

DEAD THREADS

WINTER KILLS

DAY 24

In all of God's Creation, there is no finer weapon than a rifle and a man trained in its proper use and utilization. John Dane, was just such a man. The Steyr SSG.69 rifle currently fixed to his shoulder was just such a rifle.

Through the magnified reticle of the Hensoldt scope mounted atop the Steyr's receiver, the village of Creighton came into sharp focus. A single main road cut through the centre of that small hamlet, winding its way along the narrow floor of a steep-walled valley that extended south toward the township of Dalton, and north toward Killian, located further up the pass. Side streets branched off that main artery like nerves branching outward from a human spinal cord. Each one of those streets was lined with buildings — houses, businesses, storage sheds, municipal offices. Creighton had been a bustling community. Now all of that was in the past-tense.

Dalton was already a write-off. The Zees had overrun that place back in September. But all reports said Killian was free of the pestilence that had worked its way up the valley on the ebb side of last summer. At least for the moment. The coming of winter to the pass seemed to have slowed their advance, held it in check. Killian had been granted a reprieve, it seemed, but it was only a temporary one at best. Dane had a notion that once springtime came and the snows that blanketed the valley began to thaw, the Zees would be on the march again, with Killian and points farther north squarely in their sights.

For the moment, however, Dane had a Zee framed within his own sights. The Mil-Dot reticle of the Hensoldt scope was trained upon the unmoving figure of a Zee standing out in the middle of the intersection of Main Street, where Power Street cut across from east to west. The Zee was wearing a heavy plaid coat over layered shirts intended to protect it from the cold. But those clothes had been put on back in October, before the bite of winter had really clamped its teeth closed upon the valley. Now, near the end of

November, a simple jacket and thermal under shirt had proven too little to stop the Zee from freezing in its tracks right there outside the front door of the bank that occupied the southeast corner of Main and Power, its backlit box sign forebodingly dark beneath an iron grey sky.

Dane reached up and adjusted the magnification ring at the front of the Hensoldt's eyepiece bell. This particular riflescope had been constructed with a zoom range from 6-24x, more than sufficient for him to pick out and identify targets all the way across the valley to the far side of town. The bank at the intersection of Main and Power was perhaps 800 metres below and away from his current vantage point, well within range from this position.

Adjusting his posture ever so slightly, Dane shifted the Steyr rifle upon its front-mounted bipod and adjusted its fit into the socket of his right shoulder. He was beginning to feel a chill through the insulated layer of the shooting mat stretched out beneath him. The cold, bare rock radiated little warmth even on the sunniest of afternoons, causing him to shift position every so often. Over the past three days the sun had barely made an appearance at all, choosing to hide itself behind a low ceiling of clouds that scudded over