

So let it be written...

Journal of Maya Weiss

Wednesday, October 16, 2013

My life just turned into a line from Bohemian Rhapsody. "Momma, just killed a man..." And that wasn't the worst part of my day. You'd think that just waking up after the world turned into a Romero movie would be bad enough, but that was the one thing I WAS almost ready for. I mean, we practiced for it often enough. And I really hate zombie movies. No, the worst part of my day was watching the helicopter my daughter and my boyfriend were on go down over Kansas City. Dave asked me to make good on his promise and get Cassie and Bryce to Wyoming. He promised me he'd get Amy to Wyoming. Maybe he can; it would be the second time he pulled off the impossible lately.

The plane I was on didn't fare much better. One of the engines had been shot up, and the pilot tried to land on I 70. I guess we were going to "land" no matter what, but they tried to make it as gentle as they could. We all got tossed around, but we only ended up with a couple of sprained wrists and some scrapes and bruises. Getting the trucks out was the hardest part, but it's amazing how much a squad of Marines can do. They pushed the trucks off the plane and helped us get them off the palettes. We let Sherman and Leo out. Leo was a little miffed at me, I think. Sherman just decided to slobber all over me.

That was where things started to go wrong. Major Lynch took me to one side after I checked the trucks out and asked me what we planned to do. I told him we had a place to go, but not where. He didn't ask me to tell him, but I could see he really wanted to. Then he asked me the question. Could we stay with the group for a while? Maybe I should have said no, but I couldn't. When we went back to the rest of the group, he told everyone that he and his men were going to head back to Salina to find some vehicles and told everyone to stay in the plane.

An hour or so after they left, the trouble started. His name was Mitchell Hodges. Someone has to remember who he was. He came to me and told me he was taking the trucks. When I told him no, he asked me what was going to keep him from beating the shit out of me and taking them anyway. I was about to answer him when Porsche worked the pump on one of the shotguns and Sherman growled at him.

"That," was all I could bring myself to say. He turned and walked away. I don't know how, but I could tell he wasn't done, and I put my hand on my pistol. I was right. He came at me and I shot him. "Pulled my trigger, now he's dead."

Chapter 1

At Hell's Gate

~ It is easy to go down into Hell; night and day, the gates of dark Death stand wide; but to climb back again, to retrace one's steps to the upper air - there's the rub, the task.~ Virgil

I came to with the sound of gunshots and screaming in my ears. The world was a blur when I opened my eyes, but my hearing was still sharp enough to hear the tell-tale moans of infected and the sound of crazed laughter. Something moved to my right, and I swung at it. The back of my fist connected with whatever it was, and I tried to reach for it with my left hand. A band of fabric across my shoulder stopped me from moving more than a few inches, and I remembered I was strapped into a seat on a helicopter. I looked around, but my vision was still blurry. No movement on my left. Sound of something to my right. Without a thought, I reached out and grabbed at whatever was on my right. My hand fell on brittle, coarse hair; my fingers closed around it and I twisted. Something flopped on the Blackhawk's rear deck, and chilled hands grasped at my forearms. My fuzzy vision showed me a straight line, dark on one side, light on the other. My arm straightened and I tried to line up whatever was in my hand with the border of light and shadow. The shock of impact against the door frame felt good, and the dull thud of the blow was almost musical. But it was missing something, something that my brain told me I just needed to hit a little harder to hear. So I did. The second hit didn't get the job done, so I pulled my arm back a little further and slammed the thing's skull forward again. The crack of bone brought a smile to my face, and I let go of the thing in my hand. There were other things I needed to break and kill.

