

# MONSTER PLANET

A ZOMBIE NOVEL

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# **PART ONE**

# Chapter One

Ayaan shoved the cargo loading door open with one booted foot and dry desert air rushed into the body of the helicopter. The aircraft wobbled but didn't fall out of the sky. The warrior stuck her head out into the blue sky, the graying ringlets of her hair bouncing in the wind. Her face wrinkled as she squinted at something on the ground below. A mass of people bodies, anyway advancing on the encampment. For once this was no false alarm. Get me a close approach, she shouted.

From his position at the controls Osman didn't turn to answer but the crew all heard him over their radio headsets. Of course, girl. How close would you like? Do you want to smell them?

Ayaan ignored him, instead turning to Sarah. She gave the younger woman a warm smile and beckoned her to come over. Don't worry, she said, I won't let you fall out.

Sarah moved to the open door of the Mi-8 and leaned out over the long-ago-emptied rocket pods. She needed to get a better look at the army below them, without the interference of the copter's fuselage between her and the mob. Fifty feet below grey arms strained toward the helicopter as if they could grab it and pull it down from the sky. The dead had lousy depth perception.

I need an estimate of their strength, Ayaan demanded. Are they fresh?

Sarah studied the crowd as Osman slewed the copter around in a wide turn over them. They had come out of nowhere, this army. The dead rarely announced their movements but a group this size required some kind of coordination. The mindless undead didn't work together unless some strong will was directing them. What they had come for was a mystery. What Sarah did know was that Ayaan wouldn't allow it. This little stretch of the coastline of Egypt was her nation, maybe the last nation of the living left on Earth. She wasn't about to let the dead take it for themselves. They had scrambled the copter the moment the first reports of movement on the perimeter had come in.

Now Ayaan wanted Sarah's opinion about how to proceed. Sarah was younger, just out of her teens compared to Ayaan's encroaching middle age, so she had better eyes. She also had other senses that Ayaan lacked.

Trying to ignore the howling of the wind outside of the helicopter, the glare of the sun on the sand, Sarah pulled the hood of her sweatshirt up to cover her hair. She focused her attention on the parts of her that could sense death, just as she'd been taught. The hair on the back of her neck and on her forearms. The sensitive skin behind her ears.

She closed her eyes, but she kept looking.

What she saw startled her. The ground below teemed with purplish energy, dark splotches where the profane energy of the dead smoldered cold and hungry. But between those shadows burned beacons of golden light, stronger, more vital alive. Impossible. The dead and the living couldn't work in close proximity. The dead existed only to devour life. Still. She saw what she saw. Even as she attempted to process what that meant she saw one of the golden shapes moving, lifting something to its eye. Something held with both hands. She opened her eyes and saw a living man with pale white skin aiming a rifle right at her.

Look out! she shouted into her microphone, loud enough to make herself wince. Before anyone could respond a bullet tore upward through the fuselage of the Mi-8, barely missing the foot of one of Ayaan's soldiers. The woman shrieked and jumped backwards as automatic rounds tore through the thin skin of the copter's belly. Light shot upwards into the cabin wherever a bullet came through, streaking the dark cool space inside. Noise drummed along the deck plates, pattered on the helicopter's roof. Ayaan started shouting orders but Osman was ahead of her. The helicopter banked around so hard Sarah could hear the airframe wanting to come apart. The pilot yanked back on his control yoke and they popped up into the air like a cork out of a bottle, gaining altitude fast enough to make Sarah's stomach curl up on itself like an injured animal. She swallowed back the vomit that rushed up her throat and lifted one hand to try to brush the sweat from her forehead. She stopped in mid-gesture, though, when she saw her hand was sticky with blood.

Terrified of looking, too scared not to, she turned slowly around. The interior of the helicopter had been painted bright red. Blood had pooled between the crew seats and was draining slowly through maybe a hundred narrow bullet holes. What remained of a dead woman lay sprawled across the deck, one shattered, thumbless hand so close to Sarah she could have reached down and held it. She felt a perverse desire to do just that.

It was Mariam. The expert sniper of the platoon. It had been Mariam. It wouldn't be for long.

