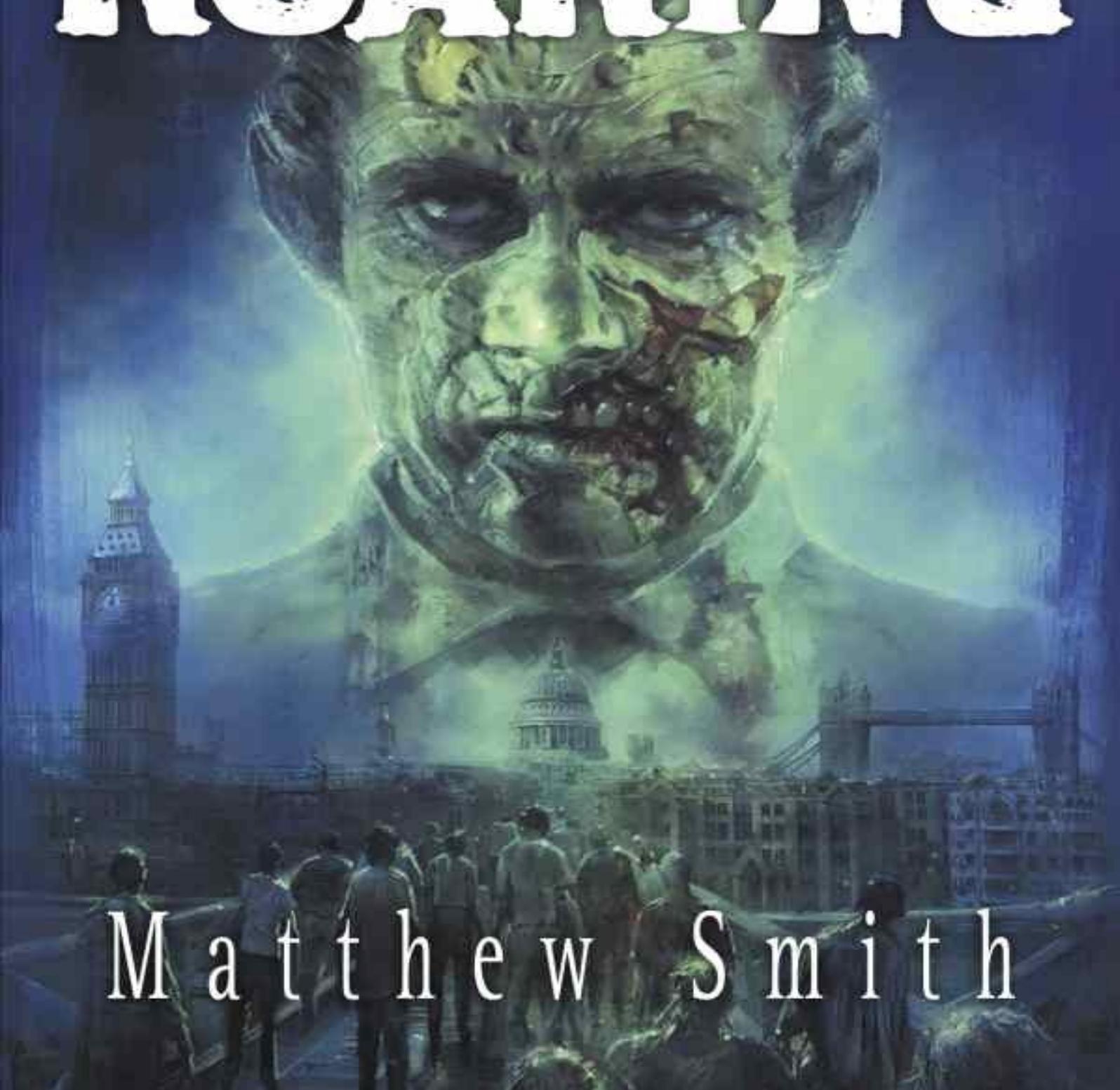


TOMES *of the* **DEAD**

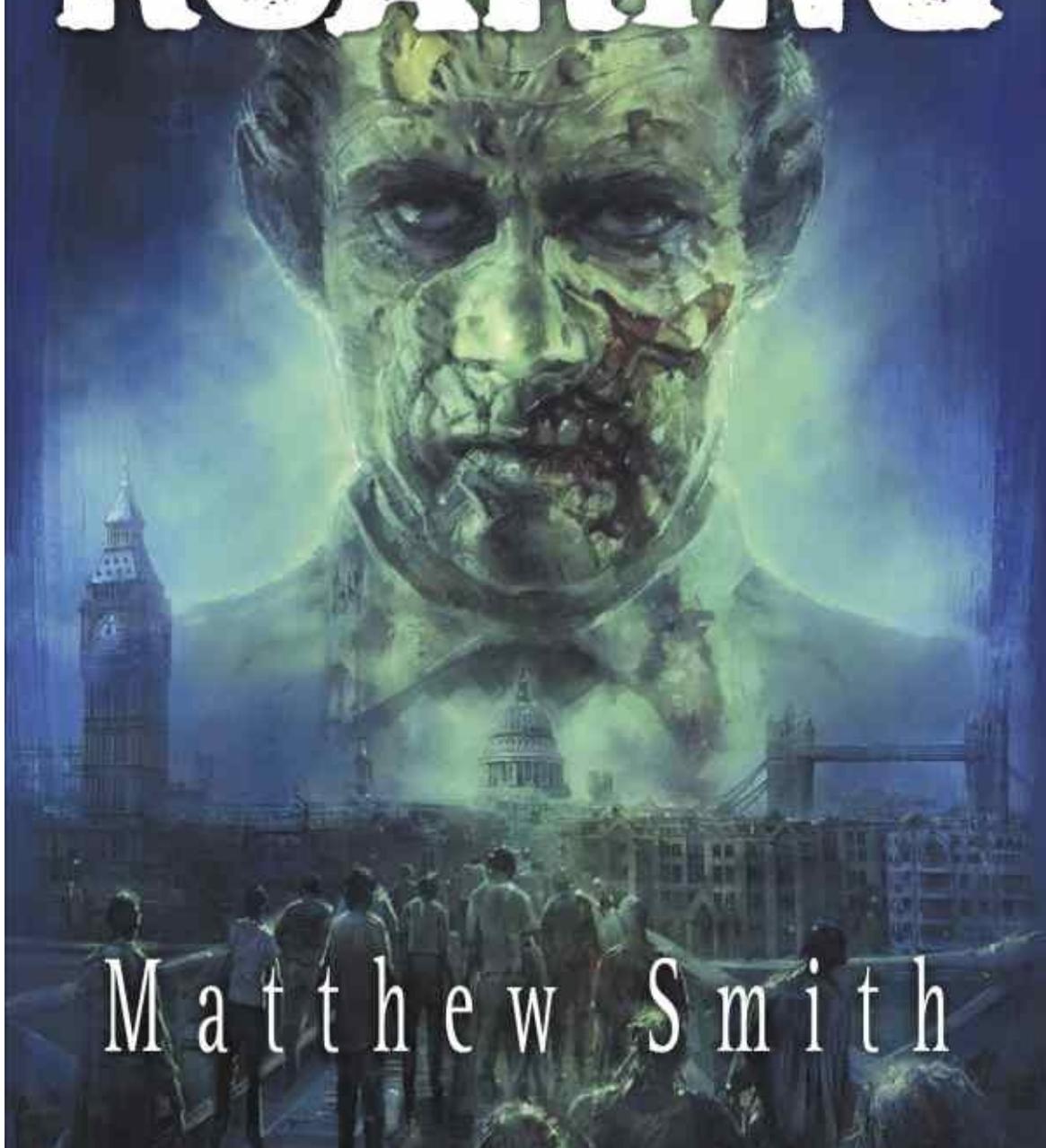
**THE WORDS OF THEIR
ROARING**



Matthew Smith

TOMES *of the* DEAD

THE **WORDS** OF THEIR
ROARING



THE WORDS OF THEIR ROARING

The car shuddered as a ghoul bounced off its wing, Ali tightening her grip on the wheel in a bid to keep the vehicle under control. She made little effort to avoid the deadheads - indeed, it was impossible to slalom between them, so dense was the crowd becoming - and concerned herself with ensuring the car stayed central on the road. The stiffs merely shuffled into its path like bugs collecting on the windscreen, utterly ignorant of the velocity the vehicle was moving at. The front end ploughed through a skinny naked man, who exploded like a dandelion in a strong wind, fragments washing back in the Escort's slipstream.

Hewitt was right, Gabe thought. Damn things are falling apart.

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fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

THE WORDS OF THEIR ROARING
MATTHEW SMITH

For my mum and dad, who always knew... one day...
And for Emma, Princess among Squaxx

Latimer spake to Ridley as fire was kindled: "Be of good cheer, Mr Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England, as I trust shall never be put out." With a bag of gunpowder around their necks, they were burned and Latimer apparently died quickly and with little pain, but Ridley burned slowly, and desired them for Christ's sake to let the fire come unto him. They heaped the faggots upon him, but it burned all his nether parts before it touched the upper, that made him leap up and down under the faggots, and often desire them to let the fire come unto him saying, "I cannot burn", and after his legs were consumed, he showed that side towards us clean, shirt and all untouched by flame. In which pangs he laboured till one of the standers-by with his billhook pulled off the faggots above, and where he saw the fire flame up, he wrestled himself unto that side. When the flame touched the gunpowder he was seen to stir no more.

Foxe's Book of Martyrs,
16 October, 1555

PROLOGUE

Background Noise

"Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?"

"Yes."

"All like ours?"

"I don't know; but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like the apples on our stubborn-tree. Most of them splendid and sound - a few blighted."

"Which do we live on - a splendid one or a blighted one?"

