

NECROPOLIS RISING



IF THE UNDEAD EVER NEEDED
A SHOT OF LIFE THIS IS IT!
GARRY CHARLES - SHOCK HORROR MAGAZINE

DAVE JEFFERY

Necropolis Rising

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Preface

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

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

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

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

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

Isn't it?

Dave Jeffery
August 2010

For Thomas and Grace -
My real world.

A fist bounced off of the window, rattling the glass in its frame. Beyond the doorway, Dennis Owen, the security guard sitting at the reception desk, looked up and scrutinized the two men standing outside in the rain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We heard he'd been stolen and there was a reward," said scraggy beard's companion. He was shorter with more meat on his bones; though his face was still gaunt.

"Is that true?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks," said scraggy beard to Owen. "But we'd like to see the *good doctor* in person."

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

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

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

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

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

"You know that once that door opens there's no going back?" Scraggy beard said to his companion.

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

"Okay, Sam," Sean replied. "Let's get ready."

The two men donned their masks and the slurping, sucking sound of their breathing filled the tiny car space, drowning out the electric motor overhead.

Sam hoisted the container to his chest, keeping it upright by hugging it to him with one arm; the other tightly clutched the Browning.

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

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

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

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

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

"Inhumanity pays," Sean said bitterly.

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

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

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

"Yes," Sam said pulling a Zippo from his pocket. "We'll have ten seconds—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The job is simple enough," O'Connell said smoothly. "But the timing makes it a bitch."

"Speakin' of bitches, where's Suzie?"

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

"She'll be here," O'Connell said, undeterred.

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

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

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

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

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

"This, Amir, is the home of the National Criminal Intelligence DNA Database," O'Connell

explained. "It holds the DNA profiles of anyone charged with a crime. In 2006 there were over four million profiles and on average it grows by 30,000 samples per month. So do the math."

"Okay," Amir said. "So that's the building; so what are we stealing? Information?"

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

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

"So?" Amir asked. "If we're not stealing anything, what are we doing?"

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

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

"Sure," Clarke said with a contemptuous sniff, "if *all* we were doing is taking it out! But that would be child's play and -"

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

"Which is what?" Amir asked.

"Access the data and manipulate it. Alter results, muddy the waters; and plant our own material. What better way to take out a rival than have them convicted using their DNA profile?"

"Sounds like sci-fi bullshit," Stu said.

"Yes?" O'Connell queried. "Well it's sci-fi bullshit that will earn this outfit 100 million."

"What about the security?" Amir asked. "I'm no computer expert but even I know about firewalls and anti virus software."

"We have a man, who can," O'Connell said. "At our word he will deactivate the firewall for thirty seconds, and let the dummy virus and the Programme in. The virus will be quarantined, but by the time our Programme will be replicating the system. But we will have to manually implant the virus from a terminal inside the NCIDD building, bypassing the state of the art external firewall."

"100 million," Stu smiled. "That's some pay cheque. Who's funding this gig?"

"Who do you think?" O'Connell said

"*The Consortium*?" Stu offered.

O'Connell nodded. "That's our employer for the next twenty-four hours."

"Jesus," Clarke muttered.

The Consortium. It shouldn't be able to exist, but it did, an organization comprising some of the most influential and esoteric bosses the crime world had to offer, an international criminal council presiding over a clandestine empire.

"If we pull this off," O'Connell said, "it will be used as a model worldwide. A franchise that will be worth billions."

"And if we fail?" Amir asked.

"There is no 'fail', Amir," O'Connell's reply was as cold as steel. "If you have any reservations then you stow them in dark places. There's no backing out. There's no failure. The Consortium has the

names of all involved on this job. That was part of the deal; part of their investment. It comes at cost you got that?"

Amir nodded unhappily.

"The money is secured and ready to be wired to our offshore accounts. I've a lot riding on this gig," O'Connell announced. "There's no going back. And there's more to lose than professional reputation."

Clarke opened his mouth to reply when the door to the room crashed open with such force the door handle left a dent in the back wall. O'Connell, Kunaka and Amir wheeled, producing an assortment of hand guns, all cocked at once; filling the room with thick, multiple clicks.

Suzie Hanks marched into the room, her body lithe and graceful, and her pretty face tight, and angry. She pulled a lock of blonde hair from the corner of her mouth; oblivious to the guns trained on her.

"Jesus, Suzie!" O'Connell said at her approach. "We could've shot you! What happened to the secret knock?"

"Fuck the secret knock," Suzie said heading for O'Connell's laptop and punching at the keyboard. "We've got a problem!"

"Shit," O'Connell spat the word across the room. The others looked up at him.

They were all huddled around the laptop which Suzie had clicked onto the iPlayer. The images on the screen could have been straight from a big budget Hollywood movie. Armored personnel carriers were pulling up and discharging troops onto the streets, each man carrying a rifle, their faces hidden behind gas masks. The camera panned, following a squad of soldiers as they ran to a high-backed truck and began pulling free rolls of razor wire. The whole scene was one of organized urgency.

