, nor did he have eyes that were at the same time so very blank yet so very intent. Some part of Thom’s mind noted the shredded duct tape at the guard’s ankles as he balled himself and hit the guy hard, taking the legs from under him, toppling Dennis what’s-his-name into the apartment, and towards the fire ball that wanted to be free so very badly.

The guard didn’t cry out, didn’t writhe in agony, instead he climbed to his feet, his skin frying and falling onto the floor as a stream of flaming fat.

The naked man and woman stood gawping at Thom’s prone body, lying flat to the floor as the flames expunged the apartment, washing over the corridor’s ceiling. The woman’s hair caught fire, turning the top of her head into a fiery crown, her features melting, collapsing like a cheap wax work, sizzling grease bubbling out her mouth and down her chin.

Then, to add to the macabre horror, her naked partner continued to stare down at Thom, and raised its arm, as if reaching out, and his hand balled before extending an index finger.

Then the inferno consumed it, leaving Thom with the bizarre image of a naked male zombie, sheathed in guzzling flame, its hand still pointing at him; and amid all this danger, amid all of this violence, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was somehow being accused, held accountable in some way for Whittington’s atrocity.

Then the figures were nothing more than shambling shadows, collapsing as the intense heat shriveled muscle and sinew, and pulverized bones.

Thom’s perverse awe dissolved with the decimation of the zombies. Self preservation finally got through and he moved, keeping low, dragging in the meager oxygen still available in corridor’s confines and headed away from the heat and the horror.

The elevator to his floor lay to his left, but he ignored it. Somewhere from deep inside he recalled that it was a bad thing to try and use an elevator to escape from a high rise fire. It was the kind of thing that turned people into Pork Scratchings. The stairs weren’t much further, a set of heavy fire doors (how apt) leading onto a landing with carpets so deep and crimson it was clear that they were hardly ever used.

But once he’d shoved through these doors, Thom Everett did not run headlong down the stairs; he didn’t punch the air and claim victory over fate. He placed his back against one of the walls, sliding down until he was sitting, tears streaming down his soot stained cheeks and thanking any deity in the theological catalogue of Man that he was still very much alive.

***

Villa Park football Stadium has capacity for just under forty-three thousand people. When Dr Richard Whittington unwittingly released his kind of Armageddon upon the city of Birmingham, the stadium had been full. Within half an hour, silence had befallen the game, as people succumbed to a hideous, suffocating death, only to find an eternal limbo only forty minutes later.

Now, as one huge mass, the crowd sought out the corporeal to sate their endless, soulless hunger. And as they drifted through the suburbs of England’s second city, the tide rolled into Broad Street like a horde of Saturday night revelers with their own unique agenda.

And, through the view finder of his army issue binoculars, Major Shipman watched them come.

“We haven’t got the time to find an alternative route,” he said to Connors after some consideration. “Give me
Keene pulled up a map on his PDA and then entered their co-ordinates. Within a few moments a 2D image of Birmingham City Centre filled the screen. Keene zoomed into a section where a red dot winked rapidly. As he honed down to the red dot it turned into a green arrow pointing North West.

“We’re two blocks short - half a mile maximum. We can assume that the streets from this point to our target will be blocked with hostiles,” Keene speculated. “Most routes will dissect these infected zones so our options are narrowed to either a call for a tactical air lift to our target or find a way on foot.”

“There’s no opportunity for an airlift anytime soon,” Shipman replied. “And it’s pretty conclusive that the city is overrun; which means it will only be a matter of time before the hostiles start to test our perimeters. Time is running out, gentlemen - I need answers.”

“What about below ground?” Keene offered. “We could use the sewers with guidance from COM.”

“Good work, Keene,” Shipman said. “Contact Colonel Carpenter and get him to send us schematic data on the sewer network. And tell him to do it quickly.”

As Keene got in touch with COM Shipman watched the approaching wall of football shirts, his face impassive.

“Get all the weaponry we can carry,” he ordered.

***

O’Connell and his team congregated briefly behind the Mastiff. Kunaka was back with them; but O’Connell knew his friend well enough to recognise that he hadn’t quite made the journey back from the dark place he’d visited for a while.

Suzie could see O’Connell’s concern for Kunaka and swallowed both her vitriol and the familiar stab of jealousy that often occurred when she saw her lover’s commitment to the big man.

She didn’t understand it, didn’t want to understand it, and O’Connell never really tried to enlighten her. On the few occasions, when she had made a token attempt to find out exactly why O’Connell was prepared to risk all for the likes of Stu Kunaka, he’d just say it was because of their friendship, the bond based on what they’d been through together during their days in the army.

And as he’d said it Suzie saw no lies in those eyes of his; but suspected that the experiences her man had shared with Kunaka would have meant that O’Connell had been placed into a position where he felt he had to protect his friend, look after him.

Save him.

The one thing O’Connell wasn’t able to do for his brother, Chris.

Dead Chris.

“Hey, you with us, sister?”

It was Kunaka.

She blinked away her thoughts. “I’m with you,” she said; the biochem mask hiding her flushed cheeks. If Kunaka had any quip he held it back, his mind now firmly on the job. Suzie allowed a fleeting moment of respect for him pass through her then sent it on its way by checking her rifle.

“Okay, everyone, listen up, O’Connell said to the row of biochem face plates. “Let’s go do our thing.”

They moved in single file, crossing the plaza, O’Connell and Kunaka taking point, their Heckler and Koch machine pistols trained on the ominous black space of the foyer.

As the group mounted the steps, they fanned out, Suzie and Clarke peeling left; the others to the right, flattening themselves against the walls either side of the entrance.

O’Connell crouched and leaned around the door, activating the torch strapped underneath his weapon.

The milky pool of light swept around the interior revealing a scene of destruction. The main reception area was awash with papers and shattered glass. The carcass of a computer terminal was upended, its keyboard trampled and keys strewn like black teeth.

“If we haven’t got power, this gig is fucked,” Clarke hissed.

“If it hasn’t, we’ll sort it,” Kunaka whispered his voice tight with annoyance. “Now button your lip, boy.”

Clarke muttered something out of earshot. It wasn’t complimentary.

“Suzie, Stu, cover me,” O’Connell said and inched through the doorway, remaining hunkered down, his weapon making broad sweeps of the area.

A large reception desk lay off to his right and he headed for it, eager to ensure nothing was lurking behind its oak paneling.

He reached the desk, his machine pistol rock steady; the upshot of years of military training. He made a mental count.

One.
Two.
Three.

He stood and aimed his weapon at any potential assailant. But the reception space was empty, save for a duo of overturned chairs.

Satisfied, he headed back to the others.

““This area’s secure,” he concluded. “Set up a perimeter. Amir, guard the access and if you see anything shoot first. You got me?””

“I got you,” Amir said, turning his shot gun on the steps.

At the reception desk, Clarke pulled a Micro Soft notebook from his pocket and fired it up. Once the desk top came online he accessed a file titled Hansel and Gretel and within seconds the team were looking at schematics for the NICDD building; provided by their inside man after a year of meticulous research.

Corridors were marked by a series of white lines, and, based upon the information gleaned from their spy Clarke had marked all the computer terminal access points with red VDU markers. It was never his intention to use these markers himself but he was obsessed with detail; part of this was down to personality, part of it was the natural requirement of a computer programmer. One co-sign or digit could mean the difference between a successful piece of software and a bug-infested piece of junk in fancy packaging.

“The nearest access terminal is on the first floor,” Clarke said scrutinizing the screen. “There’s an office three doors down from the stairwell.”

“How far to the stairs?” O’Connell asked.

“I’d say no more than a hundred metres off the reception area,” Kunaka said. “Plenty of offices in between us and the stairs though. Anything could be in ‘em.”

“You and Clarke are with me,” O’Connell said to Kunaka, who nodded as if this were a given.

Clarke said nothing despite his reservations. He was scared, but he was close to achieving his dream. Not even his fear could get in the way of that, he simply wouldn’t allow it.

O’Connell made his way back to the entrance where Suzie and Amir held vigil over the plaza.

“Anything?”

“You hear us shooting?” Amir asked.

“No.”

“Then there ain’t anything,” he smiled.

O’Connell nodded and returned his smile.

“I want to thank you, O’Connell,” Amir explained. “You hardly needed my skills to gain access to this place, right?”

“For still bringing me along on this job,” Amir explained. “You hardly needed my skills to gain access to this place, right?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” O’Connell countered. “Who could’ve planned for this kind of thing? Not your run-of-the-mill fuck up, is it?”

“I guess not,” Amir admitted.

“Besides,” O’Connell added, “if you hadn’t been there with Suzie, I’d have never got to Kunaka. You’ve earned your place in this mess, Amir. Don’t sweat it.”

“Then I guess I won’t.” The grin was back on Amir’s face, lightening his dark eyes.

“We’re moving into the building,” O’Connell said to Suzie. “Hold the fort for me?”

“You guys be careful,” she replied. He knew what she meant. You be careful.

“We will. We’ll stay in radio contact, okay?”

She nodded and he put a hand on her shoulder.

“Suzie, I -” he began but she cut him off.

“I know. And you know, right? Now get the hell out of here.”

His turn to nod now. He gave her a wink and then turned away.

“Okay guys,” he said to Kunaka and Clarke. “Let’s go get our money.”

***

Despite the best efforts of those employed to keep their population under control, their number continued to grow; their resilience to trap and poison testament to their ability to adapt and maintain their kind.

Until now.

The Lazarus Initiative had succeeded in a way that no other pest control strategy could ever hope to achieve. In the space of one hour the twenty thousand strong communities of rats in the Birmingham sewer network were dead;
lying piled and inert in the service tunnels and relaying pipe network.

But, like so many of their human counterparts who had succumbed to Whittington’s scientific catastrophe, their death was to be only a temporary measure.

***

Alpha team moved at pace through the tunnel’s narrow confines, their torches throwing crazy shadows about the curved, greasy walls. His boots filling with vile slurry, not even Honeyman had any quip to lighten the mood.

Shipman held up his hand and the unit came to a halt, their footfalls continuing for a few more seconds as a ghostly echo.

“Bearing’s check,” he said, his muffled voice bouncing off after the fading footsteps.

“We’re less than a quarter of a mile away, Sir,” Keene said his eyes flitting over the screen of his PDA. “This tunnel will pan to the left after three hundred metres, then there’s a tributary branching into three access points. One of these will bring us out at our target zone.”

“Okay,” Shipman said. “Move out.”

Running again the team continued their steady speed and showing no sign of fatigue. They were focused, determined to conclude their mission with nothing but total and utter success.

Yet one of their number had an agenda that was quite different to the others. Sometime soon that agenda would have to take precedent.

But by that time it would be far too late for the rest of Alpha Team to do anything about it.

***

Primordial instincts are guiding them but something is wrong. They used to sense things, fear things, driven to dark corners in order to protect themselves. To stay alive.

Their eyes are no longer dark black apertures, sucking in any nuance of light. They are now guided by something very different. Now only hunger drives them, and their appetites, their tastes, have become more selective. Nothing short of flesh will do; warm flesh, moistened by the blood of a still beating, still living heart.

And in their heads, in their small intuitive brains, they can hear four large hearts thumping nearby, pounding like a cacophony of drums, driving them, and guiding them towards their feast.

***

“You hear that?” Bringing up the rear, Connors turned to scan the tunnel behind him. The sound coming towards him was oddly familiar but there was something about it, something wrong. It felt as though it was multi-layered, distorted, as though coming to him through water.

From the gloom, in the grey twilight beyond the range of his torch, he thought he saw something moving; a seething, writhing mass moving at frightening speed.

“Shit!” Connors yelled. “We got rats, incoming! Hundreds of ’em!”

“Easy, Connors,” Honeyman said. “They’re honin’ in on your after shave, man.”

“I’m not kiddin’ here,” Connors said. And at that moment he realised that the familiar, yet not so familiar sound was many, many rat voices, tiny squeaks that were no longer high pitched and terrified but much lower, a long, thick cough. Then a mind numbing, sickening understanding overcame Connors.

The rats were moaning.

“Uh Jesus H!” Connors yelled. “They’re fuckin’ infected!”

Coupled with the ungodly noise rushing ahead of these awful creatures, Honeyman suddenly got it.

“Honeyman - grenades!” Shipman ordered. But, in his mind, there was the dreadful thought that this response may have been too little, too late.

***
“Sorry I lost it, man,” Kunaka said to O’Connell, his eyes ahead and his voice low. They were moving cautiously through the corridor leading to the stairs, stepping over scattered office debris. A dreadful storm had passed through there not too long ago and it had left its mark. Windows were smashed, chairs and tables scattered and overturned. But there were no bodies or blood to be seen.

“Forget it,” O’Connell said and he meant it.

But Kunaka wasn’t ready to let it go. “You have a habit of trying to bail me out.”

“Yeah, but sometimes it doesn’t always go according to plan, does it?” O’Connell recalled. “Maybe we should talk about it over a cold one some day.”

