



“Move, move, move!”

With the girl slung over my shoulder, it wasn't as easy to get *down* the side of her house as it had been to climb up it. I did my best to tuck her securely against my neck and then used two of the rappel lines to slide down. The other members of my team waited for me to hit the ground before they hooked in and fell afterward.

The battle was just picking up steam. We were already winning, of course, because we had guns. Around us, enemy soldiers dropped in mid-stride, gore starbursting from their skulls. The lights in the houses nearby were rapidly going out as everyone realized what was going on and—very wisely—hit the deck.

“We should have just gone in and grabbed her to begin with,” Tom griped before squeezing off a shot.

“C'mon,” I said, choosing to ignore his statement of the bloody obvious. It was over. We'd been trying so hard to hide, and here we were fighting, gangland style, in the middle of the royals' capital-freaking city.

I was going to get reamed out mercilessly when I got home.

“Vulture has landed.”

I heard the squealing of brakes as a van pulled up in front of

the house and the wet crunching sound of it taking out a couple of enemy soldiers for us. The rear doors, which declared the van a MUNICIPAL VEHICLE OF THE CITY OF NEW LONDON, swung open. Metal benches had been welded along the two longest sides of the van's interior, and I hauled myself up by one of them, taking my cargo to the back before returning to help my teammates up.

The moment Tom's last foot left the ground, the van took off. He and Coalhouse got the doors shut, swaying helplessly back and forth all the while. The van held extra ammo and equipment, and these things shifted beneath nets that had been bolted to the floor.

"That was intense," Coalhouse said as he fingered his empty eye socket.

"Don't pick at it," Tom said, a remnant of annoyance still in his voice.

"Tom, do not *lecture* me like I am your girlfriend. You *have* a girlfriend."

"If you think he can lecture me, you're sadly mistaken!" the girlfriend in question said over the intercom, filling the metal cavern with her voice. She was driving. "Hey, Bram, did you see me take those two out in front? That was *wicked*. Totally unplanned, too. I am just that awesome."

"Yeah, Chas," I said, distracted. We were all safe and accounted for, and my emotions were starting to settle. I tried to keep in mind the possibility that we were being pursued, but somehow that didn't seem important.

I looked to the girl. I knew that Tom and Coalhouse were looking, too.

The smell of her blood was filling the cabin.

"Brace yourselves, gentlemen," Chas's voice singsonged.

I knew what was coming. While the others took their seats and strapped in, I stood up and quickly hauled myself hand over hand down the length of the van. As we crashed through the gates

of the Elysian Fields guardhouse, I tumbled toward the girl and pulled her into my arms to absorb the impact.

She made a little sound, like a gasp. I froze.

Was she conscious?

The sound of the van's engine roaring in my ears, I lifted a hand from her side to the edge of the black bag Tom'd thrown over her head. I truly hadn't wanted to have to do it this way. Not that I'd really been convinced that invoking the name of her father and asking nicely would get her to come with me.

But part of me had hoped.

When I'd splashed my way back from the attempt at a non-invasive extraction, tired and terrified and very, very angry with myself, the others had teased me about not being able to pick up women. Well, I had her now. She was light in my arms, and so warm it almost burned.

I pulled off the hood, bracing myself for a scream.

She was still out.

I pushed her hair out of her face and wiped off her mouth with my sleeve.

"Wow, she's cute."

I lifted my eyes and glared at Coalhouse. "Inappropriate."

She wasn't cute. She was beautiful.

Dearly's daughter was so pale and small, it was hard not to compare her to a muslin rag doll. Her cheeks were still flushed from the fight, her lips red. This was only the second time I'd seen her in color, her image familiar from silvery daguerreotypes and black and white monitors, where her hair might have been any shade of dark.

I stood and carried her to one of the benches, using the straps to secure her to it. We needed to get her cleaned up, before someone started calling dibs. "You got the first aid kit, Coalhouse?" I asked. My voice was gruff with faked professionalism, I could hear it.

“Uh, yeah. Hold on.”

One puffy sleeve of her nightgown had slipped down, revealing a white shoulder. As Coalhouse retrieved the kit from beneath the netting and stumbled over to me, I tugged it up and smoothed it over her skin.

All while I rattled off a long list of curses in the soundproofed room of my mind.

Twenty minutes later the van rocked to a stop. Tom shouldered his gun and slowly opened one of the van doors, viewing our surroundings through his sights. “I don’t see anyone.”

“I got nothing,” Chas said, her voice low on the intercom. “Buzzard is thirty minutes on our tail. They’ll get the next ship out.”

I freed the girl and picked her up again. This time I cradled her in my arms, bridal style. “Okay, we do this fast. Right, guys?” My teammates nodded.

Tom kicked the second van door open, and out we marched. We hustled past the docks and boat slips, past the metal-shingled guardhouses. We were at the New London port—which even for this time of night was strangely empty. The part of my brain still capable of processing irony told me that everyone was probably inside watching news reports of the “kidnapping” we were still performing, right beneath their noses.

One of the two ironclads we’d commandeered for this mission, the NVS *Christine*, was waiting for us at the very end of the port, as far as possible from the lights of the city. We stomped up the gangplank, which was retracted immediately after us. I heard shouted orders and the sound of clanking machinery as the crew prepared to pull out. We wouldn’t be on the water long—just a quick trip down to Colombia. We’d be on a truck to base in another hour, tops.

I carried the girl into the body of the ship, down to B Level, where the medical teams were already assembled. Coalhouse had injected her with a sedative in the van, as instructed. I wasn't afraid that she'd wake up now so I gripped her a little more securely than I'd been willing to before.

