

THE GATHERING

DEAD



The Horde is Always Hungry

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By Stephen Knight

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~~The dead had risen.~~

McDaniels heard the fragmented reports over the radio, and he could glimpse the reality of through the Humvee's thick, bullet-resistant windows. The dead had risen, and they swarmed through New York City like a plague of locusts, consuming every person they could find. The gates of Hell had opened, and the dead were the vanguard of Satan's army. Every now and then, the .50 caliber mounted in the Humvee's cupola would bark, and red-hot cartridges would roll into the vehicle's passenger compartment, tinkling to the floor between McDaniels and the slightly stooped man cowering in the armored seat beside him. Whenever the soldier manning the .50 fired, the gray-haired man flinched. His pale face grew even more pallid.

"Shooting them really doesn't help," he said to McDaniels. "It takes a head shot to make them fully dead again. And the noise is just giving us away."

McDaniels shifted the M4 carbine in his lap. "A few rounds from a fifty don't really leave all that much, doctor. I'd rather deal with a couple of stiffs that are blasted into several different pieces than a couple that are still whole and able to give chase."

"But the noise..."

McDaniels shrugged. "The city's falling apart. A little gunfire isn't going to make any difference, sir."

From the front right seat, First Sergeant David Gartrell glanced back at McDaniels. "Zeds in the street ahead. Looks like they busted through the NYPD cordon. We have a choice of deviating or going through 'em. For what it's worth, top cover says we're on the most direct route." The grizzled senior noncommissioned officer hesitated for just a moment before dropping the bomb. "There are lots of civilians still in the area, so it's going to get messy no matter where we go."

"Keep on going," McDaniels said. "Doctor, you'd better prepare yourself—this won't be pleasant."

Doctor Wolf Safire shrunk even further into the seat's hard contours. His big blue eyes brimmed with terror, but there was a defiant set to his jaw.

"My daughter," was all he could get out. His voice was barely a choked whisper above the roar of the Humvee's diesel engine and the sporadic chatter of the .50 caliber overhead.

"She's right behind us. We won't leave her behind, doctor. I promise."

Safire nodded and ran a hand through his thick gray hair. He started to say something more, but the Humvee bounced on its suspension as it drove over something. The bouncing continued, and McDaniels knew the vehicle had rolled over *several* somethings. He looked up as a distorted face flitted past the window to his right, then another. A smear of blood splashed across the window. Above, the .50 caliber opened up again, this time with a vengeance as the trooper manning it let loose salvo after salvo. McDaniels leaned past the trooper's legs and looked at Safire again. The trooper scientist had his hands clenched into fists and pressed them against his eyes.

"Holy shit, is it thick out here!" the gunner said over the din of his weapon.

He wasn't kidding. Through the windshield, McDaniels saw dozens—maybe hundreds!—of the walking dead surging onto West 58th Street as they overwhelmed the hasty barricades set up by the NYPD and New York Army National Guard. The barricades weren't totally ineffective; constructed from garbage trucks, fire engines, squad cars, and every other vehicle that could be driven into position, they still held a mass of stinking dead at bay. But the dead just piled up on each other, trampling each other as they formed great writhing dunes of bodies that loomed over the barricades. That was how they crashed through. Undeterred by the firepower arrayed against them, they closed upon the barricade defenders and slammed into them like a tidal wave. Their single-minded desire to feed was what drove the legion of the dead to swarm out of lower Manhattan like a vicious, malignant

cancer. No matter what they had been in life, in death—or the *new* death—all that was left for the was incessant, never-ending hunger. And all the food was pulling away from them, headed to the north. Out of the city.

Why the dead needed to eat live human flesh was beyond McDaniels.

He slapped the trooper's right leg. "Ritt, button it up! Secure your weapon, *now!*"

"Hooah." As the Humvee plowed into the first of the walking dead, Rittenour dropped back into the Humvee's passenger cabin and closed the cupola's hatch. Just in time; the vehicle was jarred by sudden impact.

"Looks like we got some jumpers," Gartrell said from the front right seat. "I don't believe this—the damn stiff's are actually jumping off the buildings to try and get at us." He adjusted his helmet strap slightly as the Humvee slammed through two other shambling corpses, sending them flying. McDaniels watched as a New York City Police officer ran toward the convoy, a pack of the dead on his heels. He stumbled, and that was all it took; some of the faster ghouls fell upon him, nails slashing, teeth tearing. McDaniels turned away from the sight.

Gartrell glanced at the driver as the armored vehicle drove over another clutch of the dead, its big, knobbed tires spinning momentarily as they crushed bone and pulped desiccated flesh.

"No need to try and go around them or anything, Leary."

The driver kept his eyes riveted on the chaos before them. "First Sergeant, you can kiss my—*God!*"

The Humvee skidded to a sudden halt, throwing everyone against their harnesses before they could brace themselves. Sergeant Rittenour flew into the back of Gartrell's seat and rebounded pretty much right into McDaniels' lap before McDaniels could restrain him. He hadn't had the time to buckle up.

"Leary, what the fuck?" Rittenour yelled.

And then McDaniels saw what had prompted Leary to stand on the brakes. Standing next to the Humvee's left fender was a slender woman with curly red hair. She wore a white terry cloth bathrobe and clutched a small toddler to her breast. The toddler's eyes were big, blue, and beautiful, much like her mother's would have been had they not been so full of terror.

"Please! Please help me!" the woman screamed. She pounded on the driver's window with one well-manicured hand.

"Oh God," Safire whimpered.

"Major," Leary said.

"Drive, Leary!" McDaniels said.

Leary twisted in his seat and looked back at McDaniels. He compressed his lips into a thin, bloodless line.

"Major," he said again, his voice soft but the plea was unmistakable. *Please major, don't make me leave this woman and her kid to these things.*

"God damn it, troop!" Gartrell reached across the wide vehicle and rapped his knuckles across Leary's Kevlar helmet. "Drive!"

Leary glanced back at the woman, and she must have seen it in his eyes. She pounded on the bullet-resistant glass as the dead swarmed toward her, some at a slow run, others at a limp.

"My daughter, take my daughter!" she screamed. Leary finally stomped on the accelerator, and the Humvee's diesel engine roared as the vehicle pulled away just as the first of the ghouls slammed into the woman and ripped the child from her arms.

"Oh fuck," Rittenour said.

"God forgive me," Leary muttered. There was no mistaking the sob in his voice, and McDaniels' heart went out to him. None of them had ever thought they would be abandoning defenseless

American citizens to the ravages of a brutal and uncaring enemy like this. If they had, McDaniels knew none of them would have signed up to wear the uniform of the United States Army.

“God’s not here today,” Gartrell said. “But I am. Just do what you’re told to do, troop—drive straight down 58th until we’re told to turn. Got it?”

“Got it,” Leary said. He got a semblance of his game face on and sped up, weaving around the odd abandoned vehicle here and there. But when the dead shambled into view, he drifted toward them and let the Humvee’s reinforced bumper and brush guards deal with them. The heavy vehicle swayed as it crashed through them.

“You’re not hurting them,” Safire said.

“Sir?”

“You’re not hurting them, soldier! They can’t feel pain! They can’t reason, they can’t feel fear! All they know is hunger! Going out of your way to run over them isn’t hurting them *at all!*” Safire said, his voice nearly a high-pitched shriek.

Leary kept his eyes riveted on the street before him. “That may be, sir. But it sure is fun.”

McDaniels’ radio headset came alive. “Terminator Six, this is Two-Six, over.”

“Terminator Two-Six, this is Terminator Six, go ahead.”

“Six, keep on 58th. Don’t turn toward Columbus Circle. That area was a mess before the quarantine, and it was being used as a staging area for the fire department before they were stood down. A lot of the tankers and ladder trucks were abandoned, I saw it on the flight in,” said Chief Warrant Officer 3 Walter Keith. He was the real commander of the Special Forces Operations Detachment, not McDaniels. McDaniels didn’t know Keith well, but he had immediately impressed upon the major and First Sergeant David Gartrell that he was a hard charger who wasn’t about to shrug off a mission.

“Roger Two-Six, good copy.” To Gartrell: “Verify that with top cover.”

Gartrell spoke into his headset’s boom microphone, talking directly to the pilots of the MH-6 Little Bird that paced the convoy from overhead. He listened to the response.