The pop of gunfire behind me brought my thoughts into focus, and other sounds started to make it through the haze in my head. Gunfire, voices, the groan of metal, and a moan that wasn't a zombie, all of them came clear at once. Across from me, I could see one of the Marines seated against the back of the compartment; she was turned in the seat, right hand on a bloody wound in the right leg of the Marine beside her, her left arm hanging bloody and limp at her side. On my left, Amy was slumped in her seat, and my heart froze in fear. The surviving pilot's voice, the gunfire, the other Marine's pleas to her squad mate, none of them mattered. I freed myself from the harness and dropped to one knee in front of Amy. Gently, I put my fingers under her nose and felt the slight flutter of air as she exhaled. Still breathing then. My vision seemed to be clearing slowly as I put my hand to her wrist and checked her pulse just to make sure. If she was still breathing, it made sense her heart was still beating, but I still had to check.

With Amy's safety seen to, my brain shifted gears. She was okay for the moment, but I had to make sure she stayed that way. I looked out the right side of the Blackhawk's door and saw a couple of the infected shambling across the gray surface we'd landed on. My brain replayed the last thing I remembered, the chopper not quite falling, not quite gliding toward the ground. Smoke all around us, parting at the last second to reveal a building beneath us. Then the chopper had tilted back for a moment before slamming forward hard. We were on top of a building, and there were infected on the roof. While one corner of my brain wondered why there were infected all the way up on the roof, the majority of my attention was on finding a weapon among the bodies on the blood slicked floor. I grabbed an M16 and hit the mag release. The black magazine dropped into my hand to reveal what looked like a full load. It certainly felt heavy enough. I popped it back in the well, pulled the charging handle and set the selector to single fire. I was ready to rock and roll.

"Armstrong, help me with Kale!" the wounded Marine called out as I brought the rifle up and took stock of the situation. Silence answered her. "Come on, Private! On your goddamn feet!"

"Bobcat, Talon three is down," I heard the pilot calling out from the front. "The bird is grounded, casualties unknown. We're under attack by infected." Three pops came from up front. I put my sights on one of the infected and tried to keep the red dot centered in on its face when I pulled the trigger. The gun bucked against my shoulder, but the zombie's head stayed intact. I fired twice more before I put a round

through its left eye. I swung the gun to my right and found the other one. It went down on the second try, and I counted off five rounds. I glanced through the cockpit and saw several more coming toward us.

From the rear compartment I couldn't get a good shot at them, so I hopped to the ground. The world tilted under my feet and I stumbled a couple of steps before I got my balance back. As close as these four were, it was easier to get a shot at their faces. It only took me ten shots to get four rounds into their skulls. A quick look at the far side of the chopper and to the rear showed me no infected, though the incessant moaning was still reaching my ears. I turned my head to follow the sound and nearly dropped the gun.

The building we'd landed on had another section butted up against it and a structure on the roof. It was hard to tell directions in the heavy smoke over the city, but the chopper's nose was pointed diagonally across the roof, and the small structure was almost right in front of its nose on the opposite side. The infected I'd just shot had been near it. Off to my right across the roof was an unfinished looking section, and it was absolutely thick with infected, at least fifty if I had to guess. My slowly clearing vision also caught something else: several bodies between the unfinished section and the chopper. People I knew I hadn't shot. The mysterious dead people could wait, though. I figured they'd stay dead for a little while longer, but unless I did something *fast*, odds were stacking up in favor of me being just as dead for just as long. Short of a bomb, there was no way I was going to kill that many infected with an assault rifle before they got to us. I couldn't get that many rounds downrange in time.

An inhuman scream cut off my frantic search for options, and I looked back toward the unfinished section. Every one of the dead infected was looking my way now as another one, a ghoul in blue-green scrubs opened her mouth and let out another scream from the edge of the roof. The dead infected behind her started shuffling toward us like they had a purpose the second her voice ripped across my eardrums. The rifle was up to my shoulder before I could even think about it, and I put round after round into her torso. Her body jerked with the impact of each bullet, and I walked my rounds up her body until I was putting shots center mass. Finally, she fell to her knees, and I brought the red sight on her nose.

"Die, motherfucker," I snarled as I pulled the trigger. The moment her head jerked back, the zombies stopped moving toward us for a moment, and I felt a brief sense of accomplishment. Then their collective gaze zeroed in on the chopper again, and desperation gave birth to a solution. What I needed was a way to put a lot of bullets into a lot of zombies in a very short time, and I had just the gun for that. I turned and staggered toward the chopper, hoping that at least one thing on the grounded aircraft still worked the way it was supposed to. I slid behind the minigun pointed it at the shuffling wall of doom and pulled both triggers.