Everything was rushing, the sound of feet on metal grating, computers booting up. The head of the meds in Dr. Dearly's absence, Dr. Horatio Salvez, stood in the midst of it all, pointing here and there and occasionally pausing a moment to absorb a screen full of information proffered by a lackey. White-coated technicians, all of them living, scrambled to follow his directions. A few were still busy erecting the little screened rooms they'd use to start fixing us up.

"There they are!" I heard one of the techs shout. She sounded relieved.

"Oh, goody," Chas whispered. "I hate going to the doctor. I'd rather be back underground in the water playing Ophelia."

"What about mold," Tom reminded her. "Fuzziness on a girl is never attractive."

"Oh, now that's just *gross*."

Squabbling as they went, Chas and the others were pulled off for their postmission checkups. We'd been hiding in the waterlogged second level of the Elysian Fields for two days, which was a rather long time for people like us to go without medical care. Our handlers had probably been freaking out.

As for myself, I headed toward Salvez. The moment he saw what I was carrying, he shooed a petitioner away and came over. "Oh, poor Miss Dearly," he sighed. He reached out and lightly touched her cheek.

I was surprised by the growl that wanted to well up in my throat when he did this, and fought it down. I told myself it was stress, not my illness's way of saying, *Get your own take-out*.

"Here," I said, miming the motion of handing her over.

Salvez stepped back and pointed toward a gurney. “Put her there, for now.”

I did. The warmth of her body lingered in my hands.

“Go with Dr. Evola, he’ll see to you.” He bent over the girl and pushed up her eyelids to check something. “We should make landfall soon. I believe we are, as the old saying goes, hauling ass.”

Charles Evola must have heard Salvez say his name, because he was waiting. He waved and gestured for me to join him behind a nearby screen, pointing out a tangle of thick power cords on the floor before I could trip over them.

“Tough few days?” he asked me.

“Yeah,” I said. *Understatement.*

I unbuttoned my jacket, unhooked my holsters, unsnapped my bulletproof vest, and pulled my black T-shirt off. I knew the drill. I took a seat and remained still as a stone as the tech hooked several sensors up to my scarred, stitched, stapled, superglued skin.

“Too bad it’s not over yet.” Charles was a young, tan man with golden hair and a brass-rimmed monocle snuggled beneath his left brow. He peered at the screens arrayed around us as they flashed a series of gray and emerald green symbols. He then punched a sequence of characters into a chunky metal keyboard, and a chugging sound commenced. Thirty seconds later a holographic image of my internals sprung up from a screen on a nearby crash cart.

“No new wounds. Nice going there. A little muscle tearing, but we’ll knit that up at your next tightening . . . not about to cut you open *here.*” He studied the image for a few seconds more and murmured, “You know, of all our boys, I swear you have the best joints. You have the joints of a thirty-year-old. A *living* thirty-year-old.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Never let it be said that I don’t give compliments.” Charles shut the image off and opened the top drawer of the crash cart. Several prepared syringes, of the large and scary-looking variety, were arranged there. “Okay, then, time for drinkies!”

I lifted my arm without having to be ordered. I have a valve permanently installed in my forearm for the purpose of getting my meds, and another one on my inner thigh for drainage. Charles delivered the stuff with an equal lack of fanfare, and with the dexterity of someone who’s performed the same operation thousands of times before.

My gaze drifted toward the equipment table as he worked. Everything was crafted of shiny stainless steel, and I couldn’t help but catch my own reflection several times over. I regarded it more morosely than usual. My skin is almost marble white, incredibly pale—not just sunless, but bloodless—and sits tight against the muscles of my face. My eyes *were* blue, but are clouded over now. I still have my hair, which is brown and unremarkable, but hey, some guys lose it when they die. I suppose I should count my blessings.

“Got the girl, then, huh?” Charles asked.

“What?”

He grinned. “Dearly the younger.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“Little advice? Let her hear you before you let her see you. Might help.”

“It’s a little too late for that.”

“She saw you?”

“She was on the roof, shooting at the Grays.”

Charles whistled. “Nice. Girl has spunk.” He pushed the plunger on the last syringe, and I watched its pale blue contents swell the veins in my arm. When he withdrew the syringe, the tiny motor in my valve kicked on, pumping the stuff further into my body.

I pushed myself to my feet and flexed my wrist. “Yeah.”

Dr. Salvez’s head poked through the curtain. “Wolfe’s already on the horn upstairs. I can tell him that you’re still being tuned up . . . ?”

Time to face the music. “No. I’m done.” Occasionally, being a surprisingly *healthy* dead guy can come back to bite you.

“And so it begins,” Charles said with sympathy as he handed me my shirt.

I put it back on and stretched my arms. Indeed.

It took me all of five minutes to walk to my own funeral. The briefing room was on A Level, a bare-bones area with a wall-sized screen on the starboard side. Company Commander James Wolfe’s ruddy, bearded face was currently blown up on it. For the last few days he’d been wearing the sort of expression a martial-arts master does while plowing his fist through a few layers of brick.

I was the only one in the room. I paused just inside the doorway in salute. “Captain.”

“Griswold, you will explain to me what just happened,” Wolfe demanded without preamble. His heavy ginger brow and hooked nose appeared more menacing than usual—wherever he was broadcasting from, it was dimly lit. His voice boomed at me from the surrounding speakers, although, to be honest, he produced the same effect in person.