"Assessment?" O'Connell said to Stu.

"Containment," the big man's reply was simple and final. "Something big is going down."

"If you guys could be quiet for a second," Suzie hissed, "maybe we'll get to hear what's going on."

On screen, the camera had found a female reporter who was standing in the rain, her hair lank and her shoulders shrugging off the water.

"The true nature of this crisis is not exactly known," the woman was saying. "All we can confirm is that there has been an explosion at Hilton Towers and as we speak the City of Birmingham has been cordoned off by the military; no-one is being allowed in, or out, of the city. As most in Birmingham will already be aware, Hilton Towers is home to Dr. Richard Whittington who has achieved a fair amount of adverse publicity due to his pro-vivisection stance in the late seventies. Over the past three decades, his staunch advocacy of such practices has made him an active target for animal rights extremists in the UK."

The reporter paused as a huge lorry drove past, taking the opportunity to drag her damp fringe over her eyes before continuing as the big engine receded.

"Dr. Whittington is no stranger to controversy. His alleged involvement in MOD experiments with biological weapons in the seventies were uncovered by our investigative team only last year; leading to a Government denial of the existence of such a program. Whatever the speculations surrounding Dr. Whittington and his

nefarious scientific activities, the facts are: tonight he is quite possibly dead and Birmingham City is effectively locked down."

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

"You wanna say 'shit' again, boss or shall I say it for ya?"

“An examination of the book and its authors would suggest quite a conservative agenda. (I also accept that the final mix of contributions will also determine this). I think there is a real danger that this book will only serve to fuel the divide even further.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At 25 she was thirty nine years his junior but her presence - her vitality - made him feel young again. And when he considered her beauty, the way her dark hair fell upon her pale and delicate skin or how the light danced in her ice blue eyes, he didn’t conjure cold, calculated images of sex for the

sake of base gratification and degradation, instead he thought of tenderness and a yearning for her devotion to be a reciprocal entity; beheld and reflected in the eyes of this beautiful, delicate creature.

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

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

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

The scratching noise stopped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So what now?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

O’Connell nodded; his face impassive, calculating.

“Stu?” he finally said.

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

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

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

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

“Stu’s working on it,” O’Connell said; his demeanor upbeat, all traces of uncertainty shelved. He was doing what he did best. He was *planning*, he was thinking - building a way to dodge the curveball and turn it to their advantage. Sure, what he had in mind wasn’t perfect. But he knew if they could get past the cordon it would definitely work.

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

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

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

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

O’Connell had found all this out on that night; watching her on the multi-storey, a symbol of beauty and rage and self destruction. And on that night he made a promise that had stopped her from jumping

That night he promised this beautiful, coked-out-of-her-brain woman that he would make things right

~~At the time she'd laughed. But what he promised to do, in exchange for her climbing down and talking to him for a few more minutes, was that he would find Toby Hanks and bring him to her and make him beg for forgiveness.~~

And then, O'Connell assured her with unerring conviction, he'd put a gun to her abusive father's head and put a bullet in his brain.

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

"Hey," Suzie's voice slapped him from his reverie. "Stay focused, O'Connell."

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

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

"You bet your fuckin' Porsche, we're on!" he laughed.

The same room – a different plan. It was two hours later and the crew were standing in a semi-circle, checking each other over.

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

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

"Don't fret, Clarkey," Stu jibed. "You might grow into it."

"We ain't all fat fucks like you, Stu," Clarke grumbled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And a roadblock ain't gonna stop no Mastiff, missy," Stu growled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Like you’d know if I told you,” Stu said with a patronizing smile. He reached down and began pulling weaponry from its canvas innards; depositing each one onto the floor. “Benelli M4 shot gun; SA80 rifles, they hold a 30 round magazine; Browning high powered pistols; Heckler and Koch MP5 submachine gun, capable of firing 950 rounds per minute. That enough for you, Suzie?”

“Sure,” she said. “For a war.”

“Got any grenades?” Clarke’s question got in the way of another potential exchange.

“You crazy?” Stu said looking up at the pimple-faced youth. “Those things are dangerous.”

Suzie looked from Kunaka’s face to the small arsenal at his feet and shook her head disbelievingly.

“Men!”

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

Take that you undead bastard," Darren Doyle screamed as he emptied the magazine of his Heckler and Koch machine pistol into the oncoming zombie horde.

Several figures span around, some taking rounds to the head, others the chest, blood and flesh splattering the air in thick gory wads.

But still they came, the room filling with their mournful groans. He tried to reload but he was out of ammo. There was no way out of here, no way back. There were just too many of them, all yearning to grab him, hold him; eat him.

"Ah, fuck it!" he muttered in resignation.

And then Darren Doyle paused the game.

On-screen, the undead pixel army stopped in mid stride, their tide of terrible lament receding, allowing silence to wash in behind it.

"Should've gone for that bastard arms cache after all," Doyle appraised after taking a long slurp from the can of beer that he'd retrieved from a stained coffee table next to him. He grimaced. The beer was warm and flat. Christ, how long had he been playing? He peered at the Michael Meyers clock on the wall of his bed-sit. The LED readout told him he'd just emerged from another six hour straight cyber bender.