Nothing happened. I stifled a curse and tried to remember what the Marine had told me earlier. One trigger, then the other. Which one first? I tried the right trigger and again got a big dose of nothing when I pulled the left. I looked up as I let go of both triggers. The dead were halfway across the roof, and I pulled the left trigger. In front of me the gun's barrels started spinning. My mouth twitched up on the right side as I squeezed the right trigger and sent fifty rounds a second downrange. Even though I couldn't hear them hit over the roar of the minigun firing, I could see the bullets shredding flesh. I walked the first few hundred rounds at knee height, and turned fifty or so walking dead people into fifty plus crawling dead people. Once they were down I let up on the firing trigger and pointed it at one of the few that was still on its feet, a skinny corpse in a hospital gown. The tracers lanced out toward him and I put a stream of bullets through his spine before I turned it on the rest, letting the minigun burp a few more times until nothing stood in front of me. For good measure, I raked it back and forth across the crawlers, hoping to get a few head shots out of sheer volume. Body parts bounced and flew into the air as I raked the stream of bullets over the mass of zombies. Anything that raised its head got it blown off. Finally, all I heard was the sound of the barrels spinning and my own gasps. In front of me, some of the infected were still moving, but not nearly as fast.

The sound of buckles coming open hit my ears a split second before the pilot's door opened and boots hit the rooftop. I let go of the minigun as the copilot came around the side with a pistol in one hand and a first aid kit in the other, gun up and looking for targets. My eyes went to the other side of the chopper, but there wasn't much roof on that side, and no shambling cannibalistic dead people. I grabbed the M16 and took my time popping rounds into skulls until the magazine ran dry. The few that were left

weren't moving all that fast, and one was missing both arms. They could wait. A couple of steps got me to Amy. She was still breathing, and she let out a moan as I squatted in front of her.

"Amy, sweetie, wake up," I said gently. Her eyelids fluttered and finally opened as her head came up. From the way she was blinking and looking around, I could tell she was having trouble focusing.

"Dave?" she asked groggily. Her hand came up and fumbled for my shoulder.

"It's okay, kiddo. We're on the ground. Well, not exactly, but we're safe for now." I tried to be reassuring as I checked her a little more closely.

"Everything's all blurry," she murmured.

"You probably hit your head when we landed. I did the same thing. Just give it a few minutes, it'll get better." From behind me, I could hear the pilot and the lone conscious Marine talking quietly. I looked over my shoulder in time to see the pilot shake his head and pull his hand away from the Marine with the leg wound.

"He must have bled out after we crashed," he said. The other one nodded and crossed herself, then reached for the buckle on her harness. I turned back to Amy and undid her harness as well.

"Come on, sweetie," I said as the straps came free. "Let's get you out of this thing." She leaned on my shoulder as I got her to her feet, and I helped her down to the roof. The pilot was also helping the wounded Marine down. Amy put her hand against the chopper's hull to steady herself, and I reached back in for my cache tube then turned to the two Marines.

"We've got to get off this roof," I said. The pilot was helping his wounded comrade pull her assault vest off, but he spared a second to give me glare as she sat on the edge of the rear deck.

"We're about as safe here as we would be anywhere else, Mr. Stewart," he said as he opened the first aid kit. "We're on high ground, and this is a pretty defensible position. We've only got a couple more hours of sunlight left, so the best thing we can do is stay here until morning when we can get our bearings and make a plan." He turned away and started inspecting the wounded Marine's arm. Now that we weren't being shot at or trying not to fall to our deaths, I was able to take in details. The female Marine had the two chevrons over crossed rifles of a corporal. Her name tag read Hernandez. The pilot had a subdued black bar on his rank tab, and Kaplan on the tape over his pocket.