As he hadn’t told me to be at ease, I lowered my arm and maintained my stiff posture. “Sir, with all due respect, the situation was not as simple as we were led to believe.”

On the screen, Captain Wolfe pinched the bridge of his nose. “Did I ask for *excuses*? No, I did not.”

I made myself meet his eyes and began. “We met up with the municipal vans south of town two days ago, as arranged. No complications there. We arrived in the Elysian Fields around mid-

night that night, and were smuggled into the second level. Seeing as the living had left the area for the night, I ordered a few men to canvas it and make sure we were secure. And that's when we found that we *weren't*. The enemy was already there. They'd set up shop in one of the prefab mansions. At least a hundred of them. Let me remind you that I had fifty men."

Wolfe's hand clenched. "What did you do?"

"I ordered the scouts to return. The last thing I wanted was a *war* down there. We didn't even know if all the Grays were in that house, and we couldn't confirm whether or not they had weapons. Raiding or torching the place might have driven their scouts—maybe even another *company* of them somewhere—into immediate action. They might've gone after the girl. Or the living on the first level."

"You *idiot*," Wolfe growled.

"Your opinion is respectfully noted." I continued. "I did send one scout up to the first level to find Miss Dearly's house and keep an eye on it. He saw no sign that she was there. And so, we waited. The next day the second level flooded . . . I can't tell you whether the Grays did it or whether it was just an accident. The living showed up to rescue their machinery, and we retreated as far as possible from the gatehouse. We couldn't exactly launch an attack with hundreds of city workers down there—it was tough enough staying ahead of them so we weren't spotted. That night our guards did take out a few Grays in hand-to-hand . . . and so we learned that they were aware of our presence, too."

"Why didn't you strike *back*?" Wolfe asked, enunciating each word loudly and slowly, like an obnoxious tourist.

"*Because*," I repeated, "the last thing we needed was a zombie battle playing out right where hundreds of living people could watch it. There're already outbreaks leaking onto the news! Thankfully someone in the military is spinning them as normal

Punk attacks.” I looked at the scuffed black flooring. “I went up myself that day to try and intercept her. Snuck out.”

“And how did that go?” Wolfe asked, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“She didn’t buy it.”

“No, I wouldn’t think so.”

I dug my fingernails into my thigh, slowly, to keep myself from speaking faster than my brain could work. “She spent the next day up top. We planned to go in and get her tonight. We were on our way there when the scout I’d left at her house radioed to tell us that the Grays had decided on the same thing. My team got the girl out of there; the others stayed behind for cleanup. So, in the end, you got your fight, Captain.”

“Griswold, shut up.”

I did so, and watched Wolfe sliding his hand up and down his face in an attempt to calm himself. Yeah, I’d screwed up in letting the fight get to the first level of the complex—but I’d been attempting to avoid one completely. Wolfe seemed to think we should have gone in with guns blazing, which would have been a mind-bogglingly stupid thing to do.

A shaft of light slipped into the room, fading a corner of Wolfe’s image. I glanced behind me. My teammates entered, each making his or her salute before wordlessly falling back. Chas sent me a small, encouraging smile.

“The girl is on the ship?” Wolfe asked, hand still over his eyes. He didn’t acknowledge the arrival of the others.

“Of course, sir,” I said. “We’re en route to Z Beta Base. ETA about two hours.”

Wolfe nodded and let his hand fall. “From now on you will follow my orders exactly. If I do not specifically *tell you* to do something, it will not occur to your rotting mind to do *anything*. Any mission I send you on will include detailed instructions. You

will follow these, and if there is time left over you will retreat to a nearby wall and do your best broom impression, waiting for further orders from a *living* person, like the *tool* you are. Is that clear? This goes for *all of you!*”

I didn't look back at my friends. I was afraid I'd get too angry. “Yes, sir.”

“Excellent. Now, take the girl to Z Beta, and barricade her in her father's quarters. *Only* the living are to speak to her, and they are to tell her *nothing* of importance until I arrive there. Keep her fed, safe, and as ignorant as she is now. Do you understand?”

“Understood, sir.”

“Good. You can expect me back in thirty-six hours. I'm going to be wasting *my* time combing the back of beyond, looking for her father. I will be in touch with Dr. Elpinoy, Griswold.”

I saluted again, and the screen went dark. Lamps automatically lit around the rim of the riveted metal ceiling, filling the room with a gentle glow. I still didn't turn around, although I let my spine soften. I hated having to submit to Wolfe like that, especially with other people watching.

“You know he's full of crap, right?” Chas spoke up.

“Grade A, gourmet crap,” Coalhouse agreed.

I shook my head. “I know. But we have to do what he says. At least until we find the doctor.”

“No.”

I turned around to look at Chas. She fixed me with her black eyes. Chas—no last name, or so she claims, seeing as “Chastity” is bad enough—is tall for a girl, of Colombian heritage, with shaggy bleached blond hair and skin that was once the color of caramel, but now has a faint cast of blue to it. The front part of her jaw was beat up pretty bad in battle about a year ago, and the techs opted to cut out the damaged teeth and bone and replace them with a metal plate. Since then she's scratched various de-

signs into it, including a winding, thorny rose. “We can’t do that to his daughter, Bram. This isn’t her fault. She deserves to know what’s happening.”

“As much as I agree with you, Chas,” I said, “at this point it’d be insubordination.”

Chas ran a finger teasingly along the neckline of her T-shirt. “Ooh, long word. Say it again. I don’t know what it means, but it sounds so *dirty*.”