"A blighted one."

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

4 November 1917

Ten Miles East of Ypres, Belgium

As the soldier ran, he barely raised his eyes from the battle-scarred earth, intent on watching one foot replace the other, propelling him from danger. The rattle of gunfire had slowly faded the greater the distance he put between himself and the trenches, and the occasional mortar explosion was merely a dull thud behind him. Even so, he dared not slow his pace, despite the growing ache in his limbs. The ground was not easy to traverse; sludge becoming quagmire, plain disappearing into crater, every movement was an effort to stay upright, and to keep his boots on his feet. He had to pick his way carefully through barbed wire, sprawl in the mud if he thought he heard whisper of the enemy (and just who was that, now that he had chosen not to belong to one side or the other?). Exhaustion threatened to overwhelm him; but one notion kept him going, reassuring him as he watched his legs driving him towards that goal: escape.

Private William Steadman did not want to die.

He supposed there was a little of the childish logic in the way he kept his head down as he ran, reasoning that what he could not see would not hurt him; and rather than stop to get his bearings, he put all his effort into the act of flight itself, pointing himself in one direction and seeing where it would take him, as if he were a schoolboy released for the summer holidays. It was difficult to deny that he felt as lost and scared as if he was twelve years old, shrunken and vulnerable in an adult's uniform. But that was hardly a unique phenomenon; he'd seen his fellow soldiers - men perhaps in a civilian context he would've considered unscrupulous scoundrels and brawlers - reduced to bawling infants. Their faces had been masks of incomprehension and fear; they knew how close they were to death, how their dreams for the future, their desire to see their families again, hinged on an order. To leave the comparative safety of the trench, cross no-man's-land and embrace the German guns was to strip a man of everything he had and was ever likely to have. And so Steadman, with his own tears icy on his cheeks, had had to listen to one of the most terrifying sounds he'd ever

heard, far worse than the shriek of shrapnel cutting through the air: that of grown men crying with regret and loss. It was utterly alien and impossible to forget.