“Keith’s right. The Night Stalkers verify what he said, but it’s not their intention to send us the way. We’ll drive through the intersection of 58th and Eighth Avenue, then across Broadway. We turn north at Seventh Avenue and enter the park there.”

“Got that, Staff Sergeant Leary?” McDaniels asked.

“Hooah,” Leary said.

McDaniels relayed the information to CW3 Keith, who rode in the Humvee behind them. “If we get separated, take that route. Over.”

“Roger, Terminator Six. We’ll be with you, over.”

The convoy broke through the infested area and charged past a manned barricade. McDaniels was surprised to see two M2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles mixed in amidst the M1114 Humvees. Army National Guard soldiers wearing full MOPP IV gear—the accoutrements a soldier would don in the event of a nuclear, biological, or chemical attack—stared down at the three Humvees from atop their own vehicles.

“Poor bastards,” Gartrell said. “They feel safe because of the hardware, but it’s not going to help them.”

“Maybe we ought to tell ‘em,” Rittenour said.

“Maybe you ought to sit back and enjoy the ride, troop. This vehicle is not stopping,” Gartrell said.

Ahead, a fire raged unabated as a fashionable Midtown West apartment building burned, filling the street with pungent, thick smoke the color of coal. Unarmed civilians stared at the Humvees as they tore past, but the dead hadn’t made it this far yet. Despite the uncontrolled fires, the uniforms

soldiers manning the corners, the perpetual songs of sirens mixed with the throbbing basso beats of helicopter rotor blades, the residents of this part of New York City thought they were safe for the moment.

McDaniels shook his head. A moment was about all they had.

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The dead hadn't made it to Central Park yet, at least not in sufficient force. Still, the fair citizens of New York City had heard the helicopters, and they knew the jig was up. As the three Humvees roared through the park, armed soldiers and NYPD were using all the tools at their disposal to keep the citizens at bay. They were using non-lethal force, McDaniels saw. No one wanted a rising to occur here, not in the middle of an evacuation. Just a few members of the walking dead could spawn dozens of fellow walking corpses.

A television news van was off to one side of the intersection of the 72nd Street Transverse and East Drive. The Humvees were a mess, having driven over and through pretty much everything the dead could throw at them, and judging by the viscera smeared across the windows, McDaniels was certain the convoy was not a pretty sight. The TV cameras immediately swung in their direction, broadcasting the image out to millions.

The Humvees accelerated through the intersection and past the news crew without slowing down. They wound their way through the vast park that sat at the heart of one of Man's greatest cities, a city that was slowly being consumed by a kind of nearly untreatable cancer.

And the only thing that kept it from being completely untreatable sat in a Humvee not more than three feet from one Cordell McDaniels, Major, United States Army Special Forces. Doctor Wolfgang Safire, the brilliant biochemist that had started the renowned pharmaceutical company InTerGen over two decades ago. McDaniels' bosses said that Safire might have a cure, or a vaccine against whatever it was that caused those bitten by the dead from turning into one of them. And that was why he had been pulled out of his normal work at Army Special Operations Command and dispatched with First Sergeant David Gartrell to link up with Operational Detachment Alpha OMEN in New York City. He would oversee the rescue of the scientist and his thirty-something daughter, and ensure they were placed on a dedicated transport that waited for them in one small portion of Central Park's Great Lawn. McDaniels hadn't even thought to ask why him. Not only was it against the heritage of service he embraced—one did not question lawful orders, especially in the special operations community. And if there was a man who said he might be able to stop the rising tide of the dead, then McDaniels would run through an erupting volcano naked if that's what it took to get him to deliver. And McDaniels had his own family to worry about. Though the Big Apple was the general nexus point of the United States, there were catastrophic infestations in Europe. No one knew exactly where it had started, but all indications seemed to point to somewhere inside Russia. McDaniels had been on the task force assigned to discover the outbreaks' etiology. It seemed that someone had come across some long-forgotten relic of the Cold War and tampered with it. True or not, what had been released was first reported in Russia, and within weeks, Russia went dark. Satellites showed the legions of the dead moving across the nation, heading for both Europe and China. It was the double attack on capitalism the old Soviet guard might have dreamed of, but the soldiers had an entirely different perspective. They weren't in it to destroy capitalism. They were in it to eat people, and it didn't matter if those people were Russian, German, French, Polish, or Chinese.

The sky overhead was dark with smoke from gigantic fires. South of 14th Street, New York was an inferno, an intentional blaze started by the military in hopes that it would contain the army of the dead and prevent it from advancing north. And in a small measure, it was a successful gamble; even the dead couldn't soldier on when all their flesh had been burned to a crisp and tendons and ligaments could no longer move muscle and bone. But there were gaps between the fires, gaps filled with

soldiers and policemen that were being overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of the walking dead. They were tens of thousands of them in lower Manhattan, and they avoided the flames by using the subway tunnels, by massing at roadblocks in such numbers that they overwhelmed the defenders, and in some instances, by walking into the East and Hudson Rivers and walking upstream. McDaniels had heard reports on his way in that a group of the walking dead had emerged from the East River and was headed for the United Nations building. He had chuckled at that. Finally, something would devour the United Nations before it could envelop the world in leftist glory.

But the fires had also blackened the skies with thick smoke, smoke that was driven northward by the prevailing winds. This had curtailed aviation operations. Even though McDaniels' convoy had a helicopter escort, it was by sheer chance that the proper flight crew from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment had been in the area and was open to tasking. The pilots flew their small MH-6 Little Bird without doors and usually operated at an altitude of 40 feet above the deck, at night, in all weather, so flying in smoke wasn't a show stopper for them. For the rest of the aviation community, however, the smoke was thick enough to hamper general aviation missions. That was why the assembly area at Central Park had been set up. VIPs and their dependents were to make it to the Park, and, upon identity verification, they would board a helicopter or tiltrotor bound for greener pastures.

That was the idea, anyway. McDaniels looked out the window at the smoke-tinged afternoon and wondered just how many aircraft would wind up burying their noses in the dirt because their pilots couldn't fly by instruments.

Shapes moved amidst the trees as the Humvee sped up East Drive. McDaniels straightened in his seat and looked out the gore-smudged window, trying to make sense of what he saw. Were those people, or...?

"Holy mother of God," Gartrell said. "Freaking stiff in Army BDUs!"

McDaniels felt a deep chill envelop him. "Call it in as a black flag actual. Leary, step on it. We're out of time."

"You got it, major."

CHAPTER 2

~~Dozens of helicopters of all shapes and sizes had landed in the Great Lawn, from massive CH-47 Chinooks to small, aged OH-58 Kiowas. There were even some MV-22 Ospreys, big tilt rotor aircraft that had been flown in from North Carolina by the US Marine Corps. McDaniels shook his head when he saw the gigantic, odd-looking aircraft. He knew the Osprey was a capricious aircraft and something of a maintenance nightmare. The saying was the Osprey couldn't decide if it wanted to be an airplane or a helicopter, so it chose to fail at being both when the chips were down.~~

As the Humvees drove around the Great Lawn, McDaniels heard sporadic gunfire from the south. While distant, it grew in intensity.

"Sounds like there's a party going on," Gartrell said.

"I'm going to switch over to the common net, Gartrell. You stay on our private network and keep an ear open, all right?"

Gartrell nodded. "Roger that."

McDaniels switched his radio to the common frequency. Whereas the private frequency being monitored by OMEN team was quiet, the common net was a storm of traffic. Most of the transmissions were disjointed and overlapping, as troops in contact frantically tried to give updates and request reinforcements. At the same time, area commanders tried to coordinate troop repositions and fire support for those units that were danger close and had ringside seats to the havoc. McDaniels heard more than a few transmissions ending in agonized screams.

Yep, the world's going to Hell in a handcart.

McDaniels switched back to the private frequency, which was still blissfully silent. He fidgeted in his seat and looked out the grimy window. It was an early afternoon in October, and the leaves in Central Park were starting their colorful transition. This was the time for horse-drawn carriage rides and lovers strolling hand in hand, while dogs dashed about, chased by small children. That picture had gone out of focus days ago. McDaniels wondered if the Big Apple would ever be able to recover. If it was allowed the chance. While at U.S. Army Special Operations Command, he had overhead some possible plans to deal with the threat in New York City, and some of them consisted of essentially turning Manhattan Island into one giant brazier.