You need to get a life, Daz.

It was Gerard, his brother's voice that had now taken residence in his head. Doyle reviled his brother's piety more than the zombies frozen on the screen in front of him.

He'd not seen Gerard for over three years. Last time it had gotten pretty ugly. Words had been exchanged, booze fuelled of course. Doyle couldn't remember that much about it. But he guessed it involved his brother telling him what a waste of space he was, how he'd never amount to anything. Gerard usually did.

The irony was that they used to be close; driven together by the need for survival. Their parents had split when Daz and Gerard were four and eight respectively. And the years that followed were a acrimonious exchange between warring parents who used to screw each other as opposed to screw each other over. And as in all wars there was crossfire and the two kids were caught in the middle, doing the only thing they could do: keep their heads down.

Since their mum and dad had shrugged off their responsibilities, so Gerard had put them on his shoulders, making sure that his little brother had some stability.

And this continued, even when their gran took them in and raised them while her son - and their dad - continued as though the world impinged on the next trade union club or snooker hall or any place but home.

But somewhere it all got worse, it all got *skewed*. Time marched on and boys became youths and the world grew broad and enticing. Gerard yearned for it and sought it out, and suddenly a little brother became a big mill stone that he just wanted to leave behind to gather moss.

Initially it was only for a short time, but to Daz these moments were deep cuts, carving into his psyche. And these wounds festered, eating into the wall he'd built around his feelings of insecurity. Before long, as Gerard turned his focus to new horizons, so Daz began to turn to himself. And his insecurity began to manifest as rebellion; truancy and alcohol and drugs coming in quick succession.

Before anyone had realised, Daz was twenty-eight and slumming it in a cramped bed-sit, with only a Xbox and a giro for company.

But fuck it! Unlike his parents, unlike his brother, the games machine was at least constant, at least reliable. And it helped him to lose days; replacing alcohol and drugs as his new addiction of choice. It was his new way to just bail from life.

A huge crash from the bed-sit below yanked him from his reflections. It was followed by another crash, this time he felt the threadbare carpet vibrate under his bare feet.

“What the fuck was that?” he moaned at the TV. The gallery of gory faces stared gormlessly back at him, declining to comment. They didn’t have to, Doyle already knew the answer. It was his noisy, tempestuous neighbors and their feckin’ tempestuous relationship.

Two people, one disagreement, countless bottles of booze and, by the sound of it, another night of bedlam. There was a loud pop and the bright tinkle of shattering glass and then a short, sharp scream. A series of shuffling footfalls ensued as though something was being dragged across bare floorboards.

Doyle made a decision to be pre-emptive. He smashed his foot down onto the floor boards three times.

“Shut the fuck up and learn to communicate, you morons!” he yelled.

For some reason, Doyle found the resulting silence more disturbing than the argument. Then the shuffling noise was back.

And *something else*. It was faint, drifting though the floor but its presence had his eyes flitting towards the TV screen and the hairs of his neck began to do a jig.

Someone was groaning.

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

Doyle turned off the TV.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And onto the TV remote.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Stay away from me!” Doyle yammered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He smashed onto the landing below and lay there, semi conscious; his breathing shallow and h

eyes cruelly focused on the stairs.

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

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

Game over.

Sitting in the back of the Mastiff that Kunaka had acquired on the strength of a phone call, O'Connell looked at Suzie Hanks.

She didn't return his gaze. He'd upset her. He knew this because he knew *her*; every nuance in her emotional arsenal, and every inch of her delicate body. He'd made a gaff. And now she was letting him know.

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

"What is it?" she asked bluntly.

"You can bail from this, Suzie." O'Connell's reply was cautious; testing the water.

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

"You probably wouldn't," O'Connell sighed. "But I thought I'd give you the choice."

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

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

"What?" she said sternly.

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

"Why?"

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

"I wanted to -" He stopped and changed direction, "I needed to make sure that you were ..."

"This isn't about me at all is it?" she interjected with uncanny accuracy. "It's about you."

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

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

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

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

“Yes,” he conceded. “I’m sorry.”

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

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

“Hey, boss?”

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

“What is it, Clarkey?”

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

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

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

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

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

“She clearly doesn’t love you enough,” Amir replied.

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

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

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

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

“Talk to me, people!”

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

“At ease!”

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

But this current situation was different. It was different because he was reliant on external intelligence networks. Something significant had occurred and information was shady at best. And

when Intel was unreliable missions tended to fail. Lives were often lost.

And that would not do.

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

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

“What’s happening, lad?”

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

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

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

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

“What was he working on when he was live?”

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

“Explain,” Carpenter said.

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

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

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

“Stolen?”

“Destroyed,” the woman replied.

“So what was Whittington doing now? Who was funding him?”

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

“Remit?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s an issue in itself,” Carpenter observed. “Where are the people?”

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

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

“*This*, Sir.”

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

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