Tom rolled his neck. Tom’s short—only about five-four—but strong. He carried heavy personal cannon in the Punk army, and still has the arms to prove it. He’s missing his nose, and the area over it’s been grafted with skin from his thigh, so as not to leave a gaping, offensive hole. It makes him look kind of like a shark, especially with his dark eyes and bald head. “Yeah. We gotta tell her. Otherwise, she’s gonna lose her mind, and then we’ll get in trouble for *that*.”

“And with Wolfe gone, you’re the highest ranked on base,” Coalhouse said. He’s of African descent, his thick body giving him a hardy appearance that makes his rotten face all the more disturbing to look at. The right side, the side missing the eye, is bonier than the other, and his curly brown hair is patchy in places. “You’re the boss. I mean, screw what he said about following orders. Situations *change*. You know that, and you change with ’em. We’ve got your back.”

“For perhaps the first time in recorded history, Coalhouse and I agree on something,” Tom said. “But if the sky starts crying fire, just for the record? I’m leaving you losers to get wasted.”

I couldn’t help but smile a little. Tonight their faith meant a lot. “So, what do we do with her?” I asked. “I’m open to ideas. I’m not saying I’m going to *use* them, but I’m open to them.”

“Your room,” Tom said, pointing at me.

On the list of ideas I’d expected to hear, that ranked pretty low. “What? Why *mine*?”

“Because of your contingency plan.”

I immediately understood what Tom was getting at—and really, when I thought about it, it was a far better idea than Wolfe’s. Far safer for the girl. *Oh, sweet, sweet justification.* “Okay. My room, then. We’ll let her wake up, get her bearings. Let her feel a little bit in control.”

“Exactly,” Chas said as she reached into the pockets of her cargo pants to come up with a cigarette and a match. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

I gestured to myself. “And, in the meantime, what am I supposed to do—go camping?”

“You won’t be out on the streets too long,” Tom said with a slow grin. “Man, I just keep seeing her up there, in that fancy dress, shooting at the bloody things. That . . . was beautiful. Truly, so beautiful that the existence of a loving, *awesome* god can be its only explanation. I have found religion, my friends.”

“She’s still a royal,” I pointed out, in a halfhearted attempt to convince myself. “You know how their girls are. No offense, Chas.”

“Why would I take offense at that? I *know* I’m not one of them,” she snorted as she struck the match on her chin plate.

“Mark my words,” Tom said, unswayed. “In an hour she wakes up, slams back a fifth of somethin’, and asks for a uniform.”

“Huh. Maybe I should date *her*,” Chas said with mocking thoughtfulness.

I sighed, and sought solace in my mind. Okay. I’d completely disobey Captain Wolfe and court my own court-martial. Why not? I’d already tasted humiliation and failure. Not like the week could get much worse. Besides, for thirty-five hours and forty-five minutes, he couldn’t touch me.

That aside, I had two of those hours to myself. Two hours in which I could forget the trouble to come and ignore the uneasy feeling that I was making the wrong decision. Two hours in which I wouldn’t have to touch her, wouldn’t have to look at her.

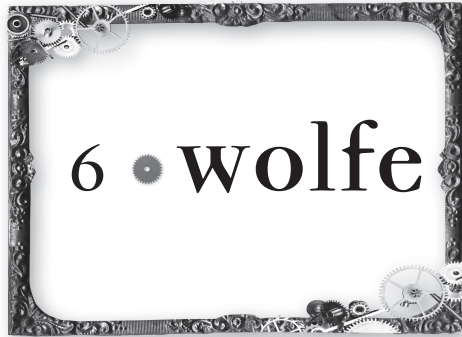
Ten minutes later I was at Miss Dearly's side, staring down at her. They'd cleaned her up, and were keeping her behind a partition in the area where the living doctors and techs were working. Without having to ask, I knew that they had chosen this area for a reason.

No dead people on assignment.

Within my body another battle raged. I ignored it—the sharpness of my senses, the prickling in my skin. I kept my hands to myself.

Silhouettes on the cloth partitions around me told me that I wasn't as alone with her as I felt. I remained silent by her side, listening to her measured breathing and the sounds of the meds at work within the hull of the ship.

I could think of a lot of things I'd have liked to say to her, though. I made plenty of dead man's promises to her in my mind, as the boys shoveled coal beneath us and the boat made like a ghost for friendlier shores.



I slowly pressed the button on the portable com unit that would terminate the call with Griswold, and did my level best to keep from leaping up, ripping the handlebars off my motorcycle and using them as a sledgehammer on the nearest crushable object.

I would derive a deep, personal satisfaction from beheading that boy someday.

I tucked the com unit away in my coat, shifting slightly in my seat. The bike was a skeletal construction of pipes and exposed gears, designed to be broken down for storage. It wasn't meant for someone of my size, and I'd be lucky to get back to my men before it collapsed beneath me. The last thing I felt like doing was taking a stroll in the dark with zombies on every side of me. I still had so much to do, and so little time to do it in.

I continued to sit there, though, surrounded by night-shrouded trees, the buzzing of insects and the distant croaking of frogs keeping me company. Clouds of mosquitoes drifted in and out of the bright yellow light of the electric lantern I'd strapped to the front of the bike back at camp. I could feel them in my beard, at the edges of my uniform—a hundred wriggling, hungry things. They wouldn't go after the dead. I was the only living human for miles.

This thought didn't exactly put me at ease. For a second I could breathe easily.

Round one of the game was over.

A rapid volley of explosions shook me out of my impromptu moment of peace.

I gunned the engine and took off toward the east.