He slid his way down a bank and felt the dirt beneath him crumble. Trying to regain his balance, he increased his pace, but only succeeded in pushing himself forward and tumbling headfirst into the mud. He rolled onto his back, a part of his mind yelling at him to be back on his feet instantly, but a curious lethargy came over him, as if the earth were sapping him of strength; as if, once this close to it, it would suck him to its bosom - revenge for the damage that had been wrought on its surface. He imagined lying there, relaxing his grip on life and watching the sun and moon chase each other across the sky, his body slowly sinking into the ground, becoming part of the landscape like so many other corpses had. Every morning for the past sixteen months, he'd woken and looked out on carcasses littering the battlefield, human and animal seeding the soil. What would it be like, he wondered, to join that silent sea of the dead? To succumb to the exhaustion and close his eyes one final time? The idea stayed in his head longer than he anticipated, perversely attractive. In the last letter he'd written home, he'd said how he'd forgotten what it was like to be warm and clean, to eat and sleep in comfort, not to have the tight ball of dread lodged in his gut; those concerns would just fade away if he was to give up now, if he was to relinquish the struggle to survive...

Steadman clutched a handful of mud and brought it to his nose; it smelt rotten, diseased. It served to fuel his anger and clear his mind of any thoughts of surrender. He would not sacrifice himself for this war; it meant nothing to him. As was common with most of his comrades, he knew little of the history behind the conflict, the objectives of taking part in it, or indeed how the world will have changed once everything returned to normal. They had just been shipped over to this godforsaken hole, instructed to stand in a freezing field, point their guns in the direction of the Hun, and wait until they could be told they could go home. It was difficult to picture a more futile image than two sets of opposing forces facing each other down from opposite ends of a muddy stretch of earth, while somewhere - invisible, in another world - generals bluffed and blustered. It would be laughable, were it not for the thousands of men being thrown across the lines. Then, the stalemate became a massacre.

He held his commanders in absolute contempt. Their strategies were idiotic, their disregard for the troops who fought for them breathtaking; many was the time he had seen Allied shells landing on their own attacking battalions because the advance had been planned with so little forethought; or frightened, sobbing young lads barely out of puberty executed for refusing to go over the top, obviously incapable of holding a rifle without shaking let alone firing it. The injustice made him want to scream. He wanted to shout at the sky and pummel this sick, stinking earth. He was not some expendable, unthinking automaton they could put in front of the German bullets; as far as he was concerned, it did matter whether he lived or died. He thought of his parents raising him as a child, fretting when he was ill, glowing with pride when he returned from his first day at school, taking the time to show him the difference between right and wrong and the good teachings of the Lord, to be the best person he could be, and all that pain, all that effort, all that heartfelt love, blown away in an instant as he charged at the enemy and his brains splattered on the ground.

He clambered to his feet, taking deep breaths, steeling himself for the next stage of

his journey. A mist was rolling in, the air chill and damp, and he assumed darkness would begin to fall within the next couple of hours. He had to find shelter if he was to last the night. He wished he'd remembered to get his watch repaired; the sky was sheathed in a thick blanket of cloud and gave nothing away, so he had little idea of the time. He didn't even know for how long he had been running; it seemed like most of the day, but he had a niggling suspicion that he hadn't covered as much ground as he hoped. The area was notoriously easy to get lost in, or to find oneself travelling in circles. He set off at a trot, intent on bedding down in the first shattered town building or abandoned farmhouse he came across.

But what exactly were his plans beyond that? He had no money, no contacts he could enlist to help him out of the country; his chance of escape seemed as slim as if he were back in the trench and awaiting that final whistle. The problem was that his desertion had been spur of the moment, a frantic bubbling of panic that eventually burst into full-blown terror. Although he had fixed bayonets in blank obedience and prepared to engage the enemy in combat, his gaze never straying to anyone on either side of him, the moment the signal came and the first soldiers went over and the shooting started, he had lost his nerve, dropped his rifle and faked injury. In the rush and confusion of men surging forward and then falling back as they were struck, he'd buried his head in his hands and played dead. As he'd willed himself to remain stationary, he could do nothing but listen to the thunderous, ear-splitting roar of the mortars, the high-pitched wail of injured men pleading for help and then cursing venomously when none arrived, and the rapid *thunk-thunk-thunk* of bullets meeting muscle and bone. When he'd opened his eyes, what was left of his regiment was several hundred yards away and he lay beneath a pile of bodies, butchered by machine-gun fire. Extricating himself slowly from the wretched heap, he'd crawled inch by inch in the opposite direction to the battle, praying silently that no one should see him and at the same time asking his Saviour to forgive his cowardice. Occasionally he would glance up, pulling corpses around him if he thought he heard anyone approaching, hating himself for his weakness. It was time consuming, arduous work, and he calmed himself through concentration, fixing his sight on some distant object, be it blasted tree or wire fence, and driving himself towards it. He was dimly aware that he was humming a hymn under his breath, a thin keening sound that suggested he was teetering on the brink of outright hysteria.

Indeed, this was insanity; he knew he had nowhere to go, knew he would be crossing dangerous terrain, knew he could give no excuse if he was discovered and was almost certainly facing court martial and the firing squad. But, he had reasoned, he had made his decision, however sudden, and should stick to the matter in hand, putting all his effort into finding a way out of this mess rather than questioning its wisdom. When he came to a secluded spot he vomited copiously, and some of the anxiety seemed to drain away with it; his mind was set, and every minute he stayed alive was a tiny triumph.

With that, he had wiped his mouth and started to run. Onward, Christian soldier, he had thought bitterly.

He had been fortunate, of that there was no doubt, that he had not been picked off by some lone sniper, and he was aware that his luck could not last for much longer. It occurred to him that maybe he had been seen by the enemy, but they had discerned in

him no threat; they recognised a scared fellow human being fleeing for his life, someone who had opted out of the war, and who was not worth the trouble or the waste of ammunition. The thought gave him hope; he imagined others like him, from all sides of the conflict, congregating to wait out the hostilities. But such a haven amidst this hell, he realised, sounded fantastical.