"Terminator Six, this is Rapier, over."

The voice over the radio jarred McDaniels back to the here and now. He keyed his headset's push-to-talk button. "Rapier, this is Terminator Six, over."

"Terminator Six, Rapier. SITREP, over."

"Rapier, Terminator Six. Package in transit, heading for assembly area ROMEO. We are in the Park, and are no longer in immediate contact with any zeds at this time, over." McDaniels' situational report was brief and succinct, just the way the Army brass liked it.

"Terminator Six, Rapier. Roger that, and good work. The Black Hawks are spooling up and will be ready to break deck the second the package is aboard, over."

Another volley of gunfire caught McDaniels' attention. Much closer this time. Even though he couldn't see any immediate threat, he clicked the fire selector on his M4 from SAFE to SEMI. They were so close to getting out of this shit that if something were to go down, now would be the perfect time.

"Terminator, Rapier. Did you copy that last, over?"

"Rapier, Terminator Six. Roger, good copy across the board. We'll come back to you when we're airborne, over."

"Roger that, Terminator Six. Rapier, out here."

"Coming up on the assembly area, major," Gartrell said. "Looks like there's some serious activity on the far side, which is where ROMEO is." ROMEO was the two MH-60M Black Hawks that

were tasked to transfer Safire, his daughter, McDaniels, Gartrell, and the rest of OMEN Team 1 to MacArthur Airport on Long Island. From there, they would board an Air Force jet and fly to Fort Detrick, Maryland, where McDaniels and Gartrell would escort Doctor Safire to the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases. Once that transaction had been completed, McDaniels didn't know what lay in store for him. He hoped that being reunited with his family in North Carolina was on the short list.

"How far are we from the ROMEO aircraft?" McDaniels leaned forward and looked through the Humvee's windshield. Civilians streamed across the road in tight, panicked groups, despite the threat of soldiers and police trying to hold them back. Leary had to slow down to keep from running people over.

"I'd guess about five hundred meters." Gartrell glanced back at McDaniels. "I know what you're thinking, major. We should get closer before we try and hoof it."

"We might not have much of a choice if this doesn't get under control, first sergeant." McDaniels pressed his radio button. "Two-Six, this is Six. Get ready to abandon the Humvees. We might have to go the rest of the way on foot, over."

Keith answered immediately. "Six, Two-Six, roger."

They stuck with the Humvees for as long as they could, but after having traveled no more than a few hundred meters in almost ten minutes, McDaniels decided to dismount. The security situation was clearly deteriorating more quickly than the forces on hand could handle. If they were going to get out of New York City before it fell to the ravenous ghouls that charged through its cold concrete canyons, they would have to leave the comparative safety of the armored Humvees.

"My daughter. I'm not leaving without her," Safire said obstinately as Leary brought the Humvee to a halt.

"She's still coming with us, doctor," McDaniels said. "Now let's get going."

The pall of smoke had grown thicker, and it filled McDaniels' nostrils with a sharp, acrid odor as he flung open the Humvee's heavy, up-armored door and stepped out into the hazy autumn daylight. Gartrell stepped out from behind him, his Atchisson AA-12 autoshotgun already shouldered and ready. The first sergeant's head panned from side to side like a tank turret as he took in the sights. While they were safe for the moment, all around them New Yorkers were rushing into the park, thousands of them. The few soldiers they encountered tried to stop them, but the flow of refugees was too great. Just the same, gunfire broke out, and people screamed and whimpered.

"My God, are your people shooting innocent civilians?" Safire asked.

"These aren't 'my people', Doctor Safire. But there's definitely some shooting going on, but I don't want to guess at whom." McDaniels ran a gloved hand over his face, then pulled his goggles over his eyes. The smoke had started to make them burn already.

CW3 Keith rolled up with the rest of his team in tow. In the center of the formation was a tall, raven-haired woman with tanned skin and the biggest green eyes McDaniels thought he had ever seen. She didn't look much like her father, which was probably a bonus. She looked tense, but not frightened.

"Regina!" Safire called.

Regina Safire hurried toward her father and embraced him immediately. She fairly towered over the stooped scientist, and McDaniels saw there was more to the embrace than just filial piety. The look in Regina's eyes hardened as she looked around, taking everything in. She was protecting her father as best as she could, and McDaniels had to appreciate her grit.

"We're ready to roll," Keith said as he stopped beside McDaniels. "I figure we should keep you, the first sergeant, and the Safires in the center of the formation while the rest of us make up the bleeding edge." As he spoke, Keith didn't look at McDaniels or First Sergeant Gartrell. His eyes were

cast outward, surveying the chaos that threatened to swallow them up whole. The rest of OMEN Team took up defensive postures with their weapons charged and ready to fire.

McDaniels nodded. “We need to get to the ROMEO aircraft, which Gartrell says are about four hundred meters that way.” He pointed into the hazy day where the collection of aircraft sat. A nearby CH-47 Chinook came alive, its gigantic rotors slowly turning as its turboshaft engines shrieked.

“We shouldn’t wait any longer,” Keith said over the rising din. Without waiting for the major agreement, Keith barked orders to the rest of his men. They formed a loose phalanx around the civilians and the two soldiers from Army Special Operations Command, and led the way toward the helicopters.

“I like his can-do attitude,” Gartrell said, half-shouting so McDaniels could hear him over the Chinook. “I also like how he automatically determined that we’re a pair of PUNTS.” PUNTS was the acronym for Personnel of Utterly No Tactical Significance, or more simply, individuals who were of no use operationally. McDaniels shrugged. He was a field grade officer, much higher up the food chain than Keith. But if the solidly-built warrant officer wanted to try and assert his dominance in the middle of the end of the world, McDaniels couldn’t give a damn. He had his own job to do.

“Let’s hit it,” he said, taking one of Wolf Safire’s thin arms in his left hand. Gartrell did the same to Regina, and the two of them tugged their charges along as CW3 Keith and the rest of OMEN Team set out at an aggressive pace. They trotted through the smoke-filled park, shoving people out of the way. Most didn’t protest the harsh treatment, not when they were fighting to get to a helicopter and get out themselves. But one group of toughs—apparently gang-bangers from Harlem—elected to try and go to guns on one of the Special Forces soldiers. The soldiers didn’t hesitate. They killed each gang-banger with headshots.

Because only headshots would keep them from turning into zeds.

“Good God,” Safire groaned, sickened by what he had just witnessed. “With everything that’s going on, do we need to be killing each other as well?”

McDaniels shook the smaller, frailer man. “Snap out of it! Those pricks wanted to kill us and take our guns, and then try and hijack a chopper. No one’s wearing any kid gloves today, Doctor. We might have to kill a lot more people to get out of this.”

“Stop hurting my father!” Regina shouted. She slammed her fist into McDaniels’ upper arm with enough force to hurt, but he favored her with what he hoped was a sufficiently grim smile.

“That’s the spirit,” he said. Her eyes flashed and she drew her hand back to strike again, but the Gartrell jerked her forward.

“Come on, let’s keep moving, miss. You don’t want to fall behind here,” the first sergeant said, his face unreadable behind his big goggles and the boom microphone of his headset.

“Get your—”

Whatever Regina Safire was going to say was swallowed up by the sudden shrieks that erupted from the team’s right. People ran from the trees separating East Drive from the Great Lawn like rabbits spooked from a bush by hunting dogs. And behind them came the walking dead, about forty or fifty of them. Some wore the woodland green battle dress utilities of Army soldiers. They fell upon any civilian they managed to catch and tore into them savagely. Blood glistened in the afternoon sunlight.

“Keith!” McDaniels shouted. “Let’s pick up the pace!”

Keith signaled the rest of the team to run.

The assembly area erupted into pandemonium as the zeds poured into it. They overwhelmed the ground security forces stationed at the perimeter and attacked helicopter crews inside their aircraft. Some of the zombies met rather ignominious fates as they charged headlong into spinning tail rotors where the vanes slashed them to pieces before fragmenting and whirling through the air. The fusillade

of gunfire that met the zombies was ferocious, but it failed to stop those that were not hit in the head. And the gunfire had a secondary effect, as several civilians and other soldiers were cut down in the melee. In a matter of minutes, they would rise again and join the other zeds in their quest for human flesh. It was a cycle the military had been exposed to, but had not had the time to train for.