After half a mile or so the trees began to thin out. I swerved to a stop. This time our battlefield had been the site of an ancient town, likely abandoned during the Settlement Wars. No buildings remained; only the odd protrusion, here and there, of an old wall from the mossy ground, or the overgrown hump of a fallen house. Vines snaked over everything.

A few of the bombs that had just gone off sparked small, smoldering fires in the undergrowth. By their light I could vaguely make out a phalanx of my troops, clad in black, red beacons flashing. They were systematically taking out the last of the enemy zombies we'd been sent to dispatch—the crawlers that always seem to spontaneously show up at the scene of a fight, like maggots on meat. Crawlers are the worst. Blind, wormlike zombies, rotten and often limbless creatures that writhe their way impatiently across the ground, waiting to bump into something edible.

As I swung myself off the motorcycle, I popped open the holster at my waist and drew out my pistol. I put a few of the crawlers out of their misery with head shots as I picked my way across the field toward my men.

One of the grunts, Private Franco, saw me first. He put his weapon away before approaching me. He was a dead man of unremarkable build, his face hidden by the regulation black mask. "Sir, permission to speak, sir!"

"Talk." I shot another crawler, black blood and semiliquefied brain matter spraying the grass. "What's going on?"

"I think this is definitely the group of enemy zombies we were sent to get, sir. Some of the healthier ones 'ave taken for the trees,

and after we clean up 'ere, we'll go after 'em." He ran a hand under his nose. I found myself idly wondering if zombies ever itched. "They'll do a run with the flamethrowers in a few."

"Any idea where this group came from?"

"Naw, but there's a *big* ol' walker in the clearing over yonder. Betcha five-to-one these're Punks, these ones. Probably ambushed by a wild pack."

Franco flicked open a pocket on his utility vest and drew out a small night vision telescope. I accepted it, removing the lens cap as he told me where to look. When I did, I saw the top of the walking tank he'd mentioned, two of its legs and part of its body rising above the tree line a few yards off. He was right—it was enormous. No wonder the zombies had attacked. That thing would have attracted attention for miles.

I handed him back the telescope. "In the morning, have some men work on that thing and get it back to base. I'm heading back to camp. Do your job, and make sure I don't have to shout at you later. My list of people to shout at is long enough as it is."

"Sir!"

I returned to my bike and took off again, this time headed slightly northwest. My men stepped back as I drove past, pointing their weapons at the sky and saluting. I didn't pay them much attention.

I did run over one of the dead zombies on the ground, though, for good measure.

Our camp wasn't meant to be anything more than a pit stop. Aside from the three equipment trucks and the communications van, there was my tent and a long, communal tent for the dead. Those zombies not currently assigned to the front lines were feigning sleep, waiting to relieve their fellow soldiers at sunrise. A few were hanging about outside, and stood to salute me as I

walked past. If they'd been human soldiers, I might've stopped to talk with them, but dead men have no morale to encourage, and dead men can't be loyal, and therefore there'd be no point to it.

"You're out after hours," I growled, without looking at them. "Get inside."

"Sir," one said as he tapped out his pipe.

Waste of perfectly good tobacco, that. Waste of time, waste of effort, waste of resources, waste of words. The dead are such a waste.

I marched over to the communications van, wrenching aside the mosquito netting they'd draped over the opening for me. There were three zombies seated within, monitoring plastic-edged screens full of glowing symbols and words. They stood, and I waved them down before they could salute.

"Report," I said, looking at Ben, the zombie I'd left in charge. He was a modestly built man with ashen black skin.

"Good news, sir," he said, smiling widely. He was missing his upper lip, the teeth beneath exposed, which only made his smile more Cheshirelike and gruesome. "Dr. Dearly's plane did crash. We were able to get a hit on his coordinates."

I released a short breath. *Finally.* I pulled my digidiary out of my belt and handed it to him. "Good. Give 'em to me."

Ben nodded and grabbed a stylus. "Orders, sir?"

"What do you think? Let's pretend you can *think* for a minute."

He shut my diary and returned it. "Well, sir, I assume we're to continue monitoring the airwaves for more rogue transmissions from the leader of the Grays."

I looked at the coordinates. I resisted the urge to punch the air, and instead focused on increasing the level of annoyance in my voice. "No. No, no, no. This is why *I* do the thinking. This is why *I* had to come and take over *your* company, before someone else got seriously hurt." I looked down at the dead man, who regarded me with that heavy, unintelligent look so many of them

have. “Our objective right now is to locate the doctor. After you guys clean up here, you’re going after him. I’m traveling with you for another day. Then I’ll return to base on my own.”

“Sir.” Ben saluted.

I stalked out of the van, diary in my hand. It felt like a passport to freedom. The moron couldn’t have landed in a better spot.

I turned on the little lantern suspended from my belt and almost ran to my tent. Once there, I felt my way through the semi-darkness to the trunk that sat at the foot of my cot. Inside was a warped, battered suitcase filled with an ancient assortment of radio equipment.

My heart was hammering. I slapped at a mosquito that had managed to get inside my collar and unbuttoned my waistcoat, reaching into the long pocket sewn within. I drew out a piece of paper. Written upon it was a series of numbers. Anyone would have mistaken it for a list of betting odds, or perhaps merely dismissed it as ancient, out of hand, it being nondigital.

All in all, I’d come out ahead that night.



I kept telling God that if He got me out of this I would never take His name in vain again, *ever*, and I would go to church every Sunday like the good, good girl I was.