“Let’s do it now,” Kunaka whispered. And O’Connell could see that Kunaka wanted some normalcy injected into his day, something to keep the werewolves from the door. Something to keep him in the here and now and not back in that place he’d stumbled across in the Mastiff, a place where Voodoo sorcerers talked of atonement.

“I agreed to let you do it,” Kunaka continued firmly. “I don’t blame you for what happened with Wiggets.”

Blame.

That was a word, wasn’t it? How many times had that noun pervaded the life and love of Kevin O’Connell? Too many times, too many instances where the beast blame had influenced his actions; moulding his decisions into its own image.

It had started with Chris, hadn’t it? Of course it had. Chris: his little brother. Last seen when, exactly? Oh, yes that last image of his small, frightened face, staring up from the brown churning waters of a Blue Circle Incorporated quarry pit. A place they should never have been, a place where two other kids had died in the space of four years. And Chris had gone to play hide and seek with them at the bottom of the murky water as his big brother knelt screaming his name over and over by the side of the shit coloured lake, clinging to the ‘Danger! No Swimming!’ sign.

Yes it had started there, even though everyone said that he wasn’t to blame, that maybe, if his parents had invested less time in snooker rooms and bingo halls and not left two boys to fend for themselves on a regular basis, things may have been different. It was about being responsible - accountable - in the end. Oh, they said these things but O’Connell saw that the level of conviction never quite made it to their eyes, not his parents, not the social workers, not the police.

And, just as the need for consistency and security had driven him into the army, so the burning need to protect those he cared for came along for the ride. But not content to be sitting quietly in the back seat, it jumped up front, taking over driving duties until the tank ran out. But it was a long, long road and the fuel gauge never entered the red zone.

So, years later, when he’d said to Kunaka that he would lie to support him in nailing the murdering scumbag of an officer, blame had pulled a few strings and made him dance. He couldn’t sit by and helplessly watch his brother sinking into that murky pit any more. He had to protect. He had to be responsible.

The report went in: an attempted rape and murder of a seventeen year old Serbian girl by a British Officer. With two marines as witnesses to the shooting. Cut and dried.

Or so it seemed.

Within three days the case was dropped. O’Connell and Kunaka were visited by a Colonel who questioned their credibility as witnesses, given that there were reports of a history of bad blood between them and the officer in question. And then there was the “evidence” found in the home of Jasna Maric implicating her as a Croatian sleeper. With this unspecified “evidence” clearing Wigget’s of any wrong doing the marine’s behaviour and more importantly their motive was subsequently called into question. And the upshot was a “Conduct Unbecoming” charge which was upheld in the subsequent - and rapid - court martial.

So, after ten years of loyal service, O’Connell and Kunaka had “DD” stamped on their file and no chance of work in the traditional post-military areas: police, emergency services, the security sector.

Instead they became anti-security consultants, their skills readily sought by those who knew quality work and the rest sort of followed on from there.

“I hate to interrupt this sort of bonding thing you guys are having here,” Clarke said from behind them, “but I think you should know I can hear something.”

The group stopped and listened intently for a few seconds. O’Connell was about to say something when a faint, dull dragging noise came from over their heads.
“Something being hauled across the floor?” Kunaka suggested. “Barricade, maybe?”
“Let’s see,” O’Connell replied, his eyes still scanning the ceiling.

The stairs were carpeted so their approach was easily masked. Once they had reached the door opening out onto the first floor O’Connell told Clarke to stay back. The youth didn’t need telling twice, skulking in the shadows and clutching his rifle to him as though it were a small child.

“Try not to shoot us, brain box,” Kunaka warned as he disappeared through the door.

The first things O’Connell picked up in his torch beam were the dark splashes on the walls. And the ceiling.

Blood.

“O’Connell,” Kunaka hissed. “Two O’clock - check it out.”

Up ahead, to the right, an office door was ajar and sticking out from it was an arm. It was bare and slim, rendered stark in the light from their torches, the rings on the fingers: a mesmerizing twinkle.

Kunaka spotted something else. “Hey, the fingers are moving. They’re still alive!”

And suddenly he was rushing down the corridor, his instincts taking over.

“Stu!” O’Connell barked. “Wait a minute!”

Kunaka got to the door and nudged it open, his gun ready but his mind focused on the shivering limb and its owner.

But, to his horror, Stu was to discover that at this moment in time the arm didn’t have an owner, it had been severed just below the elbow; the soft tissue ragged and dark with congealed blood. Yet it continued to move blindly, the fingers digging into the carpet, pulling its cylinder of flesh behind it.

Someone loomed forwards out of the shadows. A woman, eyes vacant, face smeared with gore, one arm missing just below the elbow. She lunged at Kunaka before he had time to recoil.

“Shit!”

“Kunaka, get clear!” O’Connell yelled. “I can’t get a shot.”

“Jesus, she’s fuckin’ strong,” Kunaka gasped trying to push the zombie away from him. He grabbed her by the hair, trying to yank those teeth away from him. But to his disgust she merely hauled her head forwards, with the purring sound hair ripping from the scalp, and suddenly her mouth was about his throat and closing over his larynx. Searing pain as he felt muscle tear, he felt her teeth grating against his oesophagus and the warm wetness cascading down the front of his tunic.

He tried to cry out but with his throat gone, only a weak gurgling hiss came. The female zombie was still embedded in his throat as Kunaka collapsed and O’Connell opened her head with two rounds from his weapon.

By the time he’d pulled her carcass off and held onto his friend, O’Connell knew that he was too late.

***

Phut! Phut! Phut! Phut!

Under the city streets, four grenade launchers fired in quick succession.

It was a dull sound, a small thing compared to the detonations that ensued. The walls cracked, imploding as their structures weakened in the blasts, huge chunks of concrete folding, and tumbling inwards under the weight of the earth behind it.

It stopped most of the rodent horde charging towards Alpha Team, thousands of tiny screams trapped behind a wall of dirt and rock. But some still got through, their speed carrying them onwards ahead of the cave in. And there were still enough to overwhelm their prey; a few hundred at least. There were many but they all had one single minded goal.

To feed.

“The tunnel won’t take another blast like that,” Shipman shouted, his ears still ringing from the explosions. “We have to move, get to higher ground.”

Alpha Team began their retreat, torch lights swinging frantically, footfalls big in the small space, and the vile vermin in hot pursuit.

Connors risked a brief look behind him and baulked in fear. Several of the rats were mere metres from his boots. He kicked out, catching one dead centre, puntng it back down the tunnel, but his action was too ballistic and he lost his balance. He landed heavily, rolling several times in the muddy water lying on the tunnel floor. His weapon discharged sending a round through his foot and removing his toes.

He screamed in pain and fear and the knowledge that his time on this Good Earth was to end in a brief, savage period of Hell.

Then they were on him, biting and tearing at his fatigues, his cries suddenly loud as his biochem mask was ripped from his face.

Honeyman turned briefly and saw the writhing mass in the tunnel, a bloodied arm rising weakly clawing
ineffectually at the air; all but the middle finger missing as though Connors were offering one last gesture of
defiance.

“Fuck it,” Honeyman whispered and launched another grenade from the M208 strapped to the underside of his
carbine. The high explosive pellet detonated upon impact, chewing into the flesh of both man and rodent, scattering
it throughout the tunnel with a bright, loud roar.

Honeyman turned to continue his escape and he found himself looking into the face of Shipman. The Major
looked briefly over Honeyman’s shoulder and then back at him; their eyes locking for a moment.

Then Shipman nodded; admonishment in a simple bob of the head. *You did the right thing. I would have done the
same.*

They both began to run. Unlike Connors, the grenade had given them only token, temporary respite from the
zombie rodents, who were now heading down the tunnel; now discernable - no longer a mass but still determined
and deadly.

As Honeyman followed his Major, he thought briefly of that moment they shared; that instant of communicative
twilight where right and wrong hung in the balance, and breathed a sigh of relief at the outcome.

It could’ve gone the other way and that would have meant killing the rest of Alpha Team ahead of schedule. And
Honeyman was under instruction that such action was strictly a last resort.

He ran on.

***

“I gather you two were real pals?” Clarke said in the uneasy silence.

O’Connell didn’t respond immediately. He gazed down at Stu Kunaka’s bloodied body and fought back wave
after wave of violent emotion. Anger? Sure, there was plenty of that. And grief too had turned up to the party. But
there was also blame, that old devil forever haunting his steps. He’d lost someone he cared for, another person had
been snatched away from him, right in front of his eyes.

“Yeah,” he said; his voice weak and watery. “I guess you could say that.”

“Then you really ain’t gonna like what I’m gonna say next,” Clarke muttered.

“Just say it,” O’Connell said glancing up at him.

“You’ve got to put a bullet in his head, man,” Clarke said quietly. “Otherwise he’s gonna be up and walking
around like the rest of them.”

There was a long silence as O’Connell considered this. “That’s going to be difficult,” he admitted.

“I get that,” Clarke said. “But this isn’t *Dawn of the Dead*, O’Connell. And these aren’t the products of Tom
Savini and a box of make up.”

“You think I don’t know that?” O’Connell rounded on him.

“I’m just saying,” Clarke said looking away and leaving O’Connell to come to his own conclusions. His thoughts
were mud: thick and wieldy. A small noise came from the stairway and he span round, his torch turning the corridor
to milky white.

“Hey, guys, it’s Suzie! Don’t shoot!”

O’Connell sighed and lowered his weapon. “Shit, Suzie,” he said. “Am I glad you’re here?”

“I heard shots,” she said. “What’s -?” She stopped; her eyes alighting on Kunaka’s slumped and bloody body.

“Oh, no,” she breathed. She went to O’Connell, putting a hand on his chest. “Are you okay, baby?”

“No,” he said turning away. “But we have to do this another time.”

“Okay,” she said cautiously.

“Some things can’t wait,” Clarke said quietly.

“What’s he mean?” Suzie asked O’Connell.

“What I mean is: Kunaka has been bitten and he’s gonna come back,” Clarke snapped, indignant at being ignored.

“And when he does he isn’t gonna be wanting a group hug.”

“So what do we do?”

She took Clarke unawares by addressing him directly.

He told her how these things went and she nodded grimly.

“O’Connell?” she said. “You or me, that’s what it comes down to, right?”

He said nothing for a long while. Just when Suzie thought he was unable to make the decision he turned to face
her.

“I’ll do it,” he replied. “He’s my responsibility.”

“You’re not to blame for this, O’Connell. Just like you weren’t to blame for -” The look on his face made her
abort the sentence.

*For Chris*, she’d been about say. But his eyes told her to quit it. Quit it right now.
She bobbed her head in understanding. “I’ll go with Clarke and we’ll get this thing done,” she said simply. “You catch up when you’ve finished up here.”

Suzie withdrew, heading off down the corridor. She’d taken several steps before turning to Clarke who remained gawping at her.
“Coming, or what?” she said briskly.
“Yeah,” he said in resignation and followed her, thinking that in the grand scheme of things his day couldn’t possibly get any worse.
How wrong he was.

***

Another person perhaps not having a particularly good day was none other than Thom Everett, who having wiped tears and snot on the smoke blackened sleeve of his Charvet shirt, had begun his descent to the lobby of Hilton Towers only to find a few more obstacles in his way.

On the plus side, he’d spotted the group of zombies before they had been aware of him. He didn’t know what had made him peer over the balustrade but peer he did and managed to spot the bloodied hand on the stair rail several floors below. And that bloodied hand was sliding up the banister, leaving a smear of gore in its wake, as its owner slowly climbed the stairs. And behind the hand came another and another and another; all moving at a snail’s pace, all leaving that hideous splattered smear on the hand rail.

There wasn’t any going down tonight. Not with Wei Li and sure as hell not with the stairway. He checked the hand rail on the floor above him and it appeared clear.

“Up it is then,” he muttered and began the slow ascent to the roof, desperately trying to avoid the gnawing reality that once he was up there, he had nowhere else to go.

***
From his position Amir kept watch on the plaza. He’d seen little but there were enough sounds in the air to indicate that things were far from conventional.

The evening was punctuated by explosions, some nearby, some dulled by distance, the bright tinkle of glass as windows succumbed to abuse; a car horn howling endlessly in the darkness and all of this accompanied by the bacon-sizzling hiss of the rain on the cobbles and the mournful groans of The Risen.

Things were grim but there was always hope. This was Abinaash’s philosophy. His mother. Amir embraced the warm flow of love that besieged his heart at the thought of her. Her dark silken hair and blackest of eyes, offset by the brightest smile he’d ever known.

Amir was the son of over seven generations of Sikhs; his mother’s parents moving to England from The Punjab, Pakistan, in the early sixties. Fatehpal Singh, Amir’s father, was a sedate man who pondered more than he spoke. Mrs. Singh had enough zest for both of them, often prompting Mr. Singh to jest, “Why do I need a tongue when I have my wife?”

Fatehpal Singh’s mother and father were born in England and contested any insinuations that they were anything other than British. As a family they weathered the storms of ignorance and prejudice prevalent in the sixties and seventies; standing staunch in the face of racial adversity. And then there was final irony in that Fatehpal and Abinaash, doctors of repute, should both die in the same year that racially aggravated assault became a crime in its own right. This wasn’t lost on any of the remaining family.