As bullets snapped past McDaniels and Safire, the major pulled the older man along as if he were no more than a child. When one of the SF troops to his right suddenly went down, he forgot all about the high-value civilian in his left hand and released him, bringing his M4 around. The soldier screamed as two zombies slammed into him, taking him to the ground like a pair of NFL linebackers sacking a quarterback. The soldier got off a quick burst from his M4, but it was too low; the volley passed right through one zombie's center of mass and did no substantial damage. McDaniels shouldered his own weapon and fired a single round through one zombie's head. It dropped to the verdant green grass of the Great Lawn like a sack of potatoes, its dull eyes knocked askew by the impact. But the second zombie sank its teeth into the screaming soldier's cheek even as he beat at it with his fists. His blood was bright and red in the diffused sunlight, a sudden splash of Technicolor in an otherwise black and white scene. McDaniels stared at it, transfixed for an instant, as the zombie ripped a huge chunk of flesh from the soldier's face and chewed it hungrily, its face blank and expressionless, its rheumy eyes vacant and without any sign of intelligence. The corpse was wearing the remains of an expensive blue suit. Its white dress shirt was dappled with blood, and it had lost one expensive loafer. McDaniels had the impression the zombie had been a successful man in life.

The soldier continued to struggle beneath the zombie, and he jerked his M4 into position as the corpse spread its jaws wide for another bite. A burst of gunfire blasted its skull apart, and the soldier tossed the grotesquerie aside as it collapsed on top of him. He then reached up to his mangled cheek with one hand, and explored the ragged hole torn there with his fingertips.

"Oh Jesus," Regina said, her voice small and barely audible above the din of combat and the whir of helicopters.

The soldier looked at her, then at her father. His molars were visible through the rent in his face.

"Can you help me?" he asked Safire, speaking as clearly as possible despite the wound.

Safire shook his head. "No. I'm sorry. No."

The soldier's face collapsed as a burst of bullets tore through his helmet and pulverized the skull beneath. McDaniels turned. Keith held his weapon at his shoulder. He walked toward the corpse, knelt, and pulled the rubber-edged dog tags from around its neck. He pocketed them, then rose to his feet and looked at McDaniels.

"Let's go, we're pretty close now," he said, before resuming his jog. If he was at all remorseful, he did not allow it to show. McDaniels followed, tugging Safire along.

The two MH-60M Black Hawks were surrounded by six ground security experts from the 160th. Several bodies lay around the two aircraft, some in uniform, most in other dress. Not all were zombies.

"OMEN Team," Keith told the first Night Stalker he came across. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "We've got two AMCITs that need to be hauled to MacArthur, on Long Island."

"Took you guys long enough, chief. Are any of you injured? Have any of you been bitten?" The tall, rawboned sentry looked from person to person, his Heckler & Koch MP5 held in both hands.

"Negative. We're all good," Keith said.

The sentry spoke into his helmet's boom microphone and waved them toward the waiting Black Hawks. Keith turned to McDaniels.

"Major, you go with the Safires in one ship," he shouted over the roaring jet engines and slashing rotor blades. "You take your first sergeant and Leary and Rittenour. The rest of us will be in the second chopper. In case anything goes south, we'll come in and extract you guys."

“Roger that, chief. *Sine Pari*, huh?” McDaniels said, throwing in the Special Forces Latin motto of Without Equal. A ghost of a smile flickered across Keith’s face, then he pointed to the men he wanted to accompany him and led them toward the second helicopter.

“Let’s saddle up!” Gartrell shouted, and he pushed the Safires toward their Black Hawk. One of the crew chiefs helped them aboard and strapped them into the hard seats that ran the width of the helicopter’s troop compartment. Before returning to his own seat and the six-barreled M134 minigun mounted on an articulating cradle before it, he handed McDaniels a headset that was hardwired to the helicopter’s intercom system. McDaniels removed his headset and donned the new one.

“This is Major McDaniels,” he said.

“Major, this is Chief Warrant Officer Five Cox. We’ll be pulling pitch in just a moment, but I want to let you know that we’ll have to keep it at about 100 feet above ground. Our FLIR is messed up and we can’t get it operational. Without that we can’t see through the smoke. So we’ll have to fly below the smoke layer. Understood?”

“Roger that, chief. Do whatever you need to do, this is your aircraft and we’re only along for the ride.”

“That guy with you—they say he might have a cure for this... this plague or whatever the hell it is. That true?”

“That’s what they say. Any more than that, I don’t know.” McDaniels turned and checked Safire’s safety harness. He then placed his own helmet on Safire’s head and drew the chin strap tight.

“Keep that on,” he said, shouting over the Black Hawk’s twin engines. He didn’t know if Safire heard him or not, but the scientist nodded, and that was good enough for McDaniels.

The security perimeter collapsed as the ground control personnel retreated to the helicopters and climbed aboard. The timing was unfortunate. As they mounted the helicopters, another incursion of zombies cut through the assemble area. McDaniels saw them coming, approaching the second helicopter that carried CW3 Keith and the rest of OMEN Team.

“Zeds to the right! Zeds to the right!” he shouted over the intercom while pulling his M4 into position. If he had to start shooting, he’d have to push the rifle past Safire and fill his lap with red-hot shell casings. He needn’t have worried; the crew chief leaned forward in his seat, grabbed his M134 A-frame handles, and fired a burst at the oncoming zombies. They literally exploded as the salvo rounds ripped through them. McDaniels saw one decapitated head bounce across the grass and come to a rest face-up. Like a scene from a cheap horror movie, the dull eyes still moved, and the mouth repeatedly opened and closed.

“We’re out of here!” the pilot said. He reached up to the overhead panel and fire-walled the engine condition levers. The Black Hawk’s twin turboshaft engines went from wail to a full-on scream as the helicopter’s main rotor picked up speed. The helicopter clawed its way into the air as the last of the security team threw themselves aboard. McDaniels watched as the second helicopter began to follow. As it grew light on its wheels, several shapes darted toward it from the left rear. The door gunner stood and spun his M134 to bear, but he couldn’t get it zeroed in time. Before McDaniels could do more than key his microphone button, the zombies threw themselves into the helicopter just as it lifted off. After a moment, its nose suddenly rose and tracked to the right before its main rotor lost thrust. The Black Hawk’s tail rotor disintegrated as it struck the ground, and the big helicopter rolled over and slammed back to the earth. Its rotors threw up sod and earth before they also fragmented. The helicopter spun around in a circle, and its tail boom fractured into three different pieces. It came to a sudden rest, and smoke rose from its engine cowlings.

In the tree line, a ragged line of figures shambled toward the downed aircraft. More zombies were coming in for the kill.

“We lost ROMEO Six-Two,” the pilot said over the intercom. “We’re a solo flight now, major.”

“Roger that,” McDaniels said. He looked at Gartrell, who returned his somber glance. The first sergeant’s rifle was between his legs, its butt planted against the helicopter deck between his boots. Beside him, Regina Safire had also seen the helicopter crash. Her gaze met McDaniels’, and for a moment she looked less like a hard-charging New York City professional and more like a frightened child. Her dark hair flew about her head, courtesy of the rotor wash that entered the troop compartment through the open doors.

McDaniels turned to Wolf Safire, who sat motionless beside him. His eyes were shut, and his jaw was set. McDaniels squeezed the smaller man’s wrist. Safire nodded slightly, but didn’t open his eyes. McDaniels faced forward, looking out through the canopy. He sat right behind the air crew, so he had a good view.

The smoke was dense and roiling as the sun edged closer to the western horizon, now to the helicopter’s tail. Other helicopters launched, and the MH-60M banked from side to side as its pilot threaded it through the pattern with a cool, almost mechanical proficiency that McDaniels found admirable. These were people who had just seen their wingman burn in, and there was little doubt what had happened to the flight crew and their passengers. The Black Hawk charged on, flying over the treetops of Central Park, just south of the city’s historic Metropolitan Museum of Art. McDaniels had visited the museum three years ago with his family on one hot, muggy summer day when the city had been besieged by seemingly never-ending thunderstorms. He had been impressed not just by the displays, but by the architecture of the museum itself. He wondered how it would fare in the near future, and he wondered if zombies were tearing through its corridors, hunting and killing. And in the process, swelling the ranks of their army.