Darkness was closing in far more quickly than he had guessed. Soon it would be pitch black, and he would be stranded out on the plain; it would be a choice of freezing to death during the night (a fire was out of the question if he was trying to avoid attention, even in the unlikely event of him finding dry tinder), or blundering on through the dark, and risk impaling himself on barbed wire or stumbling in on a German gun emplacement. Neither option appealed. He scanned the horizon for any kind of shelter, but saw nothing. He slowed his pace to a walk, his eyes roving the landscape, but the light was faltering with every step; he could barely see his hand in front of his face. Resignation and a little fear were just beginning to worry at him, to gnaw away at his resolve, when something tripped him up.

Despite himself, he yelped in alarm as he flopped to the ground and immediately swore; he knew instantly that it was a body his legs were hooked across, and more often than not where there was a body there were the remnants of an army. He glanced around quickly, certain his cry would've alerted somebody on watch, and sure enough, if he squinted, he could make out the thick seam of shadow that was a trench. But there was no sign of life. Steadman lay motionless for long minutes, waiting for anyone to emerge from the darkness, the razor-sharp wind chilling his skin and raising goosebumps. He resisted the urge to shiver, and breathed slowly, watching the thin, condensed streams dissipating in the air. But from the trench there was no movement.

Gradually, he began to edge forward, kicking his legs away from the corpse and lifting himself up onto his knees. If the trench was occupied, he thought, there had to be some kind of guard. But there was no light, no muted chatter or snores. The only explanation was that it had been overrun, the soldiers inside killed; but which side did it belong to? And could reinforcements be heading this way even as he sat here and deliberated?

Steadman turned back to the body, his hands outstretched in front of him like a blind man, feeling the contours of the uniform, his eyes aching as he concentrated in trying to see through the gloom. The design of the jacket was unfamiliar; the man seemed to have been an officer. Steadman's fingers grazed a holster and he gingerly removed the revolver, running his touch over it. It was of German issue. Clutching the gun in one hand, he lightly brushed the man's face, grimacing when his index finger disappeared into a penny-sized bullet hole in the man's forehead. It came away sticky.

At least they hadn't died by gas, he mused. It meant he wasn't in any immediate danger.

Wiping himself on the corpse's tunic, he looked back at the trench; it would be ideal to see out the night, hopefully providing him with some much-needed supplies, and it was unlikely British troops would be back this way if it had been disabled. The only problem he could foresee was a German regiment answering an injured radio operator's request for help just before he died and arriving here at daybreak. Then again, he could probably make use of one of the slain soldiers' uniforms and disguise himself amongst the dead once more.

He stood and moved to the lip of the trench, peering over cautiously; there was a dribble of light weakly spilling across the duckboards at the bottom. He returned to the German officer's body, took hold of both stiff arms and dragged it back with him, yanking it over the wire that circumscribed the trench's edge with as much strength as he could muster. The weight of the carcass made it bow in the middle, and he stepped across quickly, easing himself down into the earthwork. His eyes sought the light he had seen, and discovered it was buried beneath several corpses; faintly illuminated pale white faces stared up at him, the blood that criss-crossed their features appearing black in the darkness. He pulled them away dismissively, ignoring the lifeless thumps they made as they landed at his feet, and grasped the lamp - little more than a half-melted candle in a glass case - in his left hand before swinging it to either side of him.

"Sweet Jesus," he whispered.

It was an atrocity: the dead lay stacked like timber the length of the trench, one on top of the other. Each new sweep of the lamp brought a fresh horror, a new coupling, as soldier was piled upon soldier; they had been slaughtered like cattle in an abattoir. Steadman had thought he had witnessed every possible obscenity that man could perpetrate on his fellows, but this brought the bile rushing to his throat in an instant; there was something about the sheer scale of devastation here, all contained within the claustrophobic confines of the trench, that made him retch. That, and the noxious smell, which seemed to palpably clog the air; it was the sickly stench of matter breaking down and liquefying, yet these corpses looked as if they had only been dead several hours at the most. It wasn't as if the heat of day could have brought about such a change; it had rained steadily the past few weeks, the temperature barely a couple of degrees above zero.

He brought the back of his free right hand to cover his nose and realised he still held the gun. It seemed suddenly paltry and comically unnecessary in the face of such carnage, but he felt loath to let go of it. As he gripped it tighter, he sensed himself drawing strength from it, gaining courage. Slowly, he began to walk down the trench in search of the supplies centre, the dead pressed high to either side of him, threatening to topple over onto him at any moment and drown him in cold, white flesh. He felt a little of the wariness the Israelites must have experienced as they were led between those high, dark, roiling walls of the Red Sea with nothing but their faith to protect them.

Steadman tried to keep his eyes on the ground, using the lamp to guide himself past outstretched limbs that he would've otherwise stumbled over, but the lure to raise the light and gaze upon the ravaged soldiers' features was too great. A ghoulish curiosity, he supposed. The sight was appalling, but he kept returning to it, testing his endurance the way the tongue endlessly probes a painful tooth; agonising yet irresistible. Even so, when he did glance up, many of the dead no longer had recognisable features; their faces were indistinct, pulpy masses as if they'd been shot at close range. Others were eviscerated, evidently bayoneted repeatedly. He shook his head, ashamed to call himself human, refusing to align himself with a species that could commit such heinous acts of barbarism.

Why had they been so systematically slaughtered, and with such an obviously bloodthirsty callousness, he wondered. If this was the result of some mania, why then take the time to stack the bodies as if for a funeral pyre?

The smell was beginning to make him feel dizzy, and every time he closed his eyes gory images assailed him. His legs cried out for rest, and his throat for water. He was on the verge of collapse when the lamp illuminated the opening to some kind of officers' structure ahead, judging by the map table standing outside it. He sighed with relief and increased his pace towards it. There was a tarpaulin hanging across the entrance acting as a makeshift door, and Steadman hoped it would provide adequate shelter, not only to shield him from the cold but also remove from view, at least temporarily, the horrors of the trench: out of sight, if not mind. He covered the last few yards at speed and stumbled inside, pulling the sheeting closed behind him.