Injustice and ignorance and hatred robbed Amir of his parents, kicked to death by a group of alleged National Front members in a Bradford city street. They were pronounced dead on arrival in the Accident and Emergency department where Abinaash worked as a specialist registrar; her colleagues weeping as they tried to work on her; tried to bring her back to them.

No CCTV, no evidence, no one brought to justice. A local magistrate suggested that perhaps the attack was not politically motivated after all, that maybe it was a mere robbery gone wrong, a tragedy never to be repeated. He denied allegations that he was a National Front member, of course.

Amir’s family rallied after him, supported him, trying to explain why such things happened. But from this point on he remained bitter and vulnerable and receptive to the poorer influences of life.

Uncle Esharveer was one of those poor influences. Amir had first met his estranged Uncle at his parent’s wake. Amongst the grief he discovered the mystery of family dynamics; this Uncle who appeared to pay his respects yet received only furtive glances and muted whispers from those present. He sought no discourse with anyone, choosing to stand on the periphery and whenever Amir glanced over to Esharveer; his Uncle was watching him with ebony eyes.

Amir should have felt uncomfortable but he did not. He saw only strength in those eyes and drew comfort from their gaze. So much so, and against his family’s wishes, he approached Uncle Esharveer at the end of the wake and thanked him for coming.

“You have the presence of a good child,” Esharveer had said. “Goodness is a gift - a means to cajole and placate the unwitting and unwary.”

“I don’t understand,” Amir had said, his face scrunched in confusion.

“If you wish to know then call me on the one day when all seems hopeless,” Esharveer said, pressing a small black business card - daubed in gold writing - into Amir’s hand when he shook it farewell.

Amir kept the card for several months before he picked up the phone and called the gilt-edged number. It was after another row with his grandmother, another argument about his future. He didn’t want to be a doctor like his parents. He wanted to be an actor. He had a natural flair – that’s what his drama teacher had said. He wanted to go to stage school and follow in the footsteps of his hero Ben Kingsley.
A bone of contention leading to consistent consternation from his grandparents who were still grieving for their own loss; wanting to keep the memory of their children alive in him. He had to be a doctor, in honour of his mother and father. The weight of expectation was suffocating and he fought to be free of it. From nowhere Uncle Esharveer’s words come to him, “Call me on the one day when all seems hopeless.”

And that day had come all too easily. Esharveer’s voice had poured from the receiver, velvet and mellow. His words were comforting to the young, grieving Amir and within several short minutes Amir had decided that his fate lay not in hospitals or GP surgeries; it lay instead in the hands of clandestine Uncle Esharveer and his tantalizing words of fame and fortune.

So Amir left home and the expectations of his family behind. He went to stay with his Uncle Esharveer and from that point onwards Amir discovered that his aptitude to play roles would indeed find him fortune, yet his fame would have to wait until Interpol actually caught up with him.

***

“There’s the tributary,” Keene said into his mic. “We need to take the left artery.”

Shipman spied a triad of adjacent archways ten metres high, lit with a series of dull bulbs encased behind a thick mesh and snaking off into the distance.

The muted sounds of the zombie rats behind them kept Alpha Team’s pace constant and rapid. The creatures were only metres away, impervious to fatigue or fear; a relentless, focused enemy the like of which none of the men had ever known.

“We need that high ground, Keene,” Shipman said. “We can’t outrun these things forever.”

“We should see a gallery in twenty metres, Sir,” Keene assured him. “It’s ladder access, not so easy for the hostiles to climb.”

Honeyman fixed his eyes on the two men in front of him, though his mind was flitting between his mission and the lethal enemy at his heels. If his time in the army had taught him anything then the need to take the mission one stage at a time was perhaps the most useful; that and knowing your enemy of course.

And Honeyman was very up to speed on his enemies; those in front of him and those behind. The remaining members of Alpha Team were a means to an end. Sure, they were men he’d known for many years, men he knew well. But they never knew him, not really, deep down and dirty, beneath the pseudo honour - membrane thick - lay the kind of self-serving soul that a conglomerate such as Phoenix Industries could easily succumb with a bankers draft and an off-shore account.

Even with their dead tiny incisors nipping at the air, Honeyman couldn’t truly see the vermin chasing them down as enemies, they were to be after all his ultimate saviours; his meal ticket out of the army.

At best he figured he had another five years left. Then he was destined to relent to an obligatory period of readjustment in civvy-street, the limbo that often claimed so many ex-servicemen. But not Honeyman, oh no. It was time to bring his retirement forwards; time to secure his future. He’d served. And now it was time for his reward. But it wouldn’t be left to chance; he wanted it sure fire. And Phoenix Industries were about to make that happen.

“There, up ahead!” Keene said in his ear. “The platform.”

Their tunnel opened out into a large space. There, rising from a pool of stagnant water, a framework of steel threw skeletal shadows against the walls.

“Access ladder to the right, Sir!” Keene observed; his breathing heavy.

“Go! Go! Go!” Shipman ordered as he noted the ladder, a simple yet welcome salvation.

Keene had clambered to a midway point by the time Shipman launched himself at the rungs; the vibration of his landing jarring the structure. He scaled the ladder, keeping his eyes averted and watching Keene’s legs disappear over the metal summit and within mere seconds was listening to the staccato sound of a Heckler and Koch as Keene laid down suppressing fire upon the rats below. The bullets sheared many in half, scattering the shattered bodies this way and that; thinning out Honeyman’s furry entourage, but not stopping them, not daunting them.

Shipman rolled onto the platform, and came up shooting, the mesh mezzanine floor cutting into his knees. Honeyman launched himself onto the ladder, his bulk large enough to instill a shudder in the structure. Several rats came up with him, a salvo of furry missiles aimed at his back. The creatures were hewn from the air, their trajectory colliding with a wall of bullets from Shipman and Keene.

Impeded only by the incompatibility of the design of their bodies and the design of the ladder the rats struggled to keep their relentless pursuit; Alpha Team now easily picking them off as they tried to scale the platform.

“Looks as though the threat is neutralized,” Shipman said as the last blast of gunfire faded about him. “Honeyman, cover us whilst we do a recce.”

“Sir,” Honeyman acknowledged, keeping his gun aimed at the tunnel.

Shipman and Keene headed to the other end of the gallery, where there was a wide open space with another ladder
at the far end. The rungs had been secured to the wall and after twelve metres disappeared into a dark hole in the ceiling.

“According to COM this is where we get off,” Keene said after rechecking his PDA.

“Great work, soldier,” Shipman said patting Keene on the shoulder. “Let’s see what we can see.”

It was when Keene began to climb the ladder that the world above them suddenly fell through the ceiling.

Smoke and heat met Thom Everett as he made it to the next landing. He stayed low; sucking in what little oxygen remained available to him as he battled with the aftermath of the blast that had ripped through Whittington’s penthouse.

His eyes watered and his throat ached, and instinct begged him to stop; telling him to go back down the stairs, for fuck’s sake. But his mind told him otherwise; his mind told him that there were many friends of Dennis what’s-his-name waiting to say “Hi” to him; maybe give a small token of their affection: a huge bite out of his burning throat for example.

So he moved on, mounting the stairs, keeping his hands away from the bubbling walls to his right; trying to focus upon the way ahead through eyes that wept for fresh air.

Through the gloom he saw a fire door and the words emblazoned upon the cracking paint almost made him whoop with delight.

Roof: Authorized Access Only!

He crawled towards it, his movements stiff as dehydration pulled his muscles taut; the last few agonizing moments seeming to last forever. He came up onto his knees, pushed a shoulder against the horizontal bar spanning the door frame and fell out onto the roof.

The air whipped into his face, instantly reviving him; his lungs screaming with physiological joy. He got to his feet and walked for three or four paces before crumpling onto his knees.

After the cramped, choked stairwell the roof space seemed infinite; Thom taking in the sights as well as a huge lungful of air. And the images before him filled him at once with wonder and despair for he could see the beauty of the stars, the storm having finally relinquished its hold on the skies; but he could also see the destruction leveled upon the city below where familiar structures were sheathed in flame and distant explosions sent soundless plumes of flame into the shimmering star spangled sky.

He felt suddenly woozy, and the horizon of this contradictory world upon which he cast his gaze did a three sixty before Thom hit the asphalt; sprawled and unaware that the door to the Hell he’d left behind was standing wide open.

And his demons were already coming for him.

Suzie and Clarke crept into an office, their weapons aimed and prepped to unleash havoc on anything that looked remotely hostile.

The office interior was splashed with blue light from three computer terminals resting on separate tables; redundant and pointless.

“Looks like the power outage are localized,” Clarke observed; relief evident in his voice. “This would’ve been game over otherwise.”

“It is game over for some,” Suzie said, though there wasn’t any reproach in her tone. It was a statement of fact.

“Yeah,” Clarke said sitting at a terminal and digging a disc from his fatigues. He slapped it into the tray of the CD Rom allowing the hum to cover the awkward silence.

“Makes you wonder if any of this still matters though, doesn’t it?” Suzie continued.

“I think I preferred it when you didn’t talk to me,” Clarke said hesitantly. It wasn’t like Hanks to be so negative.

“You always make me uneasy, he thought. Instead he said, “Not really. I just have to stay focused, that’s all.”

“Okay, brain box. I’ll cover you while you do your thing.”

She moved to the door, leaving him to access the mainframe; which he did with deftness, underscored by a series of muted clicks on the keyboard.

As Clarke’s thoughts homed in on mainframes, Mimic Viruses and access codes, Suzie thoughts turned to O’Connell and the awful task he had to carry out. She felt a sharp pang of guilt at her continued jealousy over his relationship with Stu Kunaka. Even now - at the end of it all - there it was, boring into her belly like the ugliest of parasites. She chased it away, peering down the corridor where she knew O’Connell was standing, consumed with guilt and duty. She wished that she could be with him.
And just as she considered leaving Clarke to finish up and go seek O’Connell out; a brief muzzle flash flared in the darkened corridor, a single shot ringing out a nano-second later.

Suzie leaned against the door frame, her heart heavy; aching for her lover’s loss and the need to be with him almost overriding her sense of duty. Instead she stayed put and waited for him to come to her.

She didn’t have to wait long. But when O’Connell emerged from the shadows, he wasn’t on his own.

***

\textit{Blame.}

There was that goddamned word again; that goddamned feeling squirming in his soul.

O’Connell stared down at his friend, the Browning aimed at Kunaka’s head but the muzzle shivered, the weapon simply not designed for a conflict such as this.

He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t put a bullet into the corpse of a man he respected - shared so much life, and death. Where was the dignity in death? The honour? All these vestiges sought for - fought for - now mere scraps thrown to dogs.

“Shit, Stu,” he whispered. “How the fuck did we get to this?”

The transition from their “DD” into a life of crime was remarkably easy; getting good at it equally so. It began with the Fratelli Brothers; a small time outfit who had a reputation as a disaster area. O’Connell was put onto them by another ex-marine in exile. It was easy for O’Connell to excel in such lackluster employment and he got noticed by others; those with a little more prestige. His planning served him well, becoming as much his trademark as the huge black guy he often had in tow.

Stu Kunaka.

He felt anger boiling inside him. The kind of anger that wants out from time to time; forcing a tear to traverse his cheek, its heat almost scalding his skin.

He’d experienced such anger, such helplessness, on only a handful of occasions. The first time was when his brother, Chris, sank and drank the murky brown contents of a gravel pit. And this was bottled for a long time; launching into the ether on the night that O’Connell came by information allowing him to track down a certain Captain Wiggets who was on a period of leave in the Lake District and never came back. It was reported as an accident, of course, a long walk off a short cliff; Wigget’s body too broken to show the bruises where he was grabbed, beaten senseless and thrown into free fall as the rocks below waited to turn him to pink jelly. So no great loss when he was found.

Kunaka was unaware of O’Connell’s actions in the Lakes, just as he was unaware of the battle now, as his earthly friend aimed a semi-automatic pistol at his head.

Blame.

This was O’Connell’s sponsor; his advocate in life. The constant reminder that things should’ve been different. But responsibility was its close ally. Or rather: a failure to be responsible, a failure to make the right choices; ensure that you’re \textit{doing the do}. And what was the right choice?

Something inside him stirred. A thought suggesting that perhaps he could put things right, here and now. To end a vicious circle getting ready to bite him once more.

After all, wasn’t Stu here because of him? Weren’t they all here because of him? Didn’t he have a duty - a responsibility - to protect the others by putting a bullet into his soon-to-be undead friend?

Yes. Yes, he did. And in the twilight of realization came reaction. A single squeeze of the trigger finger putting an end to many, many monsters.

O’Connell turned away from Stu Kunaka, his friend of many years, and headed off down the corridor. It may have been the potent grief, or his anger that dulled his senses for a few minutes; but whatever switched him off allowed the zombies emerging from the darkness to get a little too close for comfort.

***

“You have the face of an angel, Amir,” his Uncle Esharveer had told him once. “A face that will melt the hardest hearts and sway the tallest of fences. It is a gift that will assure you your dreams.”