The helicopter thundered on, staying as far below the smoke layer as possible. McDaniels was discomfited to see the pilots flew the big chopper directly down one of the streets (was it East 79th?) as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Buildings rose up on either side of the aircraft, and the major knew that the rotor tips had to be perilously close to making contact with cement and glass. The Black Hawk charged across Madison Avenue, clogged with traffic. Figures ran through the halted mass of cars and trucks and buses, and in some places, more figures gathered in what looked like free-for-all fights. They were zeds in the middle of feeding frenzies, and McDaniels suddenly remembered the woman standing outside his Humvee, begging for the soldiers to save her child.

My daughter, take my daughter!

He gritted his teeth and forced the memory away.

The helicopter continued on its eastbound track, rotors thumping, vibrating slightly as any odd-ass aircraft that flew like a helicopter would. They crossed the multiple lanes of Park Avenue, and it was similarly blocked, a city artery clogged with automobiles instead of plaque. More smoke billowed, this time from a burning bus.

As the helicopter approached Lexington Avenue at sixty knots, something fell past the helicopter, startling the crew chief sitting in the right gunner seat. McDaniels didn’t have to see it perfectly know what it was: a human shape. It had been a zombie, and it had tried to land on the helicopter.

“Climb out!” he said over the intercom. “The zeds, we saw them diving out of buildings to get to people—”

Something exploded above his head and the helicopter started bucking like some crazy carnival ride. Alarms went off, and McDaniels saw rotor alerts on the pilot’s multifunction displays. The helicopter dipped to the left as the pilots fought against it.

“We’re going in, make sure everyone’s strapped in!” the pilot shouted. “Mayday, mayday, mayday, ROMEO Six-One, twelve souls aboard—”

The pilot didn’t finish his transmission and the rotor blades scythed through a treetop at the corner of Lexington Avenue and East 79th Street. The Black Hawk continued its apparent

uncommanded left bank and turned up Lexington, slowing, its nose rising as the pilot fought to change its airspeed and bring it into something approximating a hover. It seemed to be working, as McDaniels noticed the aircraft suddenly slowed to a crawl, still crabbing to the left, but no longer flying along at almost 70 miles an hour. As the helicopter descended, both miniguns barked as their gunners fired on nearby targets.

Jesus, we can't be landing here! McDaniels thought.

The pilot resumed his mayday as he and the copilot fought to regain control over the Black Hawk. The alarms continued to sound, and as the aircraft lazily spun to the left, something fractured overhead like a thick bone. McDaniels saw the blurred remains of an entire rotor blade fly away from the aircraft and disintegrate as it smashed into the brick façade of a nearby office building, disappearing into a spreading cloud of shattered carbon fiber and broken glass. The pilot screamed something unintelligible over the intercom system as the helicopter flounced from side to side as if in some sort of mechanical epileptic seizure.

Then it rolled to the right and crashed into the traffic-choked street.

CHAPTER 3

~~McDaniels curled up into a ball in his shock-absorbing seat as the helicopter slid across the rooftops of several cars, crushing them flat before it suddenly catapulted back into the air and rolled upright. The entire airframe lashed from side to side for an instant as if fighting to remain in the air. Both pilots wrestled with the cyclic and collective pitch sticks and managed to keep the aircraft right side up before it came back to earth, this time with its landing gear in the proper position. The wheels folded up as they were designed to do, absorbing a goodly amount of the G forces. McDaniels' seat stroked, sliding along gas-filled struts, diminishing the remainder of the forces, and the major had just enough time to hug his knees up against his body armor. His head struck his kneepads with sufficient force to make him see stars for an instant as the wrecked MH-60M slid forward, tearing through automobiles as if they were as insubstantial as paper. The sound of metal being torn asunder was all McDaniels heard.~~

And then, the helicopter slammed into the back of a garbage truck. The pilot screamed as the right side of the cockpit imploded, driving the instrument panel into his armored seat and pinning him in place. The aircraft jerked to a halt, and the only sounds left were those of the engines winding down and the metronomic *beep-beep-beep* of an alarm.

An eerie buzzing filled McDaniels' head. He slowly sat up in his seat and fumbled with his harness's quick release, but couldn't quite make it work. He looked to his right and saw Safire was still strapped to the seat beside him, leaning forward against his own harness. A trickle of blood ran from his thin nose, and his eyes were glassy, disoriented. McDaniels shook his head, trying to clear away the cobwebs.

Something clattered to the floor of the helicopter, and he saw Gartrell slip out of his four-point safety harness. He grabbed onto the left gunner's seat and pulled himself to his feet, standing bent over at the waist in the Black Hawk's troop compartment. He looked at the door gunner in the seat before him, then sidestepped over to McDaniels.

"I got this, sir," he said, and he reached out and hit the quick release on McDaniels' harness. McDaniels slipped to the floor and fell to his knees. The Black Hawk was tilted to the right, lying across the crumpled remains of abandoned cars. The rear of the garbage truck intruded into the right side of the cockpit. He saw no sign of the pilot inside the twisted mass of metal and plastic.

The crew chief unstrapped himself and eased out from behind his now-useless M134 minigun. His visor was fractured, and he reached up and shoved it back under his SPH-5 helmet's visor guard. He had a beefy face and a thick mustache, and his eyes were still sharp despite everything he had just gone through.

"Who's injured?" he asked, after glancing toward the destroyed cockpit. He grabbed McDaniels by the arm and looked at him. "Major, are you hurt?"

McDaniels slogged to his feet as Gartrell and the crew chief held him steady against the incline. "I'm fine," he told them. "Are we on fire? I smell smoke!"

"The fuel tanks are self-sealing, rated to stand up to 23 millimeter fire," the crew chief said. "You're smelling transmission fluid burning up. The tranny box must've been sheared off the mount." He looked past the seat Safire was still strapped into. "Ground control, you guys alive back there?"

"Still here, but Jimenez is hurt," was the reply. "His back's all fucked up."

"Rittenour and Leary?" Gartrell asked as he turned to tend to Regina Safire. She looked stunned but unhurt.

There was movement in the back of the compartment. "We're good," said Rittenour.

In the front of the helicopter, the copilot stirred. He groaned and fumbled with his straps. The crew chief pushed between the door gunner seats and went to him.

"Mr. Goggins? You all right, sir?"

"I think I'm caught beneath the instrument panel." The copilot looked around the aircraft and grimaced when he saw the devastation encasing the pilot's station. "Is he...?"

"He's dead," Gartrell said. He put his fingers against the neck of the man in the left gunner's seat. "Door gunner's dead, too." He reached forward and pulled the dead man's straps as tight as he could.

"What are you doing?" the copilot asked as he shrugged out of his harness.

"We need to get out of here," Gartrell said. "We need to find someplace we can hole up in and call for an extraction." He finished with the gunner and picked up McDaniels' rifle from where it lay on the floor between the two gunnery seats. He handed it to the major, and McDaniels checked it quickly.

"He's right, we do need to get the hell out of here," he said. "Gartrell, see to Miss Safire." McDaniels turned and looked at Wolf Safire critically. "Doctor Safire? Can you travel?"

The older man wiped at the blood trickling from his nose. He pulled a handkerchief from inside his dark suit jacket and dabbed at his nostrils gingerly.

"Yes, but where will we go?" he asked.

"We'll find that out in just a moment." McDaniels unstrapped Safire and helped him to his feet. "We'll have to go out the left side of the helicopter. The right side is blocked." And he was right, the Black Hawk had come to a rest with its right side pressed against several cars.

In the near distance, more gun fire rang out and helicopters buzzed through the area. There was a rending crash, and McDaniels knew another helicopter had gone down somewhere nearby. He found his tactical headset, slipped it on and switched to the common net. It was filled with urgent, overlapping radio calls. It was difficult to determine who was saying what.

"Any station, this is Terminator Six, come in." McDaniels transmitted while pulling Safire toward the left side of the helicopter. Gartrell preceded him and hopped out, then turned back to help Regina out of the wreckage. "This is Terminator Six. ROMEO Six-One is down on the hard on Lexington, just past East 79th. We need immediate evac, over." He repeated the calls as he helped Safire step out of the open cargo door in the Black Hawk's left side. Gartrell and Rittenour waited to help him navigate the crushed car and twisted landing gear assembly that was directly below the door. Regina looked up at her father with wide eyes, standing right behind them. Leary and the Night Stalkers' security crew had already exited the aircraft, and they provided overwatch cover, weapons oriented down either side of the street. Leary fired twice, and McDaniels saw a figure collapse to the ground.