"Lieutenant, most days I'd agree with you," I said as I walked over to them. Hernandez winced as he poured the contents of a packet of Kwik-Clot over her wound. "But not today."

"Listen, Mr. Stewart," he said as he set the gauze wrap in Hernandez' hand. He stood up and gave himself a few inches of vertical advantage on me before he went on. "We're trained to handle situations like this. I know you're scared right now, and I know this rooftop feels pretty exposed. From a civilian's point of view, I can imagine how scary the situation must seem." Behind him, Hernandez let out a little grunt that sounded like a laugh that had barely slipped under the wire. I took a deep breath and tried to reign my temper in, but somehow that seemed to make things worse.

"You're...trained for things like this," I said slowly. "When did the Marine Corps add zombie apocalypse to its leadership course curriculum? Because if they did, you sure as *hell* didn't sign up for it! Look over there, lieutenant. Do you notice anything unusual about the dozens of reanimated dead people?" His head turned, then he turned back to me a couple of seconds later.

"Well, they're dead again. Look, Mr. Stewart, you did a fantastic job keeping them away from the chopper, but that doesn't change basic--"

"Scrubs, Kaplan! Scrubs and hospital gowns!" I cut him off. "We landed on top of a goddamn hospital." His face went slack, and I watched the blood drain from his cheeks.

"Oh shit," he breathed. "We've got to get the hell off this roof." All I could do was nod. I went around to the other side of the chopper to find Armstrong, the only other Marine who hadn't been hit when our bird had been strafed by a black chopper only minutes ago. His body was lying next to the chopper, his neck at an inherently unhealthy angle with a big chunk taken out of it. Stifling a curse, I turned him over and closed his staring eyes, then grabbed his dog tags. Next came the hard part: making sure he didn't get back up again. Already I could see lines of black radiating from the gaping hole in his neck. My hands trembled as I drew the M9 from the holster on his vest and put the barrel under his chin. I

paused for a second to say something, maybe apologize for what I was about to do, and his eyes opened. My finger tightened on the trigger by reflex.

"I'm okay," I called out when I heard someone curse on the other side of the chopper. "Just making sure Armstrong didn't get back up." After a moment of debate, I started to pull his assault vest off as well. It had become an unsettling habit over the past few days, taking from the dead to serve the living. Only the vaguest hints of guilt were left by now, and those were buried under the promise I'd made to Maya to bring Amy home safe. If this was what I needed to do to get Amy to her, then I'd do it. By the time I had pulled everything useful off of PFC Armstrong's body, Kaplan had the bandage on Hernandez's arm, and she was shrugging back into her assault vest. He'd cut her left sleeve off to expose her arm, and a tan band of gauze circled her bicep about three inches above her elbow.

"But what's the big deal about hospitals?" Amy was asking them.

"A lot of people who were infected went to the hospital at first," Kaplan answered. "And when the stage one infected started attacking people, the only way to stop them was to kill them. In the early stages it took hours, sometimes longer for them to incubate to stage two and reanimate." He tucked the first aid kit into a back pack and headed for the pilots' compartment. "But by then, we'd locked most of the hospitals down. We thought we'd contained the worst of it by Saturday night."

"After that, shit just went to hell all of the sudden," Hernandez said. "We lost Washington, New York, and L.A. in just a few hours. Then they deployed us to the inprocessing centers, and we ended up trying to rescue as many civilians as we could. After that, it was pretty much 'Shut up and gear up.' Guess that was what? Three or four days ago?" Kaplan nodded as he shrugged into his own flight vest again. "Anyway, hospitals are bad news, girl. You got a whole lot of stage two infected wandering around in 'em, and looks like some stage one, too. Lower levels are locked down or barricaded so they can't get out. Thing is, I've seen 'em do some weird things since all this started, but I think this is the first time I've seen 'em up on a roof."

"Yeah, we counted on that more than once," Kaplan said as he pulled gear from behind his seat. "Seemed like most times infected would end up on the bottom floor unless they were chasing someone."

"They were," I said as I came around the chopper's nose.