The hand twitched. Closed into a loose fist. The dead soldier convulsed upward, her shoulders rolling as she sat up to look at Sarah with blank eyes. Her mouth opened wide, blood spilling out from between her teeth. Most of her rib cage on the left side had been blown away she definitely wasn't breathing.

It could happen that quickly. Sarah had witnessed undeath before. She took her pistol out of her pocket and lined up a shot with the dead woman's forehead. Even as the new ghoul lunged at her she fired. A little splutter of blood burst from the woman's right temple. It wasn't a solid kill. She could feel the ghoul looming over her, getting closer. They were slow, but deadly a single scratch or bite would pump toxins into Sarah's bloodstream. Her fingers shook as she lifted her weapon and tried to aim.

Ayaan rushed Mariam and grabbed her by one shoulder and her remaining hip. Cover, she shouted at Sarah. Sarah protected her face and head from clawing fingernails as

Ayaan rushed Mariam out of the open cargo door. Her undead body pinwheeled down to smack the sand in the midst of the army below.

Ayaan and Mariam had been together since they were schoolgirls, since before they had gotten their first periods. Since before they learned how to shoot. Nobody said a word. It was just that kind of a world, and it had been for twelve hard years.

Osman kept climbing until they were well out of range of the guns below. The dead kept reaching for the helicopter but the living stopped firing and they were safe again. Firearms, Ayaan said, wagging her jaw around to pop her ears. The dead don't shoot.

Sarah steeled herself. She needed to be part of this conversation. There were living people down there, too. Maybe a third as many as the dead. They were all carrying rifles. I don't claim to know how that works.

Ayaan nodded. We knew there had to be one of them providing close support. One of them. A *khasiis*. The Somali word meant monster. English speakers used the word lich. The not-so-mindless dead. When a ghoul managed one way or another to preserve its intellect post mortem they also tended to develop certain new faculties. They learned to see the energy of death, just like Sarah did. Some of them learned to control other undead, to communicate with them telepathically and bend them to a Monstrous will. Ayaan had some experience with Monsters. She had shot one in the head years prior, one named Gary. Gary had not only survived that shot he'd gone on to enslave an entire city. It took a raging inferno to finally bring Gary down and Ayaan had lost plenty of friends in the process. Sarah had her own reason to hate Gary. Her father was one of the friends Ayaan had lost. There must be a top-level asset nearby.

Top-level is right. To override their natural instinct to devour the living. Fathia, Ayaan's second in command, leaned her chin on the stock of her assault rifle and looked scared. Gary could do that, for a little while. But even he had limits. If this army has been moving together for a long time, marching together it would take a stronger *khasiis* than Gary. And there's only one of those that we know about.

The Russian, Ayaan said. Her eyes narrowed to thin, angry slits. The Tsarevich.

Sarah knew it had to be true. But what would the world's most pre-eminent monster be doing in Egypt? Everyone knew the boy lich's story. He'd been injured in a car accident, a hit and run, back when there had still been cars. He had languished in a semi-comatose state for years in a hospital bed, half dead even before the Epidemic began. When the dead rose the boy had been abandoned where he lay, only to die and rise again with his intellect intact and with new senses and abilities, new supernatural powers no one had ever seen before.

They said he had an army of the dead, and a cult of the living, and that in some parts of Siberia he was considered to be the second coming of Jesus Christ. The stories about him always revolved around his cruelty and his power. They made him sound like a devil. For himself he claimed only to be a Tsarevich, a Prince of the Dead.

He came here himself, Ayaan said. Her cold eyes lit up, but grew no warmer. He finally made a mistake.

## Chapter Two

Ayaan had a responsibility to the survivors—the living—she had left outside of Port Said. She could have ordered Osman at any time to circle back and provide air support for the camp. She didn't. The other women in the helicopter started to trade sidelong glances, the occasional half question. "We've never fought an enemy with guns before. Shouldn't we...?" Leyla asked.

Ayaan glared back at them. Some of Mariam's blood still flecked her cheek. "The camp is hardened against attack, if that's even what he's after. If we give him a chance to get away now we'll never see him again. We're going to find the Russian, today, and we're going to remove him from play."