The first thing that caught his eye was the bed in the corner, half-hidden in shadow; he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt the caress of a pillow. He looked around the dark room quickly, taking in the large table, the surface of which was scattered with the remains of a meal, a couple of chairs, the stove, the walls plastered with maps and directives. He crossed to the table, placed the lamp and the revolver upon it, picked up a jug three quarters full of water, and took a long swig; it tasted rusty, but he drained it to the last drop. Then, he searched for scraps of food on the plates, shovelling hard pieces of bread into his mouth and chewing appreciatively before slumping exhaustedly into a chair.

Steadman sat unmoving for what seemed a very long time, too spent to think cohesively. Finally, he ran his hands over his face, his fingers rasping against his unshaven chin, and realised he was trembling. He felt hollow and scared; he would need a miracle to get out of this situation. He tried to reason through the consequences of today's actions and plan what he should do next, but his mind would not stay still for a moment; it fluttered, startled, from one scenario to another and would not allow him to concentrate. He assumed it was tiredness; his eyelids were beginning to droop as sleep crept up on him, and he was just considering whether to attempt to get the furnace going before burying himself beneath the bedclothes when he heard a soft mewling coming from the far corner.

He froze, unsure whether he had imagined it, deciding it could possibly be a combination of the wind and his fatigued senses. But then it came again, louder, undoubtedly human. It sounded like someone in considerable distress. He inched his hands across to the lamp and pistol and simultaneously rose to his feet, taking cautious steps around the table. There was a shape on the floor, silhouetted in the blackness. He shuffled closer and crouched down, lifting the lantern to see clearly.

Lying with his back to the wall was a British soldier, his familiar uniform soaked with blood. His eyes, rolling wide in their sockets like a beast aware of its impending death, squinted at the sudden light and tried to turn his head to face it. As he did so, Steadman saw the extent of the man's appalling injuries: a portion of the right side of his skull was missing, a cavernous red hole where his ear should have been, fragments of bone and clumps of hair standing at right angles. There was a vermilion halo sprayed on the wall behind him. Between his legs were three kerosene cans.

The soldier kept attempting to open his mouth to speak, but only made the soft, piteous cry that Steadman had heard. The man's eyes were moving wildly as if panic-stricken, his head shaking from side to side. Steadman got the impression that he was trying to communicate something, or maybe to warn him, but it wasn't until the man raised his right hand that had otherwise been hidden beneath his body and revealed the

gun that was still clutched in it that he realised the horrific truth: the soldier had done this to himself. It had meant to be a suicide, but something had gone wrong, for it had left him mortally wounded and more than likely out of his mind in pain and shock. He pointed at the doorway and pulled the trigger repeatedly, grunting with each effort as the hammer slammed down on empty chambers. Presumably he'd tried to use the last bullet on himself.

"Can you hear me? Can you understand?" Steadman started to say, but faltered, realising it was pointless.

He muttered an oath under his breath, unable to comprehend. He felt dislocated, as if in his escape he had torn through a veil and discovered madness existing alongside him. He wanted to ask him what had happened here, what had terrified him to the point of trying to take his own life, but the soldier was obviously beyond rational thought; indeed, it was remarkable that he was still alive at all. But it left Steadman with a dilemma; he was loath to leave him in this state and prolong his suffering, but didn't know if he possessed the courage to finish what the man had started. The latter was the merciful option (there was nothing a medic could do for him now), but he wasn't sure he could reconcile that fact with his faith. In all his twenty-five years on the planet, he had never killed anything higher up the food chain than a bluebottle.

Odd, he mused, that with all the mass murder going on around him, thousands of men dying in seconds to capture a few feet of ground, he should balk at one act of kindness.

The soldier started to wail louder, and Steadman thought he caught the semblance of actual words beneath it; surprised, he moved closer, straining to hear.

"... they... they *come*..." he gurgled, waving the gun in front of him. "... they know you're here..."

"Who? The Germans?"

If the man heard the question, he gave no indication. "... burn... should've *burned*..." His voice descended into a groan.

Steadman was puzzled for a moment, then glanced down at the kerosene cans and flashed back to the corpses piled outside.

... *as if for a funeral pyre*...

... *burn*...

"Mother of God," he said quietly. Understanding gradually began to dawn, and with it came a tingle of fear; had this soldier been left here to destroy the remains? But to what end? To cover up a war crime? Or to make absolutely sure they were truly dead? For some reason he hadn't been able to go through with it - what had he seen that suicide was the only way out?

There was a scabbling from beyond the doorway, a sound that turned Steadman's bowels to water. The dying soldier suddenly became animated, shaking and crying ever more violently. Steadman stood and backed away, his eyes fixed on the tarpaulin-covered entrance. He tried to reason that it could be rats scurrying amongst the bodies, but couldn't even convince himself. He felt his breaths becoming shorter, his scalp prickle with sweat despite the chill. The revolver was slippery in his hand.

A low moan echoed outside; and then the sheeting bulged as if something was pushing against it, looking for a way in. Steadman attempted to swallow, the inside of his mouth like sandpaper, and raised the gun. He sensed a breeze brush against his

face, but had seen nothing come through the doorway; he moved nearer, peering into the gloom.

"Show yourself," he demanded, his voice cracking; then yelled in fright as something grabbed his leg. He staggered, glanced down and recoiled in disgust: the upper half of a German soldier's torso was crawling across the floor, one hand clutched around his ankle. In its wake, like a snail's trail, it left a glistening smear of blood, painted there by the entrails emerging from its rapidly evacuating stomach cavity. Its head was upturned, its eyes glazed, its mouth open and emitting a tiny wail from the back of its throat. Immobilised with shock, Steadman could do nothing but stare as the creature puts its lips to his trouser leg and attempt to bite through it.

Blinking himself out of his paralysis, he roared in revulsion, kicked out at it and managed to loosen its grip; he stepped away and without thinking fired the gun, catching it in the shoulder. The impact knocked it back, but it was clearly still alive; it struggled to right itself like a turtle flipped onto its shell. Steadman moved closer in horrified fascination, raising the revolver for a better shot, then caught himself before he could pull the trigger. He'd never killed anything before, either on two legs or four, and yet here he was prepared to act without pause; this creature, as his mind had fixedly called it, was still a man. He had survived horrendous injuries, either through enormous willpower or some quirk of physiology that enabled the heart to still beat even as the veins and arteries spurting into empty air, and, like the British soldier, could not be long for this world. Did that give him the right to help usher him towards death?