And then I would find myself thinking *Oh, God*, again, as I made my way over to the toilet to be sick. This time it was because my brain had just registered the fact that my hands were carefully bandaged.

It had really happened.

The dead people had patched me up after it happened.

Oh, God.

They were dead. They were freaking *dead*. They were rotting and horrible and skulls and bare teeth and . . . dead. I kept closing my eyes and seeing their bones, their chalky flesh.

Moving.

I hauled myself back onto the narrow bed and folded my arms around my knees. I had woken up a few hours ago in a small windowless room. There was a thin blue carpet on the floor, a desk with books neatly stacked on it, the bed, a tiny bathroom, and not much else. My nightgown was stained and torn, but still on me. They hadn't disrobed me, at least.

There was a teddy bear with wooden button eyes at my side, so worn that his stuffing was on the verge of falling out.

Were dead people afraid of the dark, too?

I could hear them out in the hallway.

“Oh my gosh, guys. If she wasn’t a pretty girl, you would *not* all be hanging around out here.”

“Shut up, Chas.”

They’d been there for the past hour or so. Three of them—two males and a female. The female’s voice was husky, and yet strangely perky. The two male voices were guttural baritones, though one sounded decidedly crankier than the other.

“Seriously, let me talk to her when she wakes up. Girl-to-girl.”

“No offense, Chas, but you’d scare the crap out of her.”

“Want to say that to my face, Coalhouse?”

“What’s left of it.”

“This was not part of the agreement!” said a mature male voice I hadn’t heard before. “Outside! I mean it, or the deal is over!”

“Relax, Elpinoy. She’s still out cold.”

“Or body temperature, as the case may be.”

“*Silence! Go! Out!*”

There were sighs and protests, but slowly the other voices faded away. “Miss Dearly?” The older voice was at the door.

I didn’t respond.

“Miss Dearly, if you are awake, I just wanted to let you know that you are safe here. We’d . . . prefer it if you didn’t leave the room, but we will have breakfast for you in the morning.” There was a pause, and then the voice informed someone else, “Er, better wrap up and go see if you can find some *actual* food for her. Really nice things, I mean. Try Alpha Base first, only go to town if you have to. Don’t use credit, there should be money in the tin in my office.”

“Sir.”

“And clothes, we’ll bring you some clothes. Dr. Chase must have something. Ah, what else? I suppose that’s it. At any rate, please do not be afraid.”

Yeah, right.

“I’m alive, by the way. My name is Dr. Richard Elpinoy.”

My eyes opened. *Alive?*

I was across the room in half a second. The man gave a startled cry when I yanked the door open. He was a portly, dark-skinned fellow with white hair, his frame tightly wrapped in brown tweed.

“Miss Dearly!”

“Alive?” I rasped out. “The others really are *dead*, then?”

He paused, and then timidly allowed, “Well, the preferred term is ‘undead.’”

I slammed the door shut with a whimper and closed my eyes.

“But they mean you no harm!” he was quick to continue. “I swear this to you. The ones who’d come for you, yes, but—”

“They’re the bad guys.” It was the voice of the young man with the blind eyes.

My stomach went cold as I realized—although that hadn’t been my first impression upon seeing him—that he was probably dead, too.

And he’d *touched* me.

“Go away!” I found myself yelling. “Dr. Elpinoy, make him go away!”

“Um, you’re in my room . . .”

“Bram, *please*. Oh, I knew this was a foolish idea . . .”

“Bram, if that’s your name, *please go away!*” I didn’t want to deal with anything that was not strictly alive and breathing, because I was pretty sure that I was departing my ever-loving mind.

“Look,” Bram said, exasperated. “We put you in my room because of the door. Have you even looked at it?”

I opened my eyes. The door was studded with a variety of locks.

“Ten,” he said, as if he could see what I was seeing. “Fasten them all up, if you’re scared. None of them extend out here, so it’s not like we have the keys or anything.”

I quickly did so, thrusting bars and setting chains. I stepped away from the door, instinctively expecting him to try and test it. He didn’t.

We were all quiet for a few moments before I broke the silence by saying, in my best sweet upper-crust-girl’s-school voice, “I am sure that all of you are really just suffering from some horrible disease, and that I should feel nothing but pity for you. If you let me go, I will organize a charity function that you will not believe. It will be, as our ancestors used to say, ‘epic.’ ”

There was some furious whispering before Bram responded with, “Ah, thank you, miss, but we’re already dead.”

I bit my lip. I was starting to crumble.

“And we can’t just let you go. If we do, the others will come after you again. You don’t understand . . .”

At that I tuned him out, returned to the bed, and allowed myself to fall to pieces.

“Little one, I was so gloomy,
Felt that life sure would undo me,
Till, one day, you happened to me,
My little one.

Little one, no controversy,
You’re my downfall, you’re my Circe.
I’m a good guy, show me mercy,
My little one.”

The second time I awoke it was to the voice of Bing Crosby, an old singer I remembered from a holo in history class.

I wondered if there was a crazy person’s license you had to

apply for, some seminar you had to attend, or if you could just walk out of the house one day and get started.

I sat up and rubbed at my sore eyes. The room was the same. The only thing that was different was the music—and a piece of paper lying on the floor near the door.

Slipping from the bed, I padded over and picked up the note. Before unfolding it, I paused to listen. I could hear the scratchy sound of a predigital recording being played, but there was also someone singing along, voice quiet. It was Bram. He must have been appointed guard duty or something.

The note was from him.