"We gotta boogie," he said.

As McDaniels clambered out of the wrecked helicopter, a voice crackled over his headset, barely discernable in the electrified chaos: "Terminator Six, this is Uniform Six... you read..."

The transmission quality was horrible, but McDaniels knew that Uniform Six was the overall ground element commander at Central Park, a colonel from the 10th Mountain Division's 87th Light Infantry. McDaniels pressed the earphone tighter against his right ear as Leary opened up again, this time joined by one of the Night Stalkers who released a full automatic burst downrange. Gartrell slapped the Night Stalker on the shoulder.

"Semi only! Conserve your ammo, troop!"

"Uniform Six, Terminator Six, we need immediate evac, over," McDaniels said. He saw shapes climbing over the cars in the near distance, and he slapped Rittenour on the shoulder and pointed them out. Rittenour nodded and aimed his rifle at them but did not fire. McDaniels realized the Special Forces trooper was waiting for the zeds to get closer, so he could be certain to deliver head shots.

"Terminator... Uniform Six... —ative on evac... overrun. I say again, we are overrun... all aircraft are..." The voice was drowned out by a fusillade of heavy weapons fire from somewhere inside the park, and McDaniels recognized the detonations as were from 70 millimeter rockets. Apparently, the Night Stalkers' Little Bird gunships were going into overdrive and using all the munitions at their disposal. "... someplace high and hole up, we'll try and..."

The transmission was overwhelmed by a frantic, fragmented report from an infantry unit that was in close contact with the zombies. The report was indistinguishable, but over the sound of small arms fire, McDaniels heard total fear in the voice of the soldier trying to make the report, just one amid dozens. It cut out suddenly. Was the unit overrun? McDaniels wondered. It didn't matter, another frantic report filled its place, just as garbled and unintelligible as all the others.

"Uniform Six, this is Terminator Six. Say again on status of evac, over." Something moaned to McDaniels' right, and he turned to see a small, ghoulish figure emerge from beneath a car. It had been a toddler, perhaps a three-year-old boy with straw-blond hair and an aquiline nose that resembled Regina's. In life, the boy would have been almost beautiful, full of life and vitality. In death, it was anything but, its blue eyes open and unblinking, already marred by motes of dirt. The zombie was missing most of its right arm, and its movements were slow and imprecise as it hauled itself out from beneath the car and clambered to its feet. It wore dirty pajama bottoms, and the knees had already been worn through, exposing scraped flesh the color of alabaster beneath.

McDaniels fired one round through its head as its moan turned to a hiss and it charged toward him. The bullet blasted through the top of the zed's skull, removing it along with a good portion of the brain, splattering it across a nearby white BMW. The zombie was knocked back into the car, then fell to the street face-first. It did not move.

Regina's steely façade cracked suddenly. She shrieked and buried her face into her father's shoulder.

"Uniform Six, this is Terminator Six, come in, over!" McDaniels looked around the street. There were far too many hiding places for the zombies to stalk them, and down on the street, visibility was limited. Overhead, a Chinook hurtled past, disappearing in and out of the roiling black smoke that roared into the air.

He heard nothing further from Uniform Six.

McDaniels slapped the side of the helicopter. "Flight crew, are you guys coming out?"

The copilot leaned out of his open doorway. The aircraft flown by the 160th always had the doors removed to increase visibility. "One of my fucking legs is trapped under the instrument panel," he said. "And to top it off, I think it's broken..."

McDaniels swore and pulled himself up onto one of the cars the MH-60M lay across. He peered inside the cockpit, and for sure, the pilot's right leg was pinned beneath the instrument panel overhang. If the entire console hadn't been shifted back in the crash, he could have been simply crawled out the doorway to his left, but that wasn't an option.

"Can we lower the seat?" McDaniels asked.

The crew chief was already trying that, pulling a control at the base of the pedestal and shoving down on the seat with all his weight. He shook his head.

"Seat's stroked all the way down. There's no way to depress it further. I might be able to remove the back, but we'll have to figure out a way to lift the panel off—*oh shit!*"

The crew chief was yanked toward the right side of the cockpit. McDaniels leaned inside to see what was going on. He saw an arm had reached out through the wreckage on that side, and fingers had grasped a handful of the crew chief's flight suit.

"Mr. Cox is still alive!" the crew chief shouted. He grabbed onto the pilot's wrist.

"No, he's not!" McDaniels said. "Sergeant, stay away from that man, he's not Cox anymore!"

The crew chief hesitated, and when he did, the zombie sitting pinned inside the wreckage moaned and pulled again, this time harder. The crew chief made a strangled sound in his throat and ripped the hand off his flight suit. The arm flailed around blindly, trying to find its target again. The crew chief fell against the copilot's seat and pulled his Beretta pistol from its holster.

"Fucking *shit*," he said, his voice barely more than a strangled whisper.

“Sergeant, pay attention... help me figure out how we’re going to get your copilot out of this seat all right?”

“No time for that, major.” Gartrell’s voice was a flat deadpan. “Multiple targets inbound from both sides. We don’t have the manpower or ammunition to make a stand out here in the street. McDaniels straightened and looked up and down the street. Gartrell was right. Dozens of figures shambled, ran, or crawled toward the crash site from the north and the south. More gunfire sounded from Central Park, but the sounds of helicopters were fading now. All the aircraft that had lifted off were on their way out.

Glass exploded nearby as a ghoul crashed into a car. McDaniels looked up in time to see several more boiling out a window in a nearby apartment building. All of them reached for the humans in the street as they fell, as if they could grab them. All of them crashed to the street or sidewalk below, and all of them stirred after impact. Though bones had been broken and flesh shredded, the walking dead were still capable of movement... and they remained hungry.

“But what about Mr. Goggins?” the crew chief asked. “We’ve got to get him out of here!”

“Gartrell, take everyone into that office building there.” McDaniels pointed toward an office building at the corner of the street. Through its thick glass lobby doors, he saw the marbled lobby was empty. “People are still holed up in the apartments and residences, but the chances of people being in an office building are a hell of a lot less. And with less people—”

“Fewer zeds. Roger that.” Gartrell barked orders to the rest of the men and pointed to the office building. The Special Forces soldiers immediately did as instructed, but the Night Stalkers were reluctant to leave the helicopter.

“Sir, we don’t leave our own behind!” one of them said to McDaniels.

“I’m staying with him, soldier. Move your ass!” McDaniels turned back to the Black Hawk and looked at warrant officer Goggins. The younger man’s eyes were full of fear. The ghoul trapped in the pilot’s seat moaned and struggled against the metal that kept it pinned in place, and McDaniels saw the top of its helmet moving.

“Sergeant, try and help me lift this console off his leg,” McDaniels said.

Gartrell tapped McDaniels’ right boot. “You’ve got about thirty seconds, major.” And with that the first sergeant disappeared, loping toward the office building.

“Come on, sergeant!” McDaniels snapped. He pushed upward against the instrument panel with both hands. His M4 hung from his side by its patrol strap; if he needed to use it, he’d never get to it in time. The crew chief bent down to help him, pulling upward on the panel at the same time. Metal flexed and plastic squeaked, but the instrument panel didn’t move enough for Goggins to pull his leg free.

“Fuck,” was all the pilot could say. He looked through the shattered windscreen. McDaniels followed his gaze, and his heart started hammering in his chest. More dead shuffled toward the crash site.

This guy’s not going to make it.

“Come on, major! Let’s get this done!” the crew chief shouted. He saw the approaching zombie as well.

“Get out of the aircraft, sergeant. And watch out for the other door gunner. It’s... awake.” McDaniels nodded toward the corpse in the left gunnery seat. It was sluggishly moving, hissing slightly, its unblinking eyes fixated on him. McDaniels was thankful Gartrell had had the foresight to strap it in tightly, otherwise there would have been nothing to prevent it from attacking the crew chief.

“Are you going to leave me?” Goggins asked. There was no rebuke in his voice. He pulled his pistol from its holster and looked at it speculatively before turning back to McDaniels. “I can’t do myself. I’m Catholic.”

McDaniels grabbed his M4 and fired at the approaching zombies. Three shots, and only one went down. Not a great hit ratio.

“Sergeant, get out of the aircraft,” he said. “This is your last chance.” Behind him, more gunfire sounded as Gartrell and the others engaged the zombies. A ghoul crashed to the pavement right behind McDaniels, half its skull missing.