The German was crawling in his direction once more. Clearly, despite the pain he must be in, he was not going to give up on Steadman as his objective. Steadman allowed him to draw closer, and dropped to his haunches.

"I cannot help you," he enunciated, wishing he could recall what little of the language he knew. He shook his head, holding up his hands. "*Nicht... gut...*"

The man didn't seem to understand, or even to hear him. Still he approached, whimpering like a whipped dog, his insides rasping against the wooden floor. He grasped Steadman's boot and started gnawing on it as if it were a bone; Steadman could feel teeth attempting to penetrate the leather. Tears sprang in his eyes; he knew now that this was not one man desperately clinging onto life despite the ravages of his injuries. This was something else entirely, something beyond any kind of reasoning. He was no longer human, but the product of something... unholy. He shook himself free of the man's clutches, put the revolver to the back of his skull and squeezed his eyes shut at the same time as he squeezed the trigger. He winced at the bang, thinking: forgive me.

When he opened his eyes, the man was finally motionless, the contents of his head spread out in a parabola around him. Steadman shivered uncontrollably, the gun trembling before him. He could not stay in this charnel pit a moment longer; better he took his chances on the battlefield or in a military cell than spend the night amongst this horror.

He moved towards the doorway, glancing back at the British soldier when he heard him cry out. "I'm sorry," he said, turning his head away.

Steadman pulled back the tarpaulin and bit down on a scream: the trench was alive. Where there was once dead stacked upon dead, shadows now shifted and slithered, a familiar wail carrying on the wind. He saw arms and hands clawing themselves free

like the freshly buried rising from their graves. Dark figures wobbled as they stood and grew accustomed to their newfound resurrection; some were missing appendages, some emptied viscera at their feet the moment they were upright, but it didn't take them long for their heads to turn in his direction. He could see them sense him, almost as if they were sniffing the air and hearing the beat of a warm, living heart. They began to shuffle forward, tripping over one another, the trench a tangle of grasping limbs.

Steadman did not hesitate. He rushed back to the soldier, grabbed the kerosene cans and began to splash fuel through the entranceway at the approaching creatures. When all three cans were empty, he flung the lantern into the throng.

Instantly, the dark confines of the trench became an explosion of light. The first of the figures were immediately immolated, man-sized candles awkwardly stumbling into those behind, the touch allowing the fire to spread. Thick black smoke began billowing into the air, and soon it was impossible to distinguish between the shapes being devoured by the wall of flame. For a moment, Steadman felt a small spark of hope; the inferno seemed to have halted them. But mere seconds later he saw that they were still coming, implacable and relentless, that ever-present moaning barely rising an octave. The ones at the front were shrivelled husks, turning to ash before his eyes, but they were replaced by others, unconcernedly treading on their fallen comrades as they surged forwards.

Steadman let loose a cry of frustration and fired at the nearest creature, blowing a puff of soot from its arm. There was no way out. He checked the chambers of the revolver and found he had three bullets left. That was at least some comfort.

He walked over to the British soldier and knelt beside him. He knew what Steadman intended and nodded slightly, his eyes pleading. Steadman embraced him and placed the gun barrel under his chin, offering a silent prayer before firing.

He sat down next to the body and surveyed the room, littered with the dead. His faith had instructed him that life was to be preserved at all costs - but that had been shattered. Death was preferable to the parody of life these creatures exhibited.

They were beginning to come through the doorway, shadows dancing on the walls as the flames flickered. They bumped into the table and chairs and bed, trying to find their way around, igniting fires as they did so.

He put the revolver in his mouth, tasting the oil. Funny: he had refused to be sacrificed to the war, made the choice of life over death, and yet here he was preparing to offer himself up to Purgatory. This seemed the lesser of two evils; whatever those things were - and the Army was aware of them, that was plainly evident - he guessed that if they took him, he would end up in a far, far worse place. Better this way; better a sinner than a victim of the Devil's works.

Steadman turned his head and looked up at a map of Europe on the wall, which was starting to smoulder and blacken as the creatures brushed past. Maybe this is the Apocalypse, he thought as his finger tightened on the trigger. Maybe this is the beginning of the end.

If they're the future... God help the living.

PART ONE

A Sound Like Breaking Glass

Cruell and sodaine, hast thou since
Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence?

John Donne,
The Flea

Now

CHAPTER ONE

The head didn't so much explode when hit by the bullet as deflate, a fat sack of gas puckering like an emptied balloon, haloed by a blossoming cloud of dust and powdered shards of ancient bone.

"Fuckin' things are rotten," Hewitt muttered. "See the way it burst like a goddamned watermelon?"

Gabe grunted a reply, chambering another round. He put his eye to the infrared sight and swept the street, their vantage point from atop the multi-storey car park offering a decent view of the shadowy thoroughfare beneath them. Dark figures were stumbling in the blood-red gloom of the eyepiece, hunched silhouettes shuffling aimlessly from one side of the road to the other. They seemed unperturbed by the shot that had rung out seconds earlier, or the fact that the skull of one of their brethren had vanished in a puff of miasmatic residue, what was left below the neck keeling over like a felled tree. They stepped over him - or, rather, through him, snagging their feet on his form if they wandered too close - barely aware the body was even there. Gabe moved the rifle in tiny increments, following the path of each figure, trying to gauge the numbers, his crosshairs alighting on one for several moments before drifting across to its nearest companion.

"Well?" he heard Hewitt ask. "How many you reckon?"

"About two dozen in the street," he answered quietly, continuing his vigil. "Seem fairly spread out. Can't see too many nooks and crannies to hold any nasty surprises."