Not quite. Not in the way that Amir - or his family - had intended. Amir was very well off; he had a comfortable life. He’d developed tastes for expensive pastimes like gaining a pilots license and casinos. But Esharveer had fostered a criminal, now Amir harboured a conscience that forever mourned what he might have been.

Upon his death, his Uncle had apologized for the path he’d chosen for his nephew. Amir inherited a key in his Uncle’s will and an account number to a bank in Zurich. Uncle Esharveer’s epiphany was scrawled on a letter left in a shining safety deposit box.

Too late for both of them in the end. Without Esharveer’s reinforcement, without his conviction, Amir’s deep
seated conscience had risen from the depths and threatened to consume him. So Amir made a decision. This was to be his last job. He only hoped that his parents would forgive his actions in a way that he couldn’t quite manage for himself.

Movement.

It happened fast, the present closing off his past in an instant. From the places where dark shadows pooled like India ink people loomed; a few at first but followed very quickly by others until Amir saw a wall of shambling, shuffling shapes. There was only the Mastiff separating the NCIDD building from the tide of undead now washing over the plaza. What drew these creatures he didn’t know. They may have been able to sense their prey, the way a predator fox stalks the wily rabbit; or were they drawn by something far more sinister, far more primordial?

Watching their relentless march it was hard not to think that Hell had somehow found its way to Earth. And no sooner had Amir come up with this analogy, the ground in the plaza buckled and groaned and opened into a yawning chasm; as though purgatory really had come to welcome home its prodigal children.

***
From the moment that Alpha Team discharged their lethal salvo of grenades it wasn’t only the surviving zombie rats that had pursued them through the tunnel.

Streaking ahead, and unseen, was a structural crack that split the tunnel roof the way a chef taps at an egg shell until it gives in, the fissure splitting apart with the sudden crushing pressure of thousands of tons of earth and city above.

Credit to the engineering that served the city, it had saved the lives of the men in the tunnel, holding off the force overhead for several minutes, but it was always doomed to relent at some point. It simply wasn’t designed to suffer such damage.

It was a surreal and awful site that met Shipman, Keene and Honeyman on the platform. They watched as six hundred metres of tunnel roof collapsed bringing with it earth and rocks; glass and concrete.

And bodies.

They rained in from above; men, women and children; arms and legs tangled and groping, hands pawing at the air; the platform buffeted as the ever expanding avalanche ploughed into its supportive struts.

Keene lost his footing on the exit ladder and landed heavily on his back. Shipman used the wall to steady himself and then they saw an unlikely sight.

Three hundred metres away a Mastiff truck slipped, grill first, into the ground. It smashed into the floor and teetered comically on its devastated cab for a few seconds, and toppled over.

Then, without warning, it exploded.

***

The world is a writhing mass of bodies and flame; the horizon a blazing white line as the rain drifts lazily down from ditch dark clouds.

Thom Everett hasn’t seen anything like it, and guesses that neither has anyone else. The world is dead, but it still lives. The throng below stare back at him with lifeless eyes; but their minds - oh, sweet dear Lord - their minds are far from empty. He cannot explain it, he cannot begin to say that he has the slightest notion of how it came to pass, but he can see into those minds, feel the turmoil within them, the consummate jumble of primordial lust and yearning pain at what has been lost.

They are rudderless; destined to drift aimless and without reason, but those dead eyes have seen something.

Something in him.

And as he stares down at the congregation of corpses, he realizes there is something else rising from the dark pool of this collective consciousness; something that has been lost for some time. What the mass can see and what they think is the same thing and it has been born from Thom Everett.

As one, the crowds below begin to point, each misshapen finger and twisted arm staying in the air. The resounding, unified moan stretching out across the blackened, blighted landscape and the impact of what came next had Thom suddenly sitting upright; the dream thrown away from him like some repugnant thing found in an old coat pocket. Yet whilst he could discard the image of his dream; shrugging off the implication of its meaning wasn’t as easy.

The dream had implied one thing, and one thing alone: The Risen had found hope. For, after months in the unearthly wilderness, they had found someone to lead them.

***

“Okay, the Mimic Virus has been planted into the system,” Clarke said sitting smugly back in his chair and watching the computer screen where nothing appeared to be happening.

And that was the whole point wasn’t it; that no one suspected anything? Inauspiciousness had become their camouflage; their meal ticket on the gravy train taking them to heavenly pastures.

Or a beach in the Cayman’s.

“Clarke! Get your ass out here,” Suzie hissed; spoiling his moment. “We got company.”

“I have to take care of the hard drive from this terminal to prevent us being traced,” he protested.

Suzie stepped into the room and brought her gun to bear. Clarke dived aside as she sprayed the computer housing with bullets, the black carcass erupting in a sizzling display of sparks and flame.

“There,” she sniffed before turning back into the corridor. “I’d say that pretty much takes care of it.”
“Mental,” Clarke muttered as he climbed to his feet. He joined her in the corridor as O’Connell ran at them from the shadows.

“Seven of those things will be crawling up our ass in about thirty seconds,” O’Connell panted. “Find us a way out of here, Clarkey.”

Clarke yanked his notebook from his pocket and roused it from its hibernation setting where the screen still retained the building schematics. Frenetically searching the blue prints Clarke felt sweat trickling down his neck. The heat is so fuckin’ on, he thought.

“Come on, Clarkey!” O’Connell insisted.

“Got it!” Clarke said. “Fire escape at the other end of this floor.”

“O’Connell,” Suzie yelled as a male zombie dressed in a pin striped suit lunged out of the shadows. O’Connell ducked and Suzie tore the groping figure to pieces with automatic fire; several rounds punching through its skull.

“Okay,” O’Connell yelled. “Let’s move!”

The three of them turned away from the undead entourage and charged in the opposite direction. Clarke ended up picking up the rear and was spurred on as he envisaged groping hands at his neck. She peered through it before turning back to the others.

“Looks clear,” she said.

“It’s better than back here!” Clarke shouted as the zombies staggered into view. He lifted his SA80 and discharged a volley into the corridor, succeeding in punching holes in the walls and ceiling.

“Try hitting something that wants to eat us, Clarke,” Suzie said joining him as O’Connell worked on the door.

“Fuck you, Hanks!” Clarke spat, opening fire again; the head of a fat zombie turning into the shape of a rugby ball by the impact.

Suzie smiled grimly. The kid was stepping up to the mark after all.

“Okay, we’ve got the door!” O’Connell yelled having kicked it hard enough to remove it from one of its hinges.

“Let’s go!”

O’Connell stepped aside to allow Suzie and Clarke to exit out onto a metal platform leading to a set of steps.

“What about Amir?” Suzie shouted as the three of them fled down the steps. “He’s still out front.”

“We’ll hail him once we get clear. He’ll have to come to us,” O’Connell said as they hit the tarmac of a small, private car park. It was walled with mesh fencing.

It was as he said this that the ground beneath them began to tremble and there was the dreadful sound of something collapsing nearby.

Then an explosion knocked them off of their feet.

***

The fissure opened and swallowed the huge crowd crossing the plaza. To Amir’s surprise those who had ample time to stop continued walking until they simply fell into the chasm.

The ground continued to churn, sending cobble stones in every direction, forcing Amir to duck back inside the doorway.

It was this mere action that saved his life. Because this was the very moment that the fissure claimed the Mastiff; sucking it into the bowels of the city, the groan of metal marking its demise.

And then the magazine exploded and for a moment the underworld was sent skywards in a blinding flash and the shockwave slammed into the buildings flanking the plaza, blowing glass and window frames and doorways inwards. A steel slab of armoured plating took out the reception desk behind Amir, a cobblestone-turned-missile punched into the ceiling showering his balled up body with polystyrene snow.

After the explosion came the thudding sound of all that was airborne falling back to earth; a blizzard of debris slapping onto what was left of the plaza. Only when he was sure that the deadly storm of debris had passed did Amir risk a look.

The cobblestone square was gone. All that remained was a huge maw in the earth, glowing with the ethereal light from multiple fires below ground. Just beyond the far rim of the crater, the crowd of zombies continued their lemming-like advance into the pit.

He was startled by a burst of static from his radio. Then O’Connell’s voice was on the air.

“Amir, are you there?”

“I’m here.”

“What just blew up?”

“Our ride home,” Amir said carefully.
Shipman was blown into the wall with such force it shattered the face plate on his biochem mask. A wall of heat seared his face, tightening his skin and forcing his eyes to close. He bent double before falling to his belly. Winded, he tried to drag in the hot, stinking purulent air emanating from both the waste pipe and the hundreds of bodies tumbling in from above.

He gagged and then vomited onto the platform, the sound of it lost in the rushing noise of fire and flame. Suddenly hands were on him, strong hands, powerful hands, hands that closed over his shoulders; clutching mercilessly at the material of his vomit-splattered fatigues. Shipman fought against them for a moment, dragging in another mouthful of repugnant, stagnant air but gagged again; rendering him defenseless.

The hands pulled him upwards, first to his knees then he was on his feet and an arm snaked around his waist to support him so that he didn’t topple over.

“I got you Major.”

It was Honeyman’s voice in his ear, loud despite the cacophony now drifting up the tunnel. Shipman made to say something but Honeyman shook his head behind the faceplate. “Save it for topside, Sir. We’re outta here.”

Shipman’s head was beginning to clear and hell filled his vision once more. Bodies and flames writhed as one; the mangled remnants of the Mastiff were lying hot and twisted all about them. Then Shipman saw Keene. He lay spread-eagled on the platform a few meters away, a square of corrugated armour plating embedded in the chest and his mouth open to the vile underworld about him.

“Keene,” the Major said weakly.

“He’s gone, Sir,” Honeyman said as though it weren’t obvious to all. “There’s just us. And the mission!”

Shipman was spurred by this, it blasted away the fog and he felt strength returning to him as his professional instincts began to override his injuries.

“Let’s get out of here,” Shipman said pulling away from Honeyman and reaching for the ladder. Shipman looked back at the devastation behind them. “It’s going to take a miracle to get the kid out of this,’ he said. “If he’s still alive.”

“I’m still confident, Major,” Honeyman said.

“You’re right to be confident, soldier,” Shipman nodded earnestly. “It’s that kind of thinking that will get the job done.”

“Of course, Sir,” Honeyman said.

But the marine was confident because he had the advantage of insider knowledge. One of the perks of being on the payroll. He knew that getting the kid didn’t need a miracle at all.

All it needed was Phoenix Industries.

Amir abandoned his post as soon as he’d re-established contact with O’Connell. Clarke had checked out the schematics, guiding him through the downstairs corridors towards a fire escape located on the east side if the NICDD building. After edging through scattered office equipment and the occasional piece of human debris, he located the fire door and kicked it open with several blows.

No, things probably hadn’t gone the way his parent’s would have wanted but Amir was going to put things right once all this was done; he was going to make amends.

As he stepped through the door and out into the compound, a hand grabbed him from the shadows and Amir found himself screaming instinctively for his parents.

On the roof of Hilton Towers reality and fantasy were becoming pretty indistinguishable for Thom Everett. He fought his way to his knees shortly before he was aware that he no longer had the roof space to himself.

Thom thought that he could count eight zombies in total, though it was all pretty immaterial in the grand scheme, wasn’t it? One would’ve been enough to stretch anyone’s sense of sanity.

They saw him at the same time, and for each shuffling step The Risen made, Thom scuttled backwards on his knees. Their moaning was as relentless as their desire to get to him and his heart pummeled his chest reminding him of his vulnerability - his frailty in this war of life and everlasting un-death.

His back suddenly hit something solid. A wall, a skylight, a piece of apparatus vital for the upkeep of opulence; it didn’t really matter, it was an obstacle blocking his retreat. His stomach sank and part of him accepted what was inevitable, and an even deeper part, a part that was tired of the running and the crawling and the unrelenting fear
wanted it to happen.

The Risen were devoid of such ambiguity. They crossed the ground separating their group from the beaten teenager with sluggish ease; falling to their hands and knees as they closed the space down to a few metres, forgetting that they were men and women who had once possessed lives, now crawling like ferocious feral animals stalking their helpless prey.

“Please,” Thom begged as the first, fetid hand caressed his ankle. “Please, leave me alone.”

And to his total, utter disbelief the zombies did just that.

***

In his government procured office, Colonel Carpenter was sitting gazing down at the order on his desk. In truth he wasn’t at all surprised that such a decision had been made, but given that he’d not heard from Alpha Team since their request for the schematics to the sewer system, options were limited.

The military used terms like “neutralizing” the threat; but the reality was the wholesale destruction of a city under siege. As he considered the implications of this, Carpenter’s commandeered telephone on his commandeered desk buzzed in its cradle.

“Carpenter,” he said firmly into the hand set.

“Harte here, Sir.”

“You have him?” Carpenter asked the returning marine.

“I do, Sir, though he took some persuading.” Harte’s response was stiff yet Carpenter noted some hesitancy. Carpenter wasn’t about to dig too deeply on how much persuasion the representative of Phoenix Industries needed to accompany a marine to a field HQ in the middle of a crisis zone. These were desperate times, after all.