The crew chief looked at the pilot. “Mr. Goggins...”

“Go on, Terry. Go with the major. This is the end of the road for me.” Goggins looked at McDaniels imploringly. McDaniels nodded and raised his M4.

“NSDQ,” he said before pulling the trigger. *Night Stalkers Don't Quit* was a legendary credo in the special operations community, and McDaniels had seen it in action once again on this day. His M4 barked once, and Goggins sank into his seat. McDaniels pulled the pistol from the pilot's dead hand and jumped off the car.

“God damn!” the crew chief said. His voice was high, almost a panicked shriek. “You shot McDaniels! You fucking *shot* him!”

“Cap off those zeds in the helicopter and get the hell out here!” McDaniels snapped. More gunfire from behind, and more zombies fell. Something moved atop the wrecked helicopter; the only warning McDaniels had was the lazy bobbing of one broom-strawed rotor blade. He raised his rifle and a female zombie leapt toward him, its jaws spread wide, its filthy dark hair trailing behind it like the tail of some ebony comet. McDaniels' first round passed through its neck, and the zombie's head lolled sickeningly to one side as it crashed to the street. It scrambled to its hands and knees, and its head fell downward, hanging from its neck by skin alone—it was obvious that McDaniels' errant shot had severed its cervical vertebrae. McDaniels fired again and this time dropped the grotesquerie to the pavement.

Inside the Black Hawk, the crew chief continued to swear in total panic as he fired several shots at the reanimated corpses of his flight crew. He then half-jumped, half-fell from the aircraft, slamming into a smashed SUV. If he hadn't still been wearing his flight helmet, he might have knocked himself unconscious against the vehicle's stout A-pillar.

“Let's go, major! Last chance!” Gartrell shouted from the corner. He was already backing toward the office building with Rittenour while the rest of the soldiers held the lobby under guard.

McDaniels grabbed the crew chief's arm and pulled him along as he ran toward the office building. A zombie crashed to the ground ten yards from him; another jumper, and its skeleton was pulverized by the impact, yet it still tried to make its jellified extremities work so it could pursue. Something cracked past his ear—a bullet—and he heard it strike something fleshy only a few feet behind him. Without turning to look, McDaniels knew the ensuing clatter was a zombie collapsing against a car.

The crew chief screamed, and his wrist was torn from McDaniels' grasp. He looked over his shoulder and saw the young sergeant being taken to ground by no fewer than three zombies; one of them tried to bite his skull, but the flight helmet saved him. The crew chief writhed and struggled beneath the weight of the zombies, and he fired his weapon into one of them at point blank range. Three rounds passed through the ghoul's thorax without causing any real damage. McDaniels dropped it with one shot, then took out the one trying to chew its way through the crew chief's helmet. It fell upon him, and for a moment, the younger man was trapped beneath the dead weight of two corpses.

The third ghoul grabbed up the crew chief's left hand and ripped off all his fingers in a single vicious bite. The crew chief screamed and struggled to throw off the ghouls, but it was too late. McDaniels knew that once bitten, the man was as good as a zombie. He fired two rounds, one through the zombie's skull, the second through the crew chief's. The young sergeant collapsed to the street motionless.

“Major!” Gartrell shouted.

~~McDaniels ran for the office building as fast as he could, his pack jerking from side to side on his back, his feet slamming into the asphalt. He hopped over the curb and fired blindly at the zombies closing in on him from the right. One of the rounds was lucky enough to strike one in the femur, and the destruction of the bone made it collapse in the heap, taking down the rest of the zombies moving with it. It was only a momentary respite; all of them clambered back to their feet and continued to pursue him, whatever injuries they had accrued ignored.~~

But then he was at the open lobby door. McDaniels threw himself across the threshold and slid face-first across the cool marble floor as Gartrell slammed the heavy glass door shut.

CHAPTER 4

~~The ghouls rammed into the door with their entire weight, but it couldn't be budged. Just the same, Gartrell and Leary hung on to it for dear life. Even though the door only opened one way—outward—they didn't have the key to lock it. And while the zombies had the cumulative intellect of the average pen holder, they might eventually get lucky and pull on the handle as opposed to trying to push their way inside.~~

McDaniels got to his feet, shocked to see dozens more zombies stumble toward the building. A few of them catapulted themselves against the windows of the glass-walled lobby with a single-minded fixation that was almost awesome to witness. Even though they only succeeded in breaking their own bones and leaving smears of gore across the glass, they immediately got to their feet and charged again. And again. And again. The lobby was filled with the din of bodies smashing against glass.

A nearby door popped open, and McDaniels spun, rifle at the ready. It was Rittenour and one of the Night Stalker security troops, emerging from a stairwell.

“Stairway is clear, first sergeant! We checked the first five landings, and there's no one inside!”

“You got it ready to go?” Gartrell asked, still holding onto the lobby door.

“Roger that, ready to go,” Rittenour said.

“Gartrell, you have something in mind?” McDaniels asked. He joined the burly NCO at the door.

“I figured if we couldn't get this place locked up, we'd have no choice but to go up. And if we do that, we'd have to blow up some of the stairwells to make sure those things can't come after us. Rittenour is the demolitions NCO in OMEN team, he's got enough of the goods on him to make it happen.”

“Has anyone checked any of the floors above?”

Rittenour shook his head. “No time. Some of the doors are exit only, so the first floor that's open to us is the fifth. I opened the door and looked in, but didn't see anything other than cubicles and offices.”

“Jimenez, have you found a damned key yet?” Gartrell asked. McDaniels turned and saw the Night Stalker with the bad back going through all the drawers in the lobby security desk. The young soldier's face lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Affirmative, I got the key!” Jimenez said suddenly. “At least, I think I do—”

“Get over here!” Gartrell said.

Jimenez started toward the door, but his gait was slow and stiff. The tall, rawboned Night Stalker snatched a key ring out of Jimenez's hand and dove toward McDaniels, Gartrell, and Leary. The door was locked in two places, at the top and the bottom. The soldier fell to his knees and inserted a key into the bottom lock. The cylinder wouldn't turn. The soldier fumbled about and tried another key. It also wouldn't turn.

“Finally, what the fuck are you waiting for?” shouted a small, wiry Night Stalker as he pounded up and helped hold the door as well.

“Fuck off, Maxi!” the soldier on the floor said. He tried another key, and this time, metal snapped home as the lock set. The soldier jumped to his feet and repeated the process with the top lock. After some hesitation, Gartrell and Leary stepped back from the door, but the other soldier kept pressing against it, his face blank. McDaniels could tell the soldier was on total autopilot, terrified out of his mind. He grabbed the soldier's backpack and pulled him backwards.

“Keep it together, soldier,” he said, right in the soldier's ear.

“Hooah,” the soldier replied automatically, his gaze rooted on the glass door.

The zombies continued to batter it, but the door held. Gartrell examined all the doors in the lobby critically, then nodded to himself.

“Locked up tight,” he said.

“Good work, soldier,” McDaniels said to the aviation trooper who had locked the door. He let g

of the soldier's backpack and turned to the rest of the soldiers in the lobby. "You've *all* done great work. Now let's keep doing it, and hope to high hell we can all get out of this alive. And the beers are on me at Campbell and Bragg."

There was a chorus of "hooahs", the Army term that could be anything from an affirmation to a zoological classification. The crashes against the glass increased, and McDaniels estimated the number of zombies outside the lobby had swollen to several hundred.

"We should probably get upstairs, major," Gartrell said over the growing din. "We're attracting a hell of a lot of attention, and even though this glass is pretty thick, it might give eventually."

McDaniels nodded. "Yeah, let's do that."

###

Rittenour took the lead as the seven soldiers and two civilians mounted the stairs, leaving the door of the lobby behind. The building still had power, which was a blessing, as the stairwell was brightly lit. The stairwell was all gray-painted concrete, with florescent tape marking the edges of each step, so they could be navigated in a lights-out situation. As they climbed, Rittenour pointed out the plastic explosives he had planted and various intervals. He explained that it was enough to blow out two sections of stairs and one landing, and McDaniels believed him.

"Any chance of the explosion screwing up the building structurally?" he asked the demolition expert.