"What, chasing someone?" Amy asked. I nodded.

"I saw some bodies on the roof before I added to the collection. Makes me wonder who else has already been up here."

"Does it matter?" Hernandez asked. She looked at the vest I had on and lowered her head, then crossed herself again.

"I don't know. But I'd rather be sure it doesn't." She nodded at that and turned to Kaplan.

"Alright, people. Let's get the chopper secured, gear up, and get ready to move out. Miss Weiss," he turned to Amy, "I need you to keep an eye out for any infected while we work." Amy nodded, then winced and repeated the gesture a little more slowly. Kaplan directed us in stripping out anything we could use, including the Blackhawk's survival gear and weapons for all three adults. Once we had the gear out of the chopper, we turned to the grisly work of getting all the dead Marines' dog tags and getting their bodies on board the chopper.

"Can your daughter use a handgun?" Hernandez asked me as we squatted next to the small pile of gear. I nodded and grabbed my cache tube.

"I taught her how to use my .45, but the recoil's a little much for her just yet," I said as I pulled my Ruger out of the tube. "She's practiced with the 10/22 for a couple of years or so, though, and she's pretty decent with my .22 revolver. I'd rather she use those."

"You think she could handle a nine millimeter?" she asked while I unscrewed the top of the cache tube.

"Probably, but she's never used an M9," I said. I emptied the tube onto the rooftop and Hernandez let out a throaty laugh as the Colt, the revolver, and my Zombietools blades were laid out side by side with the rest of my survival gear.

"Shit, if I'd known you were gonna bring your own damn arsenal with you, I wouldn't've bothered grabbing you a gun." I checked the receiver on the Ruger, then grabbed the revolver and popped the

cylinder out. Both guns were empty and clean. Truth was, I hadn't expected anything less since I'd cleaned them both and unloaded them myself the night before we left Sherwood. But rule fifteen was an absolute: assume every gun is loaded, and don't point any gun at something you want to keep, like people you wanted to keep around.

"Still gonna need one of those rifles," I said as I thumbed .22 Velocitor rounds into the Ruger's rotary box magazine. I loaded the first mag into the little rifle, then loaded the revolver before I called Amy over. She took the Ruger without a word, dropped the magazine out, looked it over then slid it back into place. Once the magazine release locked back into place, she pulled the receiver handle back to load a round into the chamber. While she didn't speed through the process, she did it smoothly, without fumbling the rifle or hesitating. Once the rifle was taken care of, she checked to make sure the safety was on and slung it, and I handed her the revolver. Again, she ran through the basic steps, popping the cylinder out and back in, then giving it a quick once over before belting the holster on and tucking the gun away.

"Take these, too," I told her. I held out two of the ZT Spikes in their leather sheath and my black survival bracelet. She nodded and tucked the knives away, then took the extra magazines and the box of .22 rounds I offered her.

"Rule eight," we said in unison. She gave me a wan smile and headed back to the spot she'd picked out to watch from near the tail of the chopper.

"What's rule eight?" Hernandez asked.

"Always carry a sharp knife," I answered, and I grabbed the Tainto and slipped it onto my belt.

"What rule covers carrying a goddamn sword?" she asked when I picked up the Deuce II.

"Rule five: Always have a backup for everything. Swords never run out of ammo, they don't jam, and they only have one moving part." I slipped the sword across my back and felt my shoulders relax the second its three and a half pound weight settled between them. I had no idea why, but having that yard of steel close to hand made me feel better somehow. I had a dozen assault rifles to choose from, just as many pistols and hundreds of rounds of ammo, but none of that gave me the same comfort as one sword. Still, that one little bit of comfort was far from the strangest thing I'd seen in the past week.

"If you don't mind," Kaplan said as he walked up, "I'd prefer you take Armstrong's M39 instead of one of the M16s." He handed me a heavy canvas gun case and nodded at it. I set it down and unzipped it to reveal a heavily modified looking M14. "You're already wearing his vest, so you've got the right ammo for it." I picked up the gun and tested its weight. It felt heavier than the M14's in the Land Master trucks Nate had provided, but it was also sporting a scope and a bipod. I checked it out and pulled the receiver handle back, then let it slide forward. The safety slipped to the semi-auto position with a flick of my finger, and it dry fired smoothly. I looked to the selector switch, then back at Kaplan.