“Bring him to my office,” Carpenter ordered.

“Yes, Sir, Colonel,” Harte replied and signed off.

Carpenter wondered if their reluctant ally could add any more to Shipman’s brief, though some new information had certainly come to light. Information raising more questions than yielding answers. Yet Carpenter would take it to the eleventh hour to avoid a strike on the city. But if that time passed, he would do his duty to protect his country and he would do it without question.

A knock on his door caused him to look up.

“Enter,” he said.

The door swung inwards, Harte standing to one side to allow a bedraggled looking man of around five foot five to scuttle into the office. He wore a pair of frameless glasses and his mop of brown hair was in need of a comb; highlighting the haste in which he was dragged from his home.

“This is most irregular,” the man said as he approached the desk. “I wish to make a complaint.”

“Complaint?” Carpenter echoed calmly.

“Yes,” the man said, his voice trembling with rage and fear. “Of police brutality.”

“We’re not the police,” Carpenter said waving for the irate man to sit down.

“Well, whoever you are I want to report this Neanderthal for assaulting a civilian.”

“My Sergeant,” Carpenter corrected him, “was acting under my orders. So I guess you’d better report me to the commanding officer.” He looked about the room in comic fashion. “Oops, I guess that’s me too!”

“This is a disgrace!” the man exploded. “What gives you the right to -?”

“Sit down on the chair,” Carpenter barked. “Or I shall have my Sergeant make you.”

Like a sulking child the man threw himself down upon the chair and crossed his arms tight across his chest. Harte stepped up to the Colonel and handed him a slim folder. Carpenter opened the file and laid out the contents in front of him.

“You are Professor Garry Daniels, are you not?” Carpenter said after glancing down at the file.

“You know I am,” Daniels said churlishly. “Please dispense with this charade. It insults my intelligence.”

“Professor Garry Daniels of Phoenix Industries?” Carpenter continued regardless.

“And what of it?” Daniels snapped.

“The first man that Sir Alan Coe called after being interrogated by MI6 this evening. Why was that, I wonder?”

“We’re good friends,” Daniels replied with a smirk. “He wanted to tell me how disrespectfully he had been treated.”

“More poignant to inform his lawyer of such injustice, I would have thought?” Carpenter surmised.

“Maybe that was his next call,” Daniels sniped.

“No,” Carpenter said after scanning the file again. “No more calls after the call to you. Appears as though he may have been placated by what you may have told him.”

“That is complete supposition,” the Professor scoffed. “How can you possibly deduce that from a phone call?”
“You’re a man of science, Professor,” Carpenter smiled making Daniels shuffle uncomfortably in his seat. “Let me give you some empirical evidence.”

The Colonel pulled out a small, slim device and placed it next to the colligate file. He pushed a button and Daniels visibly deflated, his shoulders sagging, his protestations shrivelling to nothing as two voices engaged in a brief, yet damning, conversation.

“Daniels?” a voice said from the recorder. It was Sir Alan recorded earlier that evening shortly after his interrogation by Shipman’s superiors.

“Yes, Sir Alan, it’s me.” Daniels confirming and damning himself with six words in the ether. “This is unexpected, is everything alright?”

“Not now. And no more names on this line,” Sir Alan hissed. It was a bad line, not helped by the interference of the MI6 listening device. “I’ve been grilled like a kipper here, and I’ve had to give them something plausible. Where are we up to?”

“Phase two is now in operation, Sir,” Daniels could be heard saying.

“What of our Necromancer?”

“Alive and well and waiting for retrieval,” Daniels’ reply was infused with pride.

“Then authorize it. Contact our man and tell him that we are to recover the Necromancer alive. Is that understood?”

“Alive, yes Sir, understood. Our retrieval squad is waiting for scramble. Our sleeper will make that happen as soon as he is in possession of the Necromancer.”

“Estimated pick up time from calling in?” Sir Alan asked.

“Thirty minutes, Sir. No time at all.”

“Good. Good. I’m off the radar now,” Sir Alan said. “Keep in touch via sms, got that?”

“I got that,” Daniels confirmed.

The device on Carpenter’s desk clicked and went dead; the silence from the past bleeding into the present.

“You have anything to say, Professor?” Carpenter asked bluntly.

At first Daniels remained silent, his lips blanched with anger and shame. Then the mood swept past him, and he adopted an affronted air.

“I cannot believe that you people would have the audacity to bug Sir Alan’s telephone conversations,” he said pretending to be surprised. It was bad acting at best.

“Who or what is meant by the term ‘Necromancer’, Professor?” Carpenter said ignoring the feigned protestations.

“Sir Alan will have you drummed out of the army for such impertinence! Don’t you understand how powerful he is? He has the PM’s ear, no less!” Daniels snapped as he leaned his shoulders forward to stand up.

“Sit back in the chair Professor or I will have you nailed to it!” Carpenter said his voice level and precise and so very serious.

Daniels flopped back in the seat, once more dragging his arms to his chest.

“I ask again: who or what is meant by the term ‘Necromancer’?”

“I do not have the authority to discuss such matters with you, Colonel,” Daniels replied coolly. It was a pat answer; robotic - rehearsed and regurgitated a thousand times over.

Carpenter looked at Daniels for a moment then nodded.

“Very well,” the Colonel said. “Harte?”

The big marine stepped smartly forward. “Yes, sir?”

“I am going to ask Professor Daniels a series of questions,” Carpenter said smoothly. “If he fails to answer any of them to nothing less than my complete satisfaction, I want you to shoot him in the head with your side arm. Am I clear?”

“Yes Sir,” Harte said as he un-holstered his pistol and cocked it.

“Are you insane?” Daniels said but the arrogance had been cleaved from his voice leaving it a small and brittle thing.

“Quite possibly, Professor. Protecting one’s country can put pressure on a man,” Carpenter said; his face an impassive mask. “But from this point on I will be asking the questions. And I would strongly advise that you answer them.”

***
Halfway into Shipman’s ascent, the rungs, brackets and the wall to which they were all attached disappeared, giving way to a misshapen trench with a summit fifty metres overhead. The channel kept company with huge chunks of concrete and several writhing zombies, their bodies crushed by slabs of debris; yet their yearning to be free, their need to feed driving them on despite their hopeless and inevitable sense of immobility.

Without his biochem mask Shipman could smell the heady mix of sweet putrid reek of decaying flesh and the bitter tang of acrid smoke on the air. He suspected that since he hadn’t yet succumbed to convulsions then the affects of Whittington’s Lazarus Initiative has dissipated; a small mercy in this place of corruption.

“The target zone should be north east,” Honeyman said crawling out of the hole in the ground. “I make that few hundred metres over the crest of the trench.”

“Then let’s get up there and report in,” Shipman said, his hand instinctively reaching for his mic. It was corrugated by the impact of his fall, but the fine clicking in his ear told him the apparatus was still functioning.

“Yes Sir!” Honeyman acknowledged.

Shipman scrambled up the side of the pit, one hand grabbing hold of chunks of rock or cement or concrete the other clutching his SA80, training its muzzle on the rapidly approaching summit.

Behind, Honeyman kept watch on his enemies; both the living and the undead. It would’ve been so easy to have left the Major to his fate in the tunnel cave in, but the cold truth was that Honeyman needed him, or rather his firepower, to get hold of the kid. It would have to be a last resort to take out the Major before he’d achieved retrieval. But no matter how he looked at it, Honeyman knew that with every step they made it nearer to Thom Everett, Shipman’s usefulness to the mission was slowly waning.

Soon he would shoot his commanding officer of five years in the back of the head. It would be an uncomfortable thing to do, but it would be made a little easier by comforting thoughts of the substantial payday that lay around the corner.

A gunshot brought Honeyman back into focus. Shipman had taken down a female zombie who had clambered over the summit and was scrambling towards them. Her head erupted in a crimson plume; driving her body flat against the inclined wall of the trench, where it slithered for a few feet on the unsettled earth.

Honeyman brought up his gun as two more zombies peered over the crest. He put a bullet through the eye of one and shattered the others jaw with a second round.

“Let’s get up there,” Shipman yelled, crouched and moving with determination. Honeyman followed and their progress was only hampered by the occasional zombie, who they dispatched with clinical efficiency.

Once out of the trough Shipman scanned the scene about them. The buildings were now skeletal, their brickwork blackened and broken; exposing girders and RSJ’s and the window frames warped and vacant.

And rising from this architectural carnage was Hilton Towers, tall and resplendent, yet still carrying the injuries of battle. Even from his position a hundred metres below Shipman noted that the top of the building bore a deep, dark gouge, a scar from the explosion at Whittington’s penthouse and from this smoke drifted, obscuring swathes of recently liberated stars.

“Honeyman,” Shipman said. “Cover me whilst I establish contact with COM.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Shipman moved several paces away from his cover man before speaking into his mic.

“Alpha team to COM Actual. Come in, Colonel. Over.”

The response was not so much fast as instant.

“COM Actual to Alpha Team,” Carpenter’s voice sounded loud and urgent. “Major, use secured line, over.”

“Yes, Colonel,” Shipman replied switching channels. “Shipman here, Colonel; you have news?”

“Plenty,” Carpenter said. “And it’s not good.”

***

“Take it easy, Amir,” O’Connell said firmly. “It’s just us.”

“May the Lord save me from myself!” Amir said clutching his heart through his fatigues. “I thought you were those things.”

“Some thanks that is,” Clarke snorted. “I thought we were a little less gross.”

“Some of us are,” Suzie sniped.
“How did we do?” Amir asked O’Connell.

“We delivered,” O’Connell said grimly. “But it came at cost.”

Amir suddenly realised that one of their number was missing. “Kunaka?”

O’Connell shook his head.

“May the lord keep him,” Amir whispered bowing his head.

“We can mourn later,” O’Connell said resolutely. “We’ve done the job. Now we have to get out of here.”

Plenty of motors,” Clarke observed after a cursory glance about the car park.

“The roads are cluttered with shit and zombies. We may not get far,” Amir cautioned.

“There’s little alternative,” Suzie said. “We have to hot wire one of these vehicles and get gone.”

“We need a weapons check,” O’Connell suggested just as the group of zombies from the first floor spilled out through the fire door onto the metal platform.

Clarke lifted his SA80 and splattered their bodies with high explosive bullets.

“I can confirm that mine still works,” he grinned.

“Child,” Suzie said under her breath.

“Let’s get a vehicle,” O’Connell said.

The car park was splashed with the sodium glow from high intensity floods highlighting fifteen or so vehicles. Clarke made his way over to a blue Subaru Impreza WRX.

“Oh, let’s have this,” he said, almost skipping towards it. “Turbo charged 16 valve 265 break horsepower. Come to me baby!”

“Forgot it, Clarkey,” O’Connell said. “It’s got an immobilizer. So unless you want to hop back inside and ask our undead buddies who’d like to give up their keys, I’d suggest that.”

Clarke followed O’Connell’s outstretched finger and moaned in disgust.

“A transit van?” he said, his face wrinkling at the abhorrence of such a suggestion. “Give me few minutes and I’m sure I could find a feckin’ moped I looked hard enough.”

“The van can be hotwired and it only has three windows,” O’Connell said. “Now get moving.”

The group trudged over to the transit and Suzie shot out the lock on the driver’s side. After clambering inside she opened the passenger door and finally the double doors at the back of the vehicle.

Amir and Clarke climbed in the back both having to navigate through a pile of electronic equipment loaded in the storage bay. Once deep inside, the two men began to create some space by throwing the contents out onto the tarmac. Once they were satisfied that they’d enough room, the doors were slammed closed with a good, solid thump.

Up front, O’Connell snapped open the steering column and removed the ignition barrel. Having sparked and twisted the two wires together, the engine fired and now lay idling.

He reversed the van out of its slot, parked between a mini Cooper and a beaten up Vauxhall Vectra, and drove to the gates some forty metres away.

Here he jumped out, removing a Browning automatic and pumped three bullets into the gate’s locking mechanism. Then he climbed back into the cab and drew forward, nudging the gate open, metal grinding against metal, until they were clear.

They had gone only a third of a mile before the first of the zombies were upon them. It was a crowd of football supporters; their sheer number providing an impregnable wall of bodies. Like moths to a flame, the horde turned to face the oncoming headlights, mouths wide and dark and dribbling.

“Gotta turn around,” O’Connell said pulling up and slamming the van into reverse, the gears grinding with an unpleasant screech.

The van thumped into a lamp post felling it like a metal tree. O’Connell fed the gear roughly into first and continued back the way they came.

“If we can just get out of the enclosed places, and get to the ring road, we’ll stand a better chance,” he said, peering out into the streets.

“You think we’re gonna make it?” Clarke asked.

“Damn right you’ll make it,” O’Connell said. “I’m making sure of it.”

Suzie sat quietly beside O’Connell, her expression blank but her mind active. At that moment optimism was a shy creature naked in the darkness. Sure, they had completed the job, but getting out - the part that should’ve been a time for reflection and quiet celebration - appeared to be turning into a hopeless affair. She fingered the rifle resting in her lap and was overcome by the gnawing realization that despite their rifles and pistols the enemy had a far greater, far more potent weapon. And that weapon was purpose. It kept this inhuman race staunch and unyielding and undeterred. Suzie questioned if even O’Connell’s commitment could match them.