"Don't believe so. Looks like the core support is in the center of the building, around the elevator shafts. The stairwells are close to them, but not too close, if you get what I mean." Rittenour kept the butt of his M4 tucked against his shoulder as he walked up the stairs, eyes scanning each landing for a threat before stepping onto it.

As they passed by one of the re-entry doors leading to the third floor—the lobby below was two stories tall, so the first floor available was the third—McDaniels tried to push it open. It was locked. There was a card reader next to the door, where he presumed an employee would swipe his card to gain access to the floor.

"Locked, like I told you it would be," Rittenour said.

McDaniels leaned against the door and pressed his ear against it. He heard nothing.

"Might be a good idea to try and get inside anyway. See what we might be sharing a building with."

Gartrell patted the key card reader. "Tall order, major."

McDaniels nodded. "Still, something to think about, if we're going to be here for a while."

They made it to the fifth floor. Rittenour and Leary took positions on either side of the stairwell reentry door, while the short Night Stalker readied to pop it open. McDaniels motioned for Gartrell to remain behind with the Safires. The first sergeant gave him a grim smile, and then stepped forward with his sidearm in his right hand.

"I'll back up Leary and Ritt," he said.

Leary looked at him from over his shoulder. "You sure you're still ready for this kind of stuff, first sergeant?"

"Sergeant Leary, I'm a plank-holder with Delta." He raised his pistol. "And I'm still able to double-tap a man in the right eye with this at fifty meters."

Singularly unimpressed, Leary grunted and turned back to the door. Gartrell looked at the two uninjured Night Stalkers.

"You aviators come in after we secure the immediate area on the other side of that door. Depending on the lay of the land, we'll probably split up into two groups and do our recon. Jimenez with your back I don't want you moving any more than you have to, so you stay here with the majors and civilians, understood?"

“Roger that, first sergeant.”

~~Gartrell rolled his head from side to side, loosening up. He conspicuously avoided looking~~ McDaniels as he moved the Safires down a few steps. Gartrell firmed his grip on his pistol and nodded to the short Night Stalker.

“Open it on three, son. One. Two. Three!”

The soldier yanked open the fire door and stumbled to one side, wincing in pain. Rittenour and Leary surged inside, followed closely by Gartrell who held his pistol in a double-handed grip. The soldiers from the 160th moved to the open door and took up their overwatch position, assault weapons at the ready. They all held Heckler & Koch MP5K Personal Defense Weapons, modified variants of the time-tested H&K submachine gun that was heavily favored by most of the American special operations community for close-in work. As he watched them form up, McDaniels realized that other than Jimenez, he still didn't know their names. Jimenez fell back from the doorway and leaned against the concrete wall, his own MP5K held in both hands. The Safires stood with their backs against the opposite wall.

After a minute or so, Gartrell drifted back into sight and waved the Night Stalkers forward. They shoved their way into the brightly-lit office space beyond. McDaniels grabbed the door and softly closed it, then kept it covered with his M4. For a long while, the only sounds he heard were the breathing of those in the stairwell with him.

“How long will this take?” Regina asked after a moment. She watched Jimenez slowly pick his way past them, his MP5K's barrel oriented toward the stairwell they had just ascended.

“It'll take as long as it has to,” McDaniels said. “Now please, keep quiet.” He looked back at Jimenez. “What's up, sergeant?”

“Don't like having the back door unguarded, sir,” Jimenez responded. His hair was cut short on the sides in the medium whitewall fashion that a lot of Army grunts favored with a semi-Mohawk on top. His eyes were dark and dwelled deep in his head, and he blinked often as beads of sweat ran down his face. McDaniels reached back and grabbed his shoulder firmly.

“Hang in there, soldier,” he said.

Jimenez nodded. “I will, sir. This is just a totally FUBAR situation, you know?”

McDaniels smiled as easily as he could. Fucked Up Beyond All Repair definitely fit the circumstance. “I definitely know that.” He turned back to the closed door and glanced over at Safire after a moment. Safire looked back at him with expressionless eyes. His daughter put her hand on her father's arm and looked at McDaniels herself, her eyes full of both terror and annoyance. McDaniels found that combination almost laughable under the circumstances.

The minutes passed, and they waited in the stairwell as patiently as they could. McDaniels listened to the sounds that entered the stairwell: machine noises from HVAC, the gentle gurgle of water in pipes, the soft susurrations of air cycling past. There were no sounds he could attribute to the walking dead. No moaning, no banging on doors, no footfalls. As far as McDaniels could tell, they were alone in the stairwell.

When the reentry door slowly opened, it was still a shock. McDaniels pointed his rifle at the door as it swung open. Gartrell was on the other side, and he waved them in.

“We're clear inside.”

McDaniels motioned the others forward while he hung back, covering the stairways leading to the landing. The Safires entered the office floor, followed by Sergeant Jimenez, who moved gingerly. McDaniels could tell by the set of his jaw that he was in no small amount of pain. Once the Night Stalker had crossed the threshold, McDaniels backed into the office and silently closed the door behind him.

“We should probably figure out a way to block this door,” he said to Gartrell.

Gartrell nodded. “We’re already looking into that. Lots of heavy file cabinets and credenzas we could use, but this seems to be the only exit. Would be a shame to block it off and not have a way out.”

McDaniels sighed. “Well, let’s have one of the troops stand guard, then. What’s the lay of the land around here?”

“Typical office environment.” Gartrell waved to the virtual sea of cubicles that made up the office. “Cube farm, with offices on the far side that have windows overlooking Lexington. They probably rename it to Dead Avenue, though—tons of stench everywhere.” He paused. “It ain’t looking pretty out there, sir.” The older NCO sighed and adjusted his backpack. “You might as well walk the floor, and take a look around. I’ve got the rest of the troops poking around. Latrines are the way”—he pointed to his right—“along with a pantry. Vending machines, coffee, hot chocolate, even a refrigerator with that Parmalat milk. Tastes like crap, but you can drink it and it won’t kill you. I think.” He paused. “Radios work out here, since they’re not cut off by the stairwell walls, but they’re pretty much useless. Our private freq is blank, but there’s still some activity on the common net. A little fragmented. Some of our guys are still alive, but they’re on the run, I think.” His face hardened a bit, and McDaniels knew the first sergeant had heard some things he didn’t like.

McDaniels flipped frequencies on his radio. The private frequency USASOC had allocated for them was indeed silent, nothing but a vague hiss of static. The common tactical frequency was a mish-mash of static broken every now and then by pleas for assistance or other units trying to reconstitute. Most of the calls were unintelligible, and some of them carried with them the sounds of distant combat.

He looked at Gartrell. “We need to keep focused on staying alive, first sergeant. Once we’re established here, we should make sure the civilians are safe, and then take an inventory of our gear and ammo. We’ll also need to break out the sat phone and see if we can get a hold of anyone in Bragg.”

“Satcom’s not going to work in here, sir. We’ll need to be up on the roof. And this building is 20 stories, so we’re going to have to go for a walk, unless you want to consider taking one of the elevators. Which are in a locked bay over there.” Gartrell pointed to his left. McDaniels turned and walked over to a nearby reception area. A set of glass doors separated the elevator bay from the office floor. When he tried to pull them open, he found they were locked.

“Magnetic lock, major.” Gartrell hadn’t followed him, and remained near the fire exit. “To get out, you press that button on the wall there. To get in, someone either swipes an entry card or gets buzzed in from that receptionist’s desk, there.”

McDaniels saw the illuminated red button on the wall beside the glass entry doors. It was clearly labeled EXIT, and he pressed it. A loud metallic click sounded, and he pulled open one of the doors easily enough. He listened, but heard no evidence that any of the elevators were in operation. He let the door close, and the click sounded again. The doors relocked automatically.

“I wonder if it’ll still work when the power fails,” he said.

Gartrell said nothing. They would deal with that when it happened.

McDaniels looked around. “The Safires?”

Gartrell pointed to over his shoulder. “In the pantry. No windows, single point of ingress. Seems to be the safest place to put them for the moment. Jimenez has guard duty.” As he spoke, the remaining two Night Stalkers appeared, carrying a heavy wooden credenza by either end.

“Put that here,” Gartrell ordered, and stepped aside while the red-faced soldiers pushed the ornate piece of furniture against the fire door. It only blocked half of it, and the door opened into the stairwell anyway, but it was a start.

“I’m thinking one of us should be on the other side of that door,” one of them said. McDaniels

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