Miss Dearly: I'll be outside, if you don't want to open the door. But when you're ready, I'd like to play a game with you. Ask me any question you like, and I'll answer truthfully. If the answer makes you feel a little safer, reward me by undoing one of the locks. I play to get my room back, you play for the confidence to be able to leave it.

Oh, by the way: Could you wind my alarm clock?

—Captain Abraham Griswold

The music switched over to “Pennies from Heaven.” Bram sang on without missing a beat. He was kind of good.

I really didn't want to think about the fact that the dead guy had a nice voice.

“You like this music?” I asked, hoping he would turn it off.

There was a pause before he asked, “Is that your first question?”

“Sure.” I was a little slaphappy at this point. I was cried out, I was tired, my hands hurt, and I was beginning to believe that this was all one big wicked hallucination.

“Yes. The world'll never have anyone like Bing Crosby again,

or Fred Astaire, or Johnny Mathis. If anyone should have had life after death, it was them. But mostly I sing along to keep my vocal cords stretched out. It's the quiet sorts who end up grunting and groaning."

He shut off the music, and the silence loomed large. I answered it by undoing one of the chain locks. He'd gotten that one for free; now, I supposed, I had leave to ask some meatier questions. I cut to the chase. "If you're dead, how is it that we are having this conversation right now?"

I could hear his clothes rustling as he physically settled in for that answer. I slowly sat down on the floor myself.

"It's caused by an illness. Your father called it the Lazarus syndrome, which is what most of us prefer. Little more dignified than some names I've heard. Some call it the Z."

My brow knit in confusion. "You mean . . . my father discovered it?"

"Named it, at least." Bram sighed, and said, "Give me a moment, this is complicated."

I let him collect his thoughts, my stomach churning again at the idea that my father could have had anything to do with all of this.

He began.

"I guess the first case happened about eight years ago now." Bram's voice was slow and rough, the way it had been outside my house, under the gas lamps of the Fields. "It started out normally enough. Punks got too close to the border, royals—er, *Victorians*—sent them packing. It was close fighting, hand-to-hand. I guess during debriefing the soldiers said that some of the Punks'd been particularly vicious, biting and clawing, but it's not like violence is considered out of the ordinary during a battle.

"One soldier'd been chewed up real good, though. He was rushed to the field hospital. By all accounts he was cheerful through it all, a good trooper . . . but some sort of blazingly fast

infection appeared to set in. Your dad was traveling with his unit at the time, so they called him in. He did all he could, but the soldier died in terrible pain just a few hours later.

“Five minutes after the official time of death, as your father was turning off the vitals monitor and preparing to draw the sheet over him, the soldier sat up. He was uncoordinated, convulsing, and obviously suffering from some sort of brain damage. How severe, permanent or not, Dr. Dearly couldn’t say. But hey, the guy was alive!

“As your father and all the staff gathered around to witness this miracle, relieved, amazed . . . he decided to make a meal out of your father’s arm.”

I covered my mouth with my hand, willing myself not to be sick. All I could think of was the monster hooked on the trellis below me, savoring my blood.

“He bit three different staff members as they tried to subdue him. He seemed to lose his mind, just go nuts—like a berserker. Do you know what a berserker is? A soldier who just goes completely blind with rage and power and adrenaline and lashes out at anything you put in front of him, heedless of his own safety? That’s what it was like. They hit him, even got a tranq in him at one point, but he wouldn’t go down. Eventually they got smart and shot him. Of course, it wasn’t ’till they shot him in the head that *that* worked, either. Took out both his knees and one of his arms, and he was still crawling toward them, until they got the head.

“Within eight hours the three staff members who’d been bitten were dead—and then alive. Dr. Dearly, thank goodness, is an observant man, and he shot them all the moment they started twitching again. Which varied. One sat right back up, one took a couple minutes.”

“What about his bite?” I asked, wrapping my arms around my shoulders. I was suddenly cold. I pressed my lips together so hard it hurt.

Bram ignored my question. “The Victorians,” he continued, “realized that this wasn’t something that should be ignored. The Department of Military Health was assigned the task of finding out what was causing it, and your father demanded to be included on the team. Ten months later he managed to identify and isolate the agent that he believed was the cause. The Prime Minister came down to get a personal glimpse of this achievement . . .”

“And that’s when the Punks attacked again, and Dad saved him?” My brain made the connection without telling me, the words flying out of my mouth.

“Right.”

I tried to force my rapid thoughts to slow down. I had a million questions, but I knew that if I got a million answers all at once, I’d go crazy. “Okay. I get the Lazarus reference, but why ‘the Z’?”

“Well, because what we’re enduring seems awfully similar to ancient descriptions of creatures known as zombies.” My silence was the equivalent of a blank look. Bram asked, “You’ve heard of zombies, right?”

“No, but my father was big into mythology and stories.” I thought longingly of the figures carved into the ceilings of our house, the carefully chosen paintings.

“The living dead? Walking dead?”

I was quiet again for a moment before trying, “Okay?”

Bram sighed. “Moving on. Your dad convinced the PM, after being offered all those cushy positions, to make him head of the DoMH—we call it the Doom around here—and let him research it. Said if he was Surgeon General, or something like that, he’d be under too much political scrutiny. The PM agreed that the public did *not* need to know about it. With any luck they’d find a cure before the whole thing blew open.

“Meanwhile, even the *Punks* were starting to get freaked out. Whatever it was, it wasn’t something they knew anything about.

The public will never be told about this, either, but there are areas along the border where the royals and Punks are now banded together in an effort to control the monsters. Little truces, all over the place.”