“You with me?” he said beside her.

“Always,” she said with a drawn smile.
The van accelerated and approached a T junction. O’Connell took a right hand turn and the imposing structure of Hilton Towers loomed over them.

“You didn’t indicate back there, driver,” Clarke said from the back of the van. “How did you get a license?”

“I never said I had a license,” O’Connell said. “You want to drive, Mr. Subaru?”

“You carry on my man,” Clarke said. “I’m getting used to this chauffer driven gig.”

“You better had,” Amir mused. “Because: we’ll have enough money in our accounts to have a small army of chauffeurs on our payroll.”

“Yes,” Clarke grinned. “You’re right! Now that’s a good thought.”

Suzie nodded. She was hungry for a few good thoughts at that moment. And she was prepared to accept them from whoever dished them out, even Clarke.

It was a day of wonders, after all.

“Another left at the end of Hilton Towers and we’ll be parallel to the Aston Express Way. Then we’ll head towards Lichfield and Tamworth,” O’Connell told them.

“What of the road blocks?” Amir asked.

“One step at a time,” O’Connell said.

The van was continuing on its route to the next junction until O’Connell saw something that made him suddenly pull over and leap out of the cab; leaving Suzie screaming for him to come back.

***

“Alpha Team is compromised,” Carpenter said in Shipman’s headset.

The Major thought about this, digesting and processing the information, his emotions switched off.

“You still there, Major?”

“I’m here, Sir,” Shipman confirmed. “Do we have a name?”

“Honeyman,” Carpenter said immediately.

“Keene and Connors are dead. Honeyman is still with me.” Shipman fell silent for a few seconds. Then, “Do we know why?”

“Money of course,” Carpenter said with disdain. “Phoenix Industries have obtained his services to secure Thom Everett and prepare him for retrieval.”

“There’s no guarantee the boy is still alive,” Shipman said. “Hilton Towers has taken a pounding.”

“He’s alive alright, Major. By all accounts the kid is tagged and monitored via a subcutaneous chip in his back. Designed and manufactured by Phoenix Industries, of course. They like to keep an eye on their investments.”

“Whittington was his baby sitter?”

“So it would appear,” Carpenter said.

“That’s a little like overkill for a failed experiment, isn’t it?” Shipman said doubtfully.

“Everett is far more than that, Major,” the Colonel said. “The boy experienced side effects during the study. Side effects that not even Whittington and his investors could’ve envisioned.”

“What about?”

“During the trials the kid was pronounced clinically dead for ten minutes. In that time, like the others, he became one of The Risen. But something unexpected happened. After a series of convulsions he collapsed and when he came round, Everett was human again.”

“I am aware of this, Sir,” Shipman reminded the Colonel.

“Indeed, Major,” Carpenter conceded. “But what you may be unaware of are the ramifications of this event.”

“Ramifications? You mean Everett’s potential as a cure?”

“That and more, Major,” Carpenter said. “Everett, it appears, is able to connect with The Risen.”

“Connect?” Shipman said in disbelief. “You mean: communicate with them?”

“You are no more surprised than Phoenix Industries,” Carpenter said. “They have designated him The Necromancer.”

“That’s incredible,” Shipman breathed as he considered the implications of such a faculty.

“I agree. Professor Daniels suspects that it has something to do with what he calls NNR Necroneuro Residue; it allows the boy to find some psychic middle ground with The Risen, a place where they can comprehend reason in its most base form.”

“I’m beginning to see the implications of this,” Shipman whispered.

“Oh, yes,” Carpenter interjected. “Daniels was very excited about it all. He almost forgot that Harte was holding a Browning at his head. If Everett can communicate with The Risen then he can control them. He is commander of the ultimate weapon, Shipman,” Carpenter said in a hushed voice. “Can you see how easily one without scruple could be seduced by such a notion?”
“And Phoenix Industries could sell the boy to the highest bidder,” Shipman envisaged. “A blank cheque.”
“Quite.”
“Orders, Sir?” Shipman asked.
“Eliminate Honeyman, Major,” Carpenter instructed. “Then proceed as planned. Retrieve the boy. I have been informed that Honeyman has made contact and requested the retrieval helicopter. We shall intercept and send our own. With luck you we should see you within the hour.”
“And if luck is against us?”
“I have orders to neutralize the city at 01.00 hours, Major. Squadrons of Tornadoes have already been scrambled and will carpet bomb the entire city with incendiaries. Nothing, living or otherwise, will leave Birmingham when it is over.”
“Understood.”
“God’s speed, Major.”
“Consider it done, Sir,” Shipman said cocking his weapon.
“I learned a long time ago never to take things as a given, Major.”
It took him a moment but Shipman realised that the owner of these words wasn’t Colonel Carpenter.
They belonged to Private Honeyman.

***

“Want to tell me why?” Shipman asked dead pan.
“Why?” Honeyman mocked as he stepped out of the shadows. “There’s no easy answer, despite what you might think.”
Shipman looked down at the rifle in Honeyman’s hands. The marine lifted it, the street lights touching the grease on its black muzzle making it ambiguously beautiful.
“I agree. I don’t think treason is something that has an easy answer.”
“Don’t be so pious, Major,” Honeyman snarled. “We’ve all done things in the name of a cause. This isn’t any different. Now drop the weapon.”
“That’s not going to happen,” Shipman said matter of fact. “If I’m to die today it will be as a marine; with a rifle in my hand and defending my country. Not kneeling, waiting for a bullet to the back of my head. So take your best shot.”
Reflex born from years of training sent Shipman diving to his left, just as Honeyman discharged a volley of shots; the muzzle flashes reflecting off of his face plate.
Three bullets struck Shipman in the leg, one passing clean through the right thigh, the others shattering his fibula. He landed heavily on the pavement, his rifle almost spinning from his grasp; his injured leg cramped with fiery pain. He clenched his teeth and used his elbows to drag himself into a blasted doorway just as another burst of automatic fire peppered the walls and floor around him.
“Get your ass out here, Shipman!” Honeyman taunted. “Come and face me like a man.”
“You’re a disgrace to your country,” Shipman said through teeth clenched in pain. He brought his gun up, ready for his ally-turned-foe to show himself.
“Have it your way, Major,” Honeyman said. “I’ll go get the kid and fly out of here and you can stay and bleed to death or end up lunch for our undead friends.”
Good psychology, Shipman thought; but then, Honeyman had been trained by the best: SAS interrogators out of Hereford. He knew how to play it.
Shipman used the back of his sleeve to wipe sweat out his eyes. It was an instant that Honeyman exploited to the maximum. The marine watched his commanding officer raise his arm to his face then charged at the doorway; his weapon spitting out bullets and ejecting spent cartridges. He used this barrage to close down space and as his magazine finally emptied, Honeyman towered over Shipman and kicked the rifle out of the Major’s hands.
“Looks like your luck’s up, Sir,” Honeyman sneered, pulling out his side arm and pointing it at Shipman’s head.
“Time to die,” the big marine smirked.
The shot was loud on the blasted landscape.

***

Blood oozed from Honeyman’s mouth, a thick and constant stream that splashed over his fatigues and onto the wet, glistening pavement.
The big marine buckled at the knees, dead weight shattering his ankles and pitching him sideways where his feet twitched for several seconds.
From the doorway Shipman looked across the street as a lone figure approached. It was a soldier in regulation
field dress, a SA80 smoking in his hands.

“That was a good shot, soldier,” Shipman said, grimacing with pain.

“You, okay, Sir?” O’Connell asked.

“I’ll live a while longer, but I need your help.”

“Sure, I can carry you to my vehicle,” O’Connell said.

“No, I mean I need help to complete my mission,” Shipman replied quickly.

“That won’t be possible, Sir,” O’Connell said. “I’m on a timeline.”

“We’re all on a timeline tonight, private,” Shipman said irritated by the newcomer’s manner. “And unless you follow my orders, none of us are making it out of here alive. COM has given the EVAC order; this city is going to be neutralized in one hour unless I complete my mission. You getting me, soldier?”

“Well seeing how we’re all being brutally honest tonight, I guess I’ve got a jaw dropper of my own for you,” O’Connell said softly.

***

With realization comes recall, the door that has been closed and secured with mental deadlocks now forced open, exposing memories; terrifying, tortuous memories of blood and pain and madness.

And these recollections surge in from the past, flooding the present; submerging the inert and trembling figure of Thom Everett in the churning waters of despair. He was dead now he has risen; human and full of life yet part of him had died and had been left behind, a beacon of light glowing in purgatory for the lost to follow; a breadcrumb trail of the most macabre kind.

And on the roof of Hilton Towers Thom Everett saw the evidence of this hypothesis as the three zombies climbed to their feet and stepped away from him.

“What do you want from me?” he screamed at them; his revulsion and anger fuelling his outburst as his gory, gormless entourage stared impassively back at him.

“What do you want from me?” This time it was whispered and accompanied by tears, as though he needed to wash away the repugnance in his mind and in the same instance purge his soul.

That was if he still had a soul to purge, of course.

***

“You told him?” Clarke hissed incredulously. “Are you crazy?”

“I’d say you’re the one who’s lost the plot talking to O’Connell like that,” Suzie said sternly.

They were all in the back of the transit van, each having removed their masks, and now looking over the Major who was lying on the metal floor, drifting in and out of consciousness.

“Look at him,” O’Connell said quietly. “He’s bleeding out. He’s not going to make it. What does it matter?”

“What if he does make it?” Clarke asked.

“Then he makes it, okay?” O’Connell snapped. “If we don’t get this guy on the retrieval chopper we get totalled with the rest of the city. He’s our meal ticket out of here. It’s pretty clear to me.”

“We could take our chances on the expressway,” Clarke protested.

“If you’re so sure you can make it past the zombies and get to the expressway before the city burns then go for it,” O’Connell said. “It’s your life, right?”

Clarke didn’t respond and O’Connell thought that maybe the kid had returned to using his brain instead of his instinct for self preservation.

“Get the guy onto his feet,” O’Connell instructed. Amir and Clarke did as they were asked though the younger man was muttering under his breath.

“Good job I know you’re not a squaddie, lad,” Shipman chuckled deliriously in Clarke’s ear. “You’d never pass for a soldier in that uniform.”

“Yeah?” Clarke said. “Well, since I’m not the one who’s shot right now, I’d say that ain’t a bad thing.”

“I guess you’re right,” Shipman said weakly.

“First time on this trip,” Clarke said to himself.

***

They abandoned the van at the entrance of Hilton Towers, getting as close to the foyer as they could.

O’Connell and Suzie went in first and put down two zombies who were too distracted feeding on the remains of a large woman in a voluminous blue dress; the swathes of fabric pooling out beneath her mauled and mutilated body.

“Stairs?” Suzie queried.

“The Major will have to go in the elevator,” O’Connell said after a quick assessment. “I’ll go with him.”

“If you go, we all go,” Suzie said adamantly.
“No,” O’Connell said.
“What’s this “no” bullshit?” Suzie’s eyes were a mix of anger and fear. O’Connell didn’t like to see her this way but was prepared for it. He stepped up to her and moved a limp strand of blonde hair away from her face.
“Think it through, Suzie. We need this guy with us when the chopper comes,” O’Connell said. “We can’t carry him up the stairs and I’m not prepared to ask anyone else to stay with him.”
“Then let Clarke and Amir take the stairs and I’ll come with you,” she offered. Her voice was close to pleading with him now.
“The lift is too confined,” he said. “If the car stops on the way up and one of those things manages to get in …”
“Then you need me there with you to save your sorry backside,” she said urgently.
“No,” he said again. “I need to know that you’re safe - that you have some kind of chance.”
“And what about what I need?” Suzie whispered miserably.
“And what do you need, baby?”
“You,” she said and kissed him deeply, hungrily and wanting it to last forever.
They broke off and held onto each other tightly for a moment. Then O’Connell stepped away and hit the “call elevator” button. From the shaft, a rumbling sound marked the car’s descent.
“Go get our man,” he said. And Suzie turned to go.
“I love you Susan Hanks,” he said and she spun around suddenly and ran to him. This time their embrace lasted until the elevator doors chimed open, two minutes later.

***

The elevator began its ascent; the walls and floor juddering under the draw of its pulley mechanism. O’Connell had propped Shipman against the wall so that the Major faced the doors of the car. He was a strong guy, O’Connell impressed by the Major’s fight to stay conscious despite the pain and loss of blood.
“Got a present for you,” Shipman said fumbling to unclip a pouch from his webbing. He handed it to O’Connell.
“So why they kick you out?” Shipman said hoarsely.
“A long story,” O’Connell said; his eyes and rifle fixed upon the golden car doors. “And you wouldn’t like the ending.”
“I happen to like unhappy endings.”
“Getting prepared for the real world, eh? You must’ve been a bundle to be around at school.”
“Real world?” Shipman laughed weakly. “You mean like this?”
O’Connell nodded slowly and let go a sigh. “Who was prepared for this kind of party?”
“It’s all become blurred, hasn’t it?” Shipman said.
“Fuzzy as Hell.”
The car shuddered to a halt, stopping their conversation.
“We there already?” Shipman asked.
O’Connell looked up at the panel adjacent to the doors.
“No,” he said cocking his weapon.