"Don't trust me with an automatic?" I asked drily.

"Nope," he said seriously. "You're a civilian. And no offense, I've seen you go full auto. You're a goddamn menace. The M39 is an Enhanced Marksman's Rifle, so if you can't hit what you're shooting at with it, you're getting a slingshot and a handful of rocks." He set an ammo case down next to the gun case and pulled two thermite grenades from his vest. "Get what you need packed up and ready. Then we need to figure out where the hell we're going."

"No argument here," I said. "I want to take a look around myself. Something happened here, and I want to know what."

"It's called the end of the fucking world," Hernandez grumbled. "It ain't that hard to figure out." Kaplan gestured for me to move, and I wasted no time in getting myself away. He squatted down next to her as I slung the rifle and walked over to the far side of the roof where Amy was looking out over the city. She had my survival bracelet in her hand, and she was looking down at the dogtag strapped to it. When I reached her side she put her arm around me and laid her head against my shoulder without a word.

"Are we gonna die?" she finally asked.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," I said softly. "And I think I'm getting pretty good at the whole not dying thing. Porsche and I made it across Springfield, then I got away from the Army and

walked home before I rode a bike out to Sherwood pretty much all by myself. Imagine what I can do with you and two Marines with me.” She looked up at me and gave me a tiny but genuine smile. “Besides, I promised your Mom I’d get you to her safe.”

“And Dad,” she said softly. “He told you to take care of me, too.” The image of Karl falling into the swarm of undead beneath the chopper flashed through my memory again, and I closed my eyes. *Take care of my little girl.* Those had been his last words to me before he’d thrown himself out of the Blackhawk to make sure we could escape.

“I will, sweetie,” I told her as I hugged her tight. I took the survival bracelet from her and snapped it around her wrist. “I’m your sword and your shield, your sentry and avenger. I’ll defend you with my life. I’ll never leave you behind, I’ll never falter, and I will not fail. I promise you that.” The words were adapted from the Airman’s Creed, and saying them felt right. Up to now, I’d promised everyone *but* Amy that I’d look after her. If anyone needed to hear that promise just then, it was her. Her arms tightened around me for a moment, then she pulled back and looked up at me with damp cheeks.

“You’re hired,” she said with a sniffle. “Just do me a favor?”

“Name it,” I told her.

“If...if we make it to Wyoming or wherever we’re going, will you marry Mom?” The question made my jaw drop, and no words would come out of my mouth. She pressed on before I could reboot my vocabulary. “Because this is kind of one of those intense bonding things people go through, so I’m probably gonna slip someday and call you Dad. And when I do that, I want it to be kinda legit, you know?”

“Okay,” I said. “When we get to Nate’s place, I’ll ask your Mom to marry me. But she might say no.” Amy shook her head and her nose crinkled up in a smirk. “Sure of that, are ya? So, deal is this. I made that bracelet in Iraq. I’m pretty attached to it. So, when we get to Wyoming, I want it back. Now, let’s go take a look around before you talk me into anything else.” She fell in step behind me as I started toward the structure across the roof from the chopper.

The crowd of dead and disabled zombies was halfway across the roof, but between them and the structure I had seen several bodies. When I got to the first one, I was faced with a blank eyed corpse on its back. A single bullet hole marred the dead man’s left cheek, but judging from the red stain beneath his deformed skull, the hole on the other side was a lot bigger. This was the closest look I’d gotten at any of the infected, and I found myself staring in spite of myself. Black veins stretched across his face and up his neck from under his maroon scrub top. His hands were also laced with black veins up to the forearm. Both eyes looked red and ruptured, and I couldn’t tell if that was from the bullet or from something else. But I could see the black tracing of the veins in the whites clearly enough.