He felt Hewitt shift up onto his knees beside him and once more peer into his night-vision binoculars. It was enough for Gabe to finally take his eye from the rifle-sight and irritably study his colleague. The kid annoyed him for numerous reasons - he was excitable but lacked the experience to put that enthusiasm to good use, he wasted ammo, and he had a sarcastic streak, a trait Gabe found particularly ignoble - but it never failed to particularly rankle him that Hewitt would often ask his opinion then double-check it for himself immediately afterwards. Gabe guessed the kid was trying to assume he had some kind of say in the decision-making process, rather than being the extra pair of hands he undoubtedly was, useful only for the inevitable donkey work. If it weren't for the bountiful haul they were expecting, Gabe would quite

happily go on one of these missions alone. He could certainly do without having to converse with the little idiot. But he kept these niggles to himself, chiefly because Flowers seemed fond of the kid - Hewitt was, after all, eager to please and would go out of his way to find favour in the boss man's eyes, looking to weasel his way up the hierarchy. You had to watch what you said sometimes, in case a version of the truth spilled back to the wrong people.

"Yeah," Hewitt drawled with an infuriating note of authority to his voice that sounded alien coming out of his mouth. "Two dozen looks about right to me too." He turned to Gabe. "Where's the store?"

"Right at the end, in a little square offset from the main street."

"Shit." He looked anxiously again through the binoculars.

Gabe tried to stop the smile that creased his lips, but nothing could prevent it. He turned his head away so the kid wouldn't catch sight of it. "I think we can take 'em. Four-man team shouldn't have any trouble."

"What about the way back? We're gonna be weighed down—"

"I'll keep you covered, don't worry," Gabe said, admonishing himself for the patronising tone that had snuck in. He glanced at the man and woman silently crouched against one of the car park's concrete pillars behind them. "Ali, Davis - there's no other way round, so we'll be going straight through. Stay sharp. Standard routine; pick your targets and don't panic, okay?"

"Can't we use the motor?" the man - Davis - asked.

"Road's fucked," Hewitt interjected.

"What he said," Gabe continued. "It's blocked with debris, and we can't risk cracking an axle. We'll drive up as far as we can go, then we'll have to be quick on our toes. Ali, you'll have to stay with the vehicle. Keep the engine running; let us know if the situation develops. I don't want to come out of there and find someone's stolen our ride."

The woman nodded. "You think there's others like us in the area?"

"Not in the immediate vicinity - deadheads are too concentrated - but our gunshots are gonna be heard by pockets of survivors, no question of that. Anything pops up that ain't maggoty, you give us a squawk."

Davis clicked the safety off on his snubnose. "This had better be worth it."

"Michaelson's info hasn't let us down yet," Gabe said, swinging his rifle onto his shoulder as he stood. "Come on, let's hop to it."

They scampered through the heavy silence of the abandoned car park, their feet tapping quietly against the cold grey ground. Lights still burned in fluorescent tubes positioned on the ceiling, powered by a forgotten generator left rumbling untended in the bowels of the building, giving the vast open space surrounding them a stark, flat glare. A few vehicles were dotted around this level, some of them with their doors hanging wide as if the occupants had fled in a great hurry. Rancid bags of food bulged from the open hatchback of a nearby Fiat, a black cloud of flies rising from it as they passed, settling in their wake. Tyre marks and oil splatters streaked the floor, and something darker and textured was sprayed up against a ticket machine. A fading crimson handprint neatly filled one of the reinforced glass panels of a door that led to the stairwell, the wood beneath it splintered as if repeatedly kicked.

Gabe led the others through the concrete expanse, gluing themselves to the walls

where they could, avoiding the impenetrable shadows of the stairs or the lift shaft till they came in sight of his armoured Escort. He tossed the keys to Ali and motioned for her to start it up, then scanned the pools of fluorescent light diminishing into the distance. The emptiness was unnerving. If he concentrated, beyond the silence he could hear the moans drifting on the still air. In truth, they were always there, a white-noise hum you tried to tune out. It was a permanent aural backdrop, like mordant birdsong.

But all the birds are gone, he thought not for the first time, cocking his head and looking out at the starless night, and the skies and treetops and roofs of the city will never echo with their sound again.

The vehicle barked into life, the roar of Ali revving the accelerator rebounding off the concrete walls. The noise would undoubtedly attract some attention, but the stiffs were going to know they were amongst them soon enough anyway. Davis yanked open the rear door behind the driver's seat and folded himself in; Hewitt sparked up a cigarette and clambered in the other side, positioning his shotgun through the window. Gabe stood for a moment beside the rumbling car, listening to its timbre, holding a palm against the vibrating roof, confident that the engine was turning over smoothly, careful to discern there were no wheezy splutters emerging from the exhaust pipe. He'd briefly and inexpertly serviced the car himself only a few days before, but he had to make sure they could rely on their ride. London was no longer a town that you wanted to travel by foot if you could help it.

Satisfied, he swung into the bucket seat beside Ali and strapped himself in. The interior was refitted to provide the maximum protection, the tubular bars of a roll cage strengthening the shell if the Escort were to flip. Outside, front and rear windscreens were covered with a thick wire mesh that didn't particularly aid visibility but were a lifesaver when it came to force of numbers attempting entry. Similarly, the side panelling and roof were reinforced with steel plates capable of withstanding a high-speed impact. It meant the vehicle had the rather undignified appearance of a hammered-together metal box, but previous excursions had proved both its reliability and durability; many a time Gabe had ploughed it through a dozen-strong crowd of stiffs with barely a dent on the bodywork, their grasping fingers unable to find purchase, grave-brittle bones snapping when struck. It wasn't quite a tank - though Hewitt had badgered him often enough (not entirely jokingly) for some kind of mortar cannon to be operated through the sunroof - but it suited its purpose.

Ali guided the car past the raised exit barriers, the attendant booths long deserted, and onto the slip road. Gabe repeated the route to her, noting a handful of shambling figures detaching themselves from the twilight. The vehicle was like a beacon to them, its sound and movement awakening their interest - the only living thing, in all likelihood, for a radius of a couple of miles. He heard Hewitt working the slide on the shotgun behind him, and glanced in the wing-mirror to see him lean out slightly, flicking the dog-end of his cigarette at the nearest zombs.