***

“For Christ’s sake, Clarke, will you keep up?” Suzie snapped.
“Strange,” Clarke said sourly from the landing below, “but I’m in no rush to get eaten.”
“You in a rush to get barbecued?” Suzie asked. “You heard what the plans are for this place. I felt sure that not ending up like a crispy chicken would motivate your pathetic ass.”
“She loves me really,” Clarke muttered sarcastically.

17
They had made their way to the seventh floor without incident, the red carpet steering them onwards, upwards; taking each turn with extreme caution, the tension leaving their muscles taut and aching.

"Where are all the tenants?" Amir questioned as the trio hit the eighth floor landing.

"Maybe it’s a block party?" Clarke mused.

"Maybe they went up to the roof?" Amir came back.

"Why would they do that?" Suzie asked.

"That could be where the survivors went," he replied. "You know: to wait for rescue?"

"It’s a possibility," Suzie said uncomfortably. "That may mean that O’Connell could be walking in on a banquet."

She began to pick up pace and Amir matched her stride.

Clarke watched them disappear round the balustrade and after a few seconds he followed; motivated not so much by the urgency of the moment as avoiding the fear of being alone.

***

In sedate horror, Thom Everett observed as his new found family lurched and lolled through the doorway and out onto the roof. Each newcomer appeared to check him over with their blue-glazed eyes before lining up with the others.

It was an incredulous and improbable image; an image straight from the movies; but with one subtle difference: Thom Everett was the star of the show. Yes, Thom Everett was playing the leading role in I was a Teenage Zombie-Master.

No sooner had this ludicrous thought slipped into his head, the urge to laugh came with it. At first it was a chuckle, but it was soon building in size and power, the way a Tsunami swells from the most innocuous of waves, until it is no longer diminished, but a colossus, monstrous, roaring surge of water smashing everything in its path to oblivion.

He bent double, eyes streaming with tears, nose bubbling with thick, sooty snot; and his sides pumping like an old mutt who has eaten too much grass.

Thom paused briefly and looked up at the silent, grisly crowd that continued to contemplate him; passive yet far from passé.

"You guys kill me," he squealed before he was taken away on another mirthless wave of laughter; laughter that was raucous and ambiguous and as close to madness as anyone could get without climbing into the pit and embracing it.

***

Although the elevator had stopped, the doors remained steadfast. With his rifle extended, and ready to deliver if they decided to suddenly open, O’Connell inched near up to the control panel.

He used the heel of his hand to hit the ebony button embossed with the words “Roof Terrace” in white, his action illuminating the letters, a beacon of hope on the darkness.

The car began moving again and O’Connell relaxed a little, moving back to Shipman.

The Major remained propped and ashen against the wall. His right leg was wet with blood and it had started to share it with the floor and, despite the mauve carpet’s best efforts to absorb it, the gory tide continued to pool, becoming a scarlet lake lapping on the surface of the expensive pile.

"I’m not going to make it," Shipman said weakly.

"No, you’re not," O’Connell said not wanting to insult the man’s intelligence. "Not in this car. We have to get on that chopper for you to stand any chance."

"The boy is more important," Shipman muttered. "He’s the only hope we have of controlling this thing."

There was something in the way the Major said “controlling” that caught O’Connell’s attention.

"The RAF firestorm heading this way will be more effective wouldn’t it?"

"Maybe, but even if it does, we both know this isn’t over," Shipman coughed weakly. "You know how these things work."

"Is he marked?" O’Connell asked.

Shipman nodded. "Of course he is."

"By who?"

"By the people who made him. By the military once they’re done sitting back and evaluating this whole mess. He’s the only constant in all of this. No-one can be sure of anything anymore."

"The rules are re-written, I guess?" O’Connell said gently. He wasn’t surprised; this was an epiphany that he’d embraced some time ago. It had since kept him successful, it had kept him alive.

"Listen," Shipman said, his voice wavering with the effort of it. "We’ve accepted that the rules have changed. I
need you to promise me something; swear it: an oath from one marine to another.”


“Look after the boy,” Shipman whispered as though they weren’t alone. “Where ever you guys go, take him with you?”

“You’re asking me to commit treason, you know that, right?”

“I know,” Shipman said. “But knowing that you’re going to die has a way of focusing the mind. Right and wrong is a little clearer. The boy is an innocent casualty in all this. He deserves the right to a life, away from the scientists and the politicians. Besides, I figured a man who masquerades as a soldier in a contaminated zone wouldn’t be beyond operating outside the box.”

“You figured right,” O’Connell said openly. “We’ll take care of the kid. You have my word.”

Shipman smiled, it was a slack thing that appeared to take every ounce of his resolve. “Good. Good.”

O’Connell was about to consider the deeper implications to the promise he’d just made to a dying soldier when the elevator jarred to a stop for a second time.

But on this occasion the doors dragged open allowing horror to enter their world.

***

“Jesus Christ,” Clarke gasped. “I thought it was gonna be zombies that killed me, not these fuckin’ stairs.”

They had climbed up to the eighteenth floor without coming into contact with another soul, living or undead. The whole building seemed as though it was unexpectedly redundant; its occupants embarking on a total and unmitigated exodus.

“You feeling that?” Amir said to Suzie, who nodded.

“And smelling it,” she replied. “The air’s getting hot, we got a fire nearby.”

“Probably on the floor above,” Amir said after a moment’s reflection.

“Get the masks back on and stay low,” Suzie told them. But Clarke stared at her gormlessly.

“What?” she said pulling her mask from its pack on her webbing.

“I sorta left my mask in the van,” Clarke said as his cheeks flushed.

“Then you’re “sorta” in deep shit then, aren’t you?” she said clearly irritated by his lack of thought.

“I guess I am.” Clarke looked at the floor and his demeanour changed to that of someone who was vulnerable and scared and annoyed with their own stupidity.

“Here,” Suzie said offering him her mask. “Take this.”

After a moment of surprise, Clarke snatched the mask from her and pulled it on. “Thanks.”

“Chivalry is truly dead in this world,” Amir said shaking his head in disbelief. “You want mine, Suzie?”

“No thanks,” she said. “It’s a trade off, if you’ve got a mask then you get to go first and clear the way.”

“Want it back?” Clarke said.

“Get moving,” Suzie said and Clarke ambled forwards, his rifle limp in his hands. Amir stood with him and the two men climbed the carpeted steps to the next floor and here the heat became a tangible entity. There were no flames, these were held at bay by a substantial fire door, but even this was buckling under the heat and thick tendrils of smoke seeped out into the stair well.

As the smog wavered, Amir saw a shape moving haphazardly, arms outstretched and totally unaffected by the suffocating atmosphere.

“Zombie!” he cried as the figure came at him; the shotgun instantly pumping a shell with the sound of a small explosion, chewing a huge semi circle into its side so that the remnants of its torso toppled sideways, dragging the legs with it.

Suzie started up a coughing fit, the swatch of fabric she’d clamped over her nose and mouth now clogged with soot; her eyes streaming.

“Grab her!” Amir said to Clarke. The younger man did just that, taking hold of a fistful of fabric just under Suzie’s collar and yanking her with him.

The three of them continued on through the smoke, Suzie gasping in ragged breaths; all of them blind but motivated by the desire to live, to survive this awful night and spend the rest of their days thanking God or whoever was there to listen that they had made it.

There were moments when Suzie thought she was going to collapse, never to get up again, but Clarke held her firm; rising to the moment until she felt something on her scorched face, a cooling breeze wafting down from above.

“I see a door!” Amir called out; Clarke increasing his speed and pulling Suzie closer to him, supporting her with an arm around her slim waist.

She saw the door, she saw the stars. And as the smoke gave way to the outside world, Suzie Hanks saw a nightmare come to Earth.
As soon as the elevator doors dragged themselves open, the foyer outside was a writhing mass of bodies all wanting in.

O’Connell opened fire instantly; the SA80 spitting half its magazine into the faces struggling to get into the car, pulping them, shattering cheekbones and teeth and skulls; churning flesh until the entrance to the elevator was veiled in a fine curtain of crimson mist.

The barrage cleared the entrance for a few seconds allowing the glittering, blood flecked doors to begin an attempt to shut out the carnage beyond.

But from nowhere a big, green tinted arm snaked through the opening. A large, mean-looking zombie with a shaved head fought his way into the car, followed by a smaller man dressed in a black *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* tee shirt.

The doors bounced back to allow the zombies clearer access, O’Connell lifting his weapon only to find it tangled in the flailing arms of the bald man. The gun went off tearing a ragged hole in the zombie’s chest but it didn’t stop its momentum.

O’Connell landed heavily on his back, on Shipman’s injured leg and the Major’s scream was intense and loud. Then O’Connell found himself fighting off his assailant as the elevator doors finally dragged shut and the putrid stink of decay filled the car.

The bald zombie loomed into view, its face filling O’Connell’s vision until he could see nothing else, smell nothing else, and he drove his elbow into the side of its head, jarring it sideways. When the zombie opened its mouth in an attempt to rip out his throat, teeth fell onto O’Connell’s chest.

Using rigid, strained muscle, O’Connell forced the zombie backwards with his forearm across its throat, but couldn’t sustain the weight for long. He brought his knees up to assist, struggling to get both of them in-between their bodies, then extending his thighs until there was enough room for him to reach his sidearm. He fumbled blindly with the holster as bald zombie got snappy, eager to sink its remaining teeth into his exposed throat. It opened and closed its mouth as if it had forgotten the process of chewing and needed a run through. O’Connell jammed the barrel of his pistol into its maw and pulled the trigger.

The bald head above him blossomed as the bullet punched through it, and suddenly the zombie was literally nothing more than a dead weight; pinning O’Connell to the floor. He looked over to Shipman and groaned in dismay.

*Buffy* zombie was content with feeding on the major’s throat; the irony of this not lost on O’Connell, even in that dreadful moment. Shipman’s death mask was one of painful surprise, his eyes staring ahead, his jaw yanked down to his chest.

O’Connell placed the Browning’s muzzle against Buffy’s head. The zombie didn’t acknowledge the contact and O’Connell introduced its brains to the walls of the elevator car.

He’d disentangled himself from the carnage about him and grabbed his rifle just as the elevator came to a shuddering halt.

“Roof Terrace,” the automated voice said brightly, before pulling the doors open; inviting him to step out before something dreadful decided to step in.

Suzie was slowly suffocating. The smoke was filling her lungs and scorching her eyes and her body was telling her that if things didn’t change soon, she would be as dead as most of the mob outside on the roof.

“Come on, Suzie.” Clarke’s voice was urgent beside her. “Don’t you be giving up now we’re on first name terms.”

He dragged her to the exit, where smoke was being pulled apart by the breeze. Amir was already there, peering out at the crowd beyond.

“I got a skylight to the left,” he hissed at Clarke. “It’s high enough to give us cover. Let’s get her out of here.”

The trio broke out onto the roof, keeping low; Suzie sucking in the huge lungful of oxygen her body so desperately needed, her consciousness returning like some animal after a long slumbering winter. As they threw themselves behind the raised skylight, Amir scanned the crowd forty metres away.

“They look pre-occupied,” he said. “Something’s got their attention.”

“Could be the kid,” Suzie said after spitting out a black wad of goo onto the asphalt. “If he’s still alive.”

“You’re such a lady,” Clarke said.

“Don’t I know it?” she said, surprising him by giving him the hint of a smile

“That’s a new look for you, isn’t it?” he said turning away, embarrassed.
“Thanks for getting me out of there,” she said earnestly.

“You’re welcome,” he said. But he didn’t look at her. She nodded an understanding at his burning cheeks, still visible through his mask. The boy had walked away tonight and a man had stayed to watch him go.

“Where’s O’Connell?” Suzie whispered as soon as the thought sparked in her head.

“He should be up here,” Amir said looking about him just as the faint sound of doors rumbling open came to them.

In the wall opposite to them a rectangle of light appeared, an ethereal gateway in the gloom, and through this a figure stumbled into view, rubbing at their eyes with a sleeved forearm.

“Great timing,” Suzie said quietly before scrambling over to him and guiding him back to their hiding place.

“What happened to the other guy?” Clarke asked.

O’Connell replied by shaking his head.

“Then how do we get on the chopper?” Suzie asked.

“They want the boy,” O’Connell muttered. “When it comes, stay close to him.”

“And how do we get near him with those things in the way?” Clarke said.

“I hear something,” Amir interjected. They all listened intently and picked up the thick staccato sound of a helicopter wavering of the breeze. O’Connell craned to follow the noise until he saw the flicker of navigation lights to the southwest.

“Chopper’s in bound,” he noted.

“You still haven’t answered the question - how do we get to it?” But once again O’Connell’s response was thwarted, this time by a gasp of shock from Suzie.

“Oh my God, O’Connell,” she cried out. “You’ve been bitten!”