I stared at the door without seeing it. *What?* “That’s not true. I saw on the news that the Punks are . . .” I trailed off as I realized *what* they were. They weren’t angry.

They were scared.

Or sick.

Oh, God.

“Well, most Punks think that the roy—*Victorians*, sorry—engineered the Lazarus to kill them off, and that’s why they’re suddenly fighting back so violently, yeah. But not all of them. Some are united in fighting the evil dead. Have been for about . . . five years now. It’s not a wide-ranging truce, and it’s pretty uneasy at times, but . . . there’s a bigger threat out there. One that has to be kept under wraps. Can you imagine how the people on both sides’d freak out if they knew? The panic?”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“Anyway, the sickness kick-starts the brain, reanimates the body after death. I could go into more detail, but you know, we have all these great visual aids out here, which would really help me out . . .”

“Nice try.”

I heard him chuckle. I willed myself not to like the sound.

And I undid one of the locks.

I lowered my hand slowly to my lap and leaned my head back against the wall. “How can I be convinced that you’re a ‘good guy,’ then? You’re talking about corpses that apparently like to . . . eat people?” I hoped he wouldn’t confirm that.

“Yeah, we seem to be naturally cannibalistic,” he said, so casually that it chilled me to the bone. “But that’s what I meant when I told you that your father saved my life. In his research, he rec-

ognized that some of us were coming back more . . . intact than others. Memories, personality. Some of the new undead his men encountered seemed to be wandering, lost, overwhelmed—not necessarily looking for their next meal or anything. And so his mission became . . . well, in the absence of a cure, helping us to deal with our illness.”

I felt as if someone had thonked a brick between my eyes. Suddenly it made perfect sense. My father had truly seen monsters, an old tale sprung to life—moving, thirsting before his eyes. It would have been the same if he’d discovered a dragon. He would have tried to tame it.

“It’s like . . . look, as a living human being,” Bram went on, “you have things you need. You need food, water. If you don’t have these things, no matter how civilized you might think you are, you’ll regress. You’ll go insane without them. You’ll kill others, trick others for them. It’s simple animal instinct. It’s hard to remember how to be nice when you are in agonizing pain from hunger.

“Well, I have things I need, too. I instinctively crave fluids, because I’m drying out. I crave protein because I’m damaging my body’s tissues every time I move, even though I can’t use that protein to rebuild them anymore. And the prions living in my brain crave new hosts and tell my synapses to make me a little nippy. In short, I’m newly rewired with a burning desire for a nice, warm body. You know, like every other teenage boy.”

I rocketed away from the door to the other side of the room. “Shut up! *Shut up!*”

He must have heard my voice retreating, because he called out, “Miss Dearly, you’re still locked in! Geez, it’s okay! Just listen, all right?”

A horrible thought occurred to me. “Did the monsters get anyone else? In the city? My friend Pam is . . . oh, she is going to be *sick* with worry . . .”

“No, no. As far as I know, we got all of them. Trust me, that was my fear, too. Will you calm down, please?” He sounded both annoyed and . . . desperate?

Screw his desperation. He didn’t know the *meaning* of the word.

“Like I’m going to let some sick, rotting cannibal tell me to calm down!” I shrieked.

“I’m *not* a cannibal!” He was angry now. “I’ve *never* tasted human flesh, okay? Your father got to me before I could!”

I took a breath.

When he spoke next, I could tell that he was standing directly outside the door. “The methods that Dr. Dearly developed keep us going . . . our minds, as well as our bodies. It’s hard to explain without being able to show you anything, but look—I eat *tofu*, okay? Nummy, nummy tofu. Hurrah, protein that I can’t use. But it takes the edge off. I get topped off every day, too . . . there’s a small army of doctors in this facility who do nothing except tune us up, like carriages in a garage. So physically, we’re as fine as dead people can be, and mentally, we have our bearings. We don’t have to fend for ourselves. We’re not lost and confused. We know exactly what we are.”

Bram stopped talking then. He seemed to know that I would want to digest this—*ha, ha*. And so I crept nearer to the door again, allowing the sensation of my bare feet on the hard floor to ground me as I let my mind turn over this information.

He was a monster. He appeared to have the ability to rationalize, to think, to experience emotions. Perfectly normal ones, like aggravation and amusement. He was quick-witted. And although he sounded impatient, I realized that he had to have some capacity for patience in order to sit outside the room so long and talk to his ignorant captive.

But he was a monster.

And a teenage boy?

“How old are you?” I found myself asking.

“I died when I was sixteen. That was two years ago, though.”

I was surprised. “You look good, for being dead for two years.”

He laughed then, fully. “I thank your father for that. But yeah, the others you saw tonight, they don’t have the benefit of our technology. Your taxes at work.”

I hesitated in consideration for a moment, before undoing one of the locks.

“Thanks,” he said, at the sound of it.

“But no more questions.” My voice was growing hoarse again.

“Three was better than I expected to get in one session, anyhow. Oh, did you wind the clock?”

I looked to the bedside table, where there was a brass alarm clock. “It says three-fifteen. In the morning?”

“Bah, no, it’s almost five A.M. now. If you could keep it going, I’d appreciate it. If it’s left unwound for too long it doesn’t seem to like to keep the tension afterward, and I have to take it apart and mess with it.”

I walked to the table and picked it up, doing as he asked. And then it struck me that I was setting a so-called zombie’s alarm clock for him, and I swear I heard something snap in my ears. I started laughing uproariously.

I heard the monster’s bemused voice outside, asking me if I was all right, but that just made it funnier.