It was enough for most of the soldiers. Ayaan had lead them into stranger encounters and she had proven her tactical brilliance a hundred times over. If she said she knew what she was doing they believed her. Sarah wasn't so sure but she kept it to herself. As the youngest member of Ayaan's unit and the only non-Somali (she was half American, on her father's side, which was a strike against her with most of the women) her opinion counted for little. Still she couldn't help having a bad feeling.

Ayaan had always been more than cautious than anyone around her. She'd bordered on paranoia in the past—and it had kept her people alive. Now she was throwing herself into the lion's maw. It made no sense.

"I've got visual confirmation of a second group," Osman called over the headset band. "Smaller... maybe fifty individuals."

"Close with them but keep an eye on the floor." Ayaan had a pair of field glasses in her hand. They had been designed to provide night vision but the batteries had died years before. They still worked as binoculars in broad daylight. Her voice turned to ice cubes slithering out of a pitcher. "There."

Sarah moved forward hand over hand, grabbing at the nylon loops sewed into the headrests of the crew seats. In the cockpit of the Mi-8 she could look down through the chin bubble and see what Ayaan was talking about. About fifty people—almost all of them dead—were laboring up the side of a sand dune below her. Most of them were tugging on thick lines, dragging a flatbed rail car kitted out with enormous balloon tires. On its back crouched a kind of tent, maybe a yurt, while ghouls chained to the flatbed turned enormous cranks while living men crewed .50 caliber machine guns rigged up in universal mounts.

The flap of the yurt fell back and someone emerged from the shadowy interior. Then something happened to the light in the helicopter, to Sarah's eyes, to her... other senses.

Though she was still five hundred meters away Sarah could make out his features perfectly. She felt as if she were looking through binoculars, though she wasn't. He was a boy—shorter even than herself, maybe ten or twelve years old. He was astonishingly beautiful.

His skin was so white it stood out bluish in the desert sun. His complexion was perfectly clear, his hair a pale gold lighter than his skin. His large, soulful eyes smoldered with blue flame. He wore the armor of a medieval warrior, scaled down to fit his frame and enameled in glossy black then worked with a motif of bones and creeping vines. He carried a scepter in his right hand topped with a bleached human skull. Sapphires winked from its dark eye sockets.

He looked right at Sarah. Not just in her direction but right at her, making perfect eye contact. Which was when she realized something was wrong.

“Grab something, ladies,” Osman called just as he swung the Mi-8 around. The machine guns mounted on the flatbed blasted tracer fire through the air, yellow sparks that arced up and tried to touch the aircraft. Fathia leapt up out of her seat even as the bullets tore past so close Sarah was dazzled by their flickering light. The soldier started yanking assault rifles down from the rack at the front of the cargo bay and tossing them to her squad mates. Ayaan unstrapped herself and picked up the oilcloth bundle of her own weapon. The same AK-47 she'd carried since she had left school.

Osman had never impressed Sarah before by displaying courage but he didn't shrink from Ayaan's orders—perhaps the two of them shared some secret reason for acting so irrationally. The pilot opened up the copter's throttle and pushed forward on the yoke, throwing the Mi-8 right at the flatbed with all the power the dual powerplants could muster. Soldiers leaned out of the crew door and the rear loading ramp, secured from a deadly fall to the sands below only by their safety lines, and the air in the helicopter vibrated with the noise of their weapons discharging again and again and again. As quickly as that they were in the midst of battle.

One of the ghouls working the flatbed's cranks slumped against its wheel, its head a dark smear and the flatbed slewed to one side. The Russian's troops retaliated by spraying bullets across the fuselage of the helicopter and shattering one of the porthole-like windows on the port flank. “Again, and closer this time,” Ayaan shrieked as she slapped a full magazine into her rifle and tested its iron sights.

“I'll take you right up his nose if you like, and leave you there,” Osman replied but he wheeled around for another pass. He brought the aircraft in low and fast, almost losing his landing gear as they brushed the top of the yurt. Ayaan's rifle snapped and spat with tight, perfectly-controlled bursts of three bullets each. The ghouls dragging the flatbed scattered away from her fire but not fast enough. Heads burst, bodies spun and fell. One of the machine gunners slipped and fell onto the sand, his blood jetting from his ruptured chest.

Sarah stared at the boy standing on the flatbed. He looked like the soul of calm. The