“Truman Medical Center,” Amy read from beside me. She reached out and plucked the ID badge from his pocket. “Oh, damn.” She handed me the badge before she stood and turned away. *Bill Skinner. Pediatrics.* I laid it next to the body and touched Amy’s shoulder. She followed me, but her eyes went back to Skinner’s body. Suddenly the infected were a little more human to her. I knew it was a disturbing revelation, but it also meant she was a decent human being. The next infected body had also taken a bullet to the face, this one through an eye. I stood and headed for the structure, noting several more infected sprawled on the roof top along the way. Every one of them had a round through the face or head. I saw blood on the roof and brass casings in a trail leading toward the building in front of me. When I got to the structure, several bodies were laid out in front of the open doorway, and I could see a pair of scrub covered legs sticking out of the door. When I peeked inside, I could see a fatigue clad body slumped against a closed door set in the far wall. Blood stained the side of his torso and his left leg, and I could see a couple of holes in the side of his assault vest. A black submachine gun with a thick barrel was slung across his chest, and he held a pistol I was familiar with in his left hand: a SOCOM with a Laser Aiming Module and a suppressor attached. I crossed the few steps to him and went to one knee beside him.

“Sir?” I said as I looked him over. If he was what I thought he was, the absolute last thing I needed to do was reach out and grab him unexpectedly. Under the black bowl helmet he wore, his brown hair was longer than military regs allowed, and he sported a beard. His chest didn’t move, so I finally put my hand

to his left wrist. His skin was cool, and there was no pulse under my fingertips. I cursed and put my hand to his neck, but I found no dogtags.

“Who was he?” Amy asked from the door.

“Special forces of some kind,” I told her as I took the SOCOM and worked at getting the submachine gun free.

“How can you tell that?”

“One, from the bodies outside. All head shots, all in the middle of the head or face. Special forces operators are the only people I can think of who would be that accurate in the middle of a firefight with every shot.” I paused as I got the submachine gun free and slung it.

“Next you’ll be telling me Sand People ride single file to hide their numbers,” she said. I shook my head.

“No, the other big giveaway was the weapons and the hair. Both guns are suppressed, and the Green Berets I ran into back in Springfield carried the same pistol he’s carrying. Beard and hair longer than regs allow, Army issue fatigues but no patches, no dogtags. So, I’m thinking Delta. Keep an eye out. I’m going to take him back to the chopper with us. He deserves to be laid to rest with his fellow soldiers.” It took a lot of doing, but I finally got him up on my shoulders and staggered out the door. Kaplan met me halfway there and took the dead soldier from me, carrying him the rest of the way to the chopper.

“What happened to him?” Hernandez asked as Amy and I joined her by the pile of gear.

“Oddly enough, he got shot. I think he stayed behind to give the rest of his team a chance to get away.” As I talked, I hit the magazine release and dropped the mag from the SOCOM, then pulled the slide back slowly. The unfired round popped out, and I locked the slide back so I could give the receiver a quick check.

“I wonder who shot him?” she said. Nothing looked jammed up in the ejector, and the slide slid forward cleanly when I released it. I worked it back and forth a few times as I answered her. Dave’s Survival Rule number sixteen was never trust a gun you picked up off the ground, especially not one you found in a fight. Sometimes there was a damn good reason it was on the ground.

“That’s the million dollar question. The sixty four million dollar question is what were they fighting about? And why were they fighting in a hospital?” The round on the roof didn’t have the dimple of being hit by a firing pin, so I was pretty certain it wasn’t a dud. Kaplan came back with an armload of gear, including the dead man’s vest. He set it all down and pulled something out of the pile.

“Hernandez, put those on. Stewart, since you already appropriated the pistol, take these. Miss Weiss, this might be a little heavy, but I’d like you to put this on.” He held out a pair of ammo pouches to me and waved Amy over to him and hefted the stripped down assault vest. It covered less area, and I was guessing it was made more for mobility. To her credit, she didn’t make a face at the blood on the vest, but she did grumble when Kaplan strapped it onto her. I checked the ammo pouches and found six magazines for the SOCOM.