"I don't want you taking any unnecessary potshots, Hewitt," Gabe warned him. "Conserve your ammo."

"Yeah, yeah," Hewitt murmured in reply, resting the barrel on the window frame.

Gabe turned in his seat to face the kid, but the younger man refused to meet his gaze, instead concentrating furiously on the darkened buildings passing by. Davis

clearly caught the tension between the two, though said nothing.

"I'm serious," Gabe remarked. "There are far, far too many of the things for us to gun down every one indiscriminately, and it's just a waste of resources we can't afford to squander. This isn't a duck-shoot. You choose your targets and you make them count, understand?"

"I said I heard you, O'Connell," the kid answered, glaring at Gabe finally. "I have done this once or twice before, you know. Christ, I can handle it."

"I know you've done it before." Gabe softened his tone, returning to face the front. "I'm just saying: don't leave yourself open."

"Main street's coming up on the left," Ali said quietly.

"OK, we'll only be able to get a couple of hundred yards down it before we'll have to bail out."

The dead were emerging in increasing numbers, their hungered, soul-black groans growing in volume. They staggered from shadowy shopfronts and doorways, stumbling off the pavement and onto the road, what little senses still chiming in their grey-green skulls alerting them to the proximity of warm flesh. They made half-hearted attempts at reaching out to the car as it sped past them, their cries developing a note of angry disappointment. Gabe watched them in the mirror attempt a stiff-legged pursuit, arms held out in front of them, pushing past one another with an eagerness that seemed at odds with their barely functioning bodies. *They only come alive at the prospect of food*, he thought, *and right now we're their movable feast*.

"Fuckers," Hewitt murmured from the back, grimacing at the throng with an unconcealed hatred.

Ali slowed the Escort slightly to take the turn onto the main road, wrenching hard on the steering wheel. The tyres span on something on the tarmac and lost their purchase, the vehicle's rear fishtailing, and for a moment the car was skidding, the sharp screech of rubber drowning out the cries of the dead. The woman pumped the brake and steered into the slide, bringing the car to a juddering halt; thrusting it into gear, she stomped on the accelerator and the vehicle lunged forward, powering down the high street. Watching her from the corner of his eye, Gabe noticed that Ali hadn't even broken a sweat, her face a mask of grim determination. A small, morose woman in her forties, an ex-wife of one of Flowers' button men, she was one of the best drivers in the boss man's predictably male-dominated outfit and had characteristically proven her worth with little flamboyance or showy technique. Even Hewitt held his tongue when piloted by her, confident in her hands.

"What was it?" Gabe asked over his shoulder.

"Roadkill, I think," Davis answered, peering out of the back window at a red pulpy residue the car had just skidded through. "Something splattered across the highway."

"Remains of the day," Hewitt remarked, snorting back a laugh. "Somebody ended up zombie supper."

"Enough of that," Gabe snapped, trying to keep the tension from his voice. "Concentrate on the job in hand."

The hordes of dead were becoming more clotted as they sped forward, a clawing, mewling mass that shambled towards the Escort as one. The longest deceased were merely desiccated skeletons clothed in a tissue-thin brown veil of rank flesh, their eyes shrivelled back into their sockets, their crooked limbs flapping independently of the

torso as if the muscle and bone within had perished; the freshest corpses had recognisable features, the skin grey and taut, their fatal wounds often readily apparent. They were young and old, male and female, of all races, from every level of the social strata. Death was the great leveller, no question of that, Gabe mused. There was no distinction between them anymore, nothing to separate this mob into individual entities: a paunchy bald man in a torn business suit lurched beside a teenager in motorcycle leathers with a scarlet-raw face, and a grandmother still clothed in her burial shroud and caked in the undertaker's make-up. They paid no heed to each other, each seemingly oblivious to their neighbour and indeed the numbers of their kin surrounding them; locked inside their own private resurrection, all they wanted, all they hungered for, was the living, driven by an insatiable craving their brains could not possibly fathom.

The car shuddered as a ghoul bounced off its wing, Ali tightening her grip on the wheel in a bid to keep the vehicle under control. She made little effort to avoid the deadheads - indeed, it was impossible to slalom between them, so dense was the crowd becoming - and concerned herself with ensuring the car stayed central on the road. The stiffly merely shuffled into its path like bugs collecting on the windscreen, utterly ignorant of the velocity the vehicle was moving at. The front end ploughed through a skinny naked man, who exploded like a dandelion in a strong wind, fragments washing back in the Escort's slipstream.

Hewitt was right Gabe thought. *Damn things are falling apart.*

"Don't think I can go much further," Ali yelled above the *thump-thump-thump* of the dead rebounding off the bodywork or fists slamming down on the steel panelling. The car's suspension started to bounce as it rolled over cadavers and rubble. Several blackened vehicles lay on their sides on the pavement ahead, or poking half out of shattered shop windows. A bus leaned precariously against a wall, displaying its undercarriage.

"OK, this is the end of the line, guys," Gabe shouted, tearing free his seat belt. "Hewitt, Davis - create a circumference, then follow me." He turned to the woman. "Ali, once they start following us, that'll take the heat off you. Turn the car around, keep her running. We're not back in ten minutes, get out of here."

"Good luck."

Gabe smiled. "Piece of cake."

Hewitt was the first out, simultaneously throwing open the door and discharging his shotgun at the nearest knot of ghouls; the blast punched through them as if he had hurled a grenade, flinging a handful backwards and, in one case, bisecting another at the waist. He worked the slide and fired again, popping a number of heads with a single shell, then used the butt to club the skull of a zombie in a stained traffic warden's uniform that dared to venture too close. *Goddamn*, he thought, *that felt satisfying.*

Davis appeared on the other side of the Escort and sprayed the dead with a burst from his sub-machine gun, raking them with bullets that tore through their empty, papery carcasses. They folded like wheat before a thresher. He pulled his snubnose from the waistband of his jeans with his left hand and snapped off half a dozen deft, accurate headshots, silencing the prone, moaning zombies forever.

Gabe clambered from the car, put his rifle to his shoulder and marched forward,