O’Connell saw that her eyes were staring at the side of his head and his hand went searching there. No sooner had his fingers begun probing, a searing bolt of pain shot through his left ear though it was immediately clear to him that most of the lobe was missing. What was left of the pinna felt bloated and tender as infection ravaged the tissue. It was only the affects of adrenaline that had staved off the agony thus far.

“They got your ear, man,” Clarke gaped.

“Let me see,” Suzie said raising her hand to check. O’Connell took hold of her arm at the wrist.

“No need to check it out, Suzie,” he said gently. “It’s bad but it is going to get worse.”

“Worse?” Suzie said her voice wavering with realization. “You mean -?”

“I’m infected, Suzie,” O’Connell said. “I’m going to die. Then I’ll be one of them.”

“This can’t be happening,” Suzie buried her face in her hands, wailing against her palms.

“It’s happened,” O’Connell said bluntly. “And it makes it easier to answer Clarke’s question.”

“What?” Suzie said coming out from behind her hands.

“The chopper’s coming,” O’Connell explained. “And I’m going to make sure you’re all getting a ride home.”

“No,” Suzie said. “You’re coming with us.”

“You’re all here because I brought you on board,” O’Connell said. “I’m not going to make it, Suzie. And I sure as hell ain’t going to end up like that.”

He stood and watched the chopper approach. “Give me your ammo,” he said. “I’ll draw them off and you get the kid.”

“No way,” Suzie snapped. “No fucking way!”

“Easy, Suzie,” Amir whispered nervously eyeing the crowd. “You’re going to draw attention to us.”

“It has to be this way, baby,” O’Connell said drawing her to him. She resisted for a moment but it was fleeting; token. “I promised Shipman that we’d look after the kid, keep him safe - protect him - from people who’d want to use him. I need you to keep my promise now that I can’t. Will you do that for me?”

“Please don’t do this,” she begged. “I can’t live without you.”

“You’re Suzie Hanks and you can do whatever you want after tonight,” O’Connell said firmly.

“I want to stay with you,” she said.

“I’m already dead,” he said with brutal honesty. “You have to live; you have to uphold my promise, baby. Without it I will die with honour. I couldn’t bare that. I need you to make that happen.” He cupped her chin in his hands, the pain in her face tore his heart open, but he held firm. “Please, baby. Let me go.”

She collapsed into him sobs rattling through her body. But in her action he saw not only despair, he also saw acceptance of the inevitable.

And inside he now prepared himself for war.

***

“Thom Everett! Show your hands!”
The bullhorn blasted across the rooftop, drowning out even the heavy sound of the Merlin helicopter’s rotor blades.

“I repeat,” yelled the co-pilot from the cockpit, “Thom Everett, make yourself known. Show your hands!”

Below, Thom looked up as the rooftop felt the effects of the chopper overhead; the updraft from the rotor blades whipping his hair, the floods on the fuselage dazzling his eyes.

Incredulously Thom raised his hands and waved them frantically. His luck had miraculously changed; he was being rescued. Just when he thought he was destined to spend the rest of his life trapped on a roof with an unerring, ghastly and silent audience.

“Okay, Thom!” the voice from the helicopter shouted. “Stand clear of the crowd! Find cover!”

Thom ducked down behind a communications array; a skeletal finger jutting into the sky and bristling with satellite dishes. Almost immediately the dull thud of a chain gun rattled through the night sky, tracer fire streaking down from the helicopter as bright blinding streaks, smashing into the zombie mass and inflicting appalling injuries; removing limbs and heads, splintering bodies; sending some spinning through the air and over the edge of the roof.

From his hiding place Thom Everett clamped his hands to his head. Not to shut out the fierce din from the machine gun or the incessant whooping from the helicopter but to hide from the screams; the terrible hideous screams now reverberating through his skull. And with the screams came the pain, the suffering, the loss. None of these soul slicing sensations belonged to him, yet they were as much part of him as those who were dying for a second time. Tears coursed down his face, grief now squeezing his heart until it ached.

“Stop it!” he screamed standing, disorientated by the psychic onslaught and staggering dangerously close to the bullets raining down from above. “Stop it! Stop it! You’re hurting them!”

His mind went into meltdown; protecting him from the anguish threatening to drag him back to the edge of madness and throw him into the pit. And from this place he was aware of arms grabbing him, pulling him away from the curtain of fire before he was consumed by it. He made no attempt to fight it and he made no attempt to understand it. He allowed someone else to take him to a safer place, a place where perhaps there would be no pain or despair or suffering.

It would be some time before Thom Everett was aware of the people who had saved him. For now he was content for his mind to be a clean slate; unsullied and devoid of blood and death.

***

O’Connell was in another place; a place he hadn’t visited for a while. Most would say that he was in the zone, but O’Connell would say it was deeper than that, it was a darker place; the kind of mindset that allowed him to focus on the task of killing.

In Bosnia he’d lived in this world for too many years. When he was out of the army he’d returned to it twice. Once with Suzie’s father and the time when he’d pulped Wiggles in the Lake District.

In each hand he clutched an SA80, each with full magazines purloined from the others. On his back he’d strapped Amir’s shotgun. He breathed deeply, ready to go to work. Ready to embrace his responsibilities.

Behind him Suzie was propped up by Amir and Clarke; the trio each armed with a Browning. Suzie had temporarily converted her grief to anger, using this to fuel her desire to fulfill her promise to the man about to die for them.

For her.


The Merlin was almost upon them.

“The chopper will lay down suppressing fire,” O’Connell continued. “Once it starts; that’ll be our cue. Be ready.”

So they waited for a mini-eternity and the moment the bull horn called for Thom Everett to raise his hands, O’Connell began to walk, his steps unwavering, the zombies mesmerized by the lights in the sky.

Then the moment for action was announced by the tumultuous howl of a chain gun shattering the night.

O’Connell opened fire, the twin SA80’s lost in the cacophony from the barrage in the heavens. He aimed head height, splattering at least ten undead before the bulk of the back row tuned into him. He peeled left and a glut followed him, creating a gap in the crowd large enough for Suzie, Amir and Clarke to see the carnage in the front row.

“Let’s go,” Amir urged and the two men dragged Suzie with them; Browning’s poised.


A zombie caught their attention before Suzie’s fragile resolve could be knocked off kilter. A small man with a gash across his forehead grabbed her shoulder spinning her about, but she’d broken free of her grief fuelled fugue and shot him through the eye at point blank range.

Then she was moving, Amir and Clarke were ahead, taking shots at any zombies who sudden took an interest.
The chain gun spat more high velocity rounds into the crowd, ripping bodies apart. Amir turned to face Suzie to make sure that she wasn’t lagging behind or, worse, succumbing to her grief and going after O’Connell. As he did this a zombie landed on his back, knocking him flat, the asphalt skinning his cheek.

He bucked and squirmed and writhed but whoever had jumped him was too heavy, too determined, to let it go. And then it was there: pain, searing pain; the kind that knocks the air from your lungs until there’s nothing left but the puncture-hiss that wants to go on forever. Amir felt wetness, warm and sticky and fatal pouring over his neck and shoulders and his world fogged for a second. Then conservation kicked in and he found strength that had gone to ground when he’d really needed it. He battled to his feet and the zombie fell away taking a wad of his neck with it; and now that Amir had staggered to his feet the blood really wanted out, spraying onto the asphalt, despite the hand he slapped to his neck to stem the flow.

Suzie fought to get to him, the Browning in her hand putting a hole in the forehead of the zombie who had attacked Amir and was up in search for seconds. The zombie collapsed but then Amir was exposed the Merlin and Suzie could only watch another volley from the chain gun strafe the roof before hitting her friend.

Amir’s torso was obliterated, leaving his legs standing for an instant before they collapsed in quasi-comical fashion.

She cried out his name even though he was no longer able to hear her then she was drawn to something else, someone else.

She spotted a figure stumbling out from behind a communications array, a figure with its hand clamped to their head, clearly in pain and yelling at the helicopter.

Thom Everett.

And as he staggered about the roof top, Suzie could see that he was too pre-occupied to notice that he was about to meet the same fate as Amir Singh.

She ran at him, full pelt. Part of her hoped that she didn’t make it, but another, the part that had made a promise to a man who she loved above anything else in this off-kilter world, came to the fore.

Suzie ploughed into the youth and they both went sprawling as the chain gun’s lethal cargo chewed up the undead all about them.

“Stay down,” she hissed in Everett’s ear. “If you want to live, stay the fuck down.”

But Thom Everett offered no comment. He lay next to her, shuddering, his eyes fixed and vacant; his thoughts very much his own.

“How come I don’t get a hug?” Clarke said as he hunkered down next to her.

“Because I hate you,” she said but there was no malice to it, just exhaustion.

“At least you’re consistent,” Clarke replied.

Something landed heavily next to them: a harness and wire. In the tempestuous howling vortex over head, the Merlin’s co-pilot shouted instructions for them to put it on.

Clarke went first, at Suzie’s insistence, and she could see the relief in his eyes as he was winched away.

The remaining zombies milled about the roof, walking into the sporadic chain gun rounds, falling foul of its searing touch in spectacular and bloody fashion.

Everett allowed Suzie to secure him in the yoke. He’d gone somewhere for a while; Suzie knew it because there had been a point in her life when she’d checked out of reality. As Everett was pulled into helicopter Suzie scanned the rooftop for the man who had brought her back from the abyss. But all she could see were zombies, still coming despite the chain gun’s fury.

The harness landed again and suddenly the gun overheard stopped its racket. Instead it made crunching, clanking noises filling Suzie with dread.

Jammed.

She struggled with the yoke as her undead audience shuffled towards her, their moans pitiful yet sinister.

And, without the chain gun culling their number, there was nothing to stop their unrelenting advance.

***

O’Connell looked at the woman struggling to get into the harness. He knew her, of that he was certain, but the details of who, how and why were gone to him; like trying to recall a dream.

The side of his head was an undulating, festering balloon, but the pain was distant. He was on base instinct now. Not even the figures about him paid him any attention. He had an affinity with them that, whilst not complete, was well under way.

But other images were in his mind: this woman, the face of a big black man with too much pride and honour, and a sandy haired boy with his mouth filled with water. Separate entities but united in his commitment to them.

And it was this nuance that drove him to reach for the pack that Shipman had given him. The pack that contained
eight high explosive grenades. It was this shadowy sense of responsibility that allowed him to remove a metal orb and yank out the pin before dropping it back into the pack.

He shuffled into the crowd and stood shoulder to shoulder with his soon-to-be brethren and looked at the woman busy securing herself to the webbing. He gave a small slack smile.

“Miss you,” he whispered.

Then Kevin O’Connell died for good.

***

The blast powered through the crowd, tossing bodies in the air and out over the edge of the building; gifts for the city below.

Tired of the abuse it had sustained, Hilton Towers decided to give it up for the night, the roof collapsing with a great rent of metal. A maw opened up and the remaining undead fell into it; arms and legs, flailing in the confusion.

As the asphalt traded places with thin air, Suzie Hanks gasped; the harness only just secure as the roof collapsed beneath her. The winch mechanism engaged and she felt herself being hauled up; the noise of the Merlin replacing the explosion.

At the end of the ascent, Clarke pulled her in and helped her to remove the straps as the helicopter climbed away from the building and away from the horror.

But no matter what was left behind, the memories were destined to stay for a while.

***
Epilogue

The airport was bustling with people: business folk, commuters, holiday-makers; those just passing through. Susan Hanks was just passing through. She and her two companions had a few more red-eye flights to catch before they could finally stop and make a home.

The present was a nomadic transition, the future safe enough as long as no one found their trail. They had enough money to buy their anonymity after all. The past? Well the past was where it should be: held at bay by the strength that comes with a shared experience, and a group decision not to revisit it.

Ever.

It was difficult for Thom. He carried residue. His recovery would take time. But Susan had been there from the moment she hi-jacked the Merlin and, at gun point, ordered the bemused crew to set them down in the Worcestershire countryside. Here they’d holed up in a safe house for a while as she called in favours. During this time Clarke screwed up enough network systems and left enough false trails for them to leave the country with relative ease. Scrambling Phoenix Industries’ tracker inside Thom had been even easier.

Thom understood that his only chance to survive a life in the lab was to work with the tough, beautiful woman. He liked her though he thought she had the saddest eyes he’d ever seen.

And Thom was to follow her, and the young man who she brought in tow.

The dreams also came along for the ride, but they were fading now. No more pitiful cries in the night, no more images of searing flames as the city burned in the RAF inflicted inferno. The further Thom moved away, the easier it had become.

But he still had that residue; quiet voices somewhere in his mind, but too far away to hear. It would happen if he passed near a hospital or a cemetery. And Thom knew that if he really tried, he would be able to hear these voices loud and clear. Their new home in Wyoming was nowhere near such places. This was Suzie’s promise to him.

The last flight from Boston took them west to Jackson, where a thousand acre ranch was waiting to be a new home for three people with one, indisputable hope.

To find a somewhere where they could heal. A place to rest in peace.

END
Table of Contents

Start