“What are these?” Hernandez asked as she held up the black object the lieutenant had handed her. “Forearm guards?”

“Yes, corporal, and I expect you to wear them. Have you been trained on the MP5?” She shook her head as she slipped the plastic arm guards on and pulled the Velcro tabs to secure them. “Then I’ll carry the SMG. Okay people, the plan is to get out of the building and get to a place we can hole up for the night. Come morning, we’ll scout the area and find a way to get out of the city. From there, we head to the rendezvous point in Wyoming.”

“Uh, have you actually looked down?” Amy asked from the edge of the roof. All three of us trotted over to her and looked over the side. The street below was packed with infected. Hernandez and I turned and gave Kaplan a wry look.

“Any other bright ideas, sir?” Hernandez asked.

“Actually, yes,” Kaplan said as he looked to our left and pointed. “We get across the walkway there and to the other side of the far building and see what it looks like over there.” From behind us we could hear the pop of distant gunfire. I looked over my shoulder and weighed the odds of the people with guns being friendly. At least with the infected, things were always simple. They were going to try to eat you,

and you were going to either be lunch, run, or try to bash their heads in. People had a tendency to be unpredictable and sneaky. You never knew if someone you just met was going to have your back in a fight or try to cut your throat in your sleep. Personally, I preferred taking my chances with the infected.

“Yeah, that’s not going to be a walk through hell, now is it?” I said. “It isn’t like we have a better option, unless someone forgot to mention being able to fly.” No one raised their hand, so we headed back to the stuff we had salvaged from the chopper. When we got there, Kaplan opened the ammo box and handed me a length of linked ammo.

“That’s all that was left from the port side gun. Stow it in your pack, and hang on to your empty magazines. You’ve got five days of food in there, too.” I tossed the linked rounds into the pack and put it on, then handed Amy the cache tube. She slung it like I’d shown her, across her left shoulder to leave her right arm unencumbered, then slung the Ruger above it. Hernandez reached over my shoulder and pulled the tube for the water reservoir on my pack so that it hung down over my left shoulder. I immediately grabbed it and lifted it over my head so it fell on the other side.

“You’re a lefty, huh?” she said as she helped me adjust it. When I nodded, she grabbed the rifle they’d given me and started making adjustments to the sling.

“Terminally,” I said as I pulled the SOCOM and dropped the magazine into my hand. The cut out showed it was half full, so I pulled one of the spares and dropped the old mag in upside down so I could tell by feel which one it was. Kaplan had foregone an M16 and was carrying the suppressed MP5 slung across his chest, and when Hernandez slung my rifle, it hung barrel down behind my left arm, ready to pull forward. She gave me a nod and a slap on the shoulder, then gave the lieutenant a thumbs up.

“Okay, sidearms only inside,” he said as he prepped a pair of thermite charges. “I’m in the lead; Hernandez, keep these two between us. Miss Weiss, keep your pistol holstered please. Mr. Stewart, don’t shoot at anything unless I tell you to, and only use the pistol. Aim for the head.”

“You know, this isn’t the first time I’ve done this,” I said as I switched on the laser aiming module below the SOCOM’s barrel. Now as soon as my finger touched the trigger, I had an aim point.

“What’s your kill count?” Hernandez asked as she drew her pistol.

“Not counting the ones on the roof, about a hundred. I won’t accidentally shoot you in the ass, okay?”

“Fair enough,” Kaplan said. “But you’re still a civilian, and I’m still the officer in charge here. Your safety is my responsibility, so do as I say, and we’ll all make it out of here.” He stepped up to the chopper and pulled the pin on the first charge. He tossed it into the rear of the chopper and pulled the pin on the second one, tossing it into the front.

“Whatever you say, lieutenant,” I told him as the charges ignited. With a sweep of my hand, I stepped aside and gestured toward the open section of the building. “Hell awaits. Lead the way.” He headed for the opening with the Blackhawk burning behind us, a pyre for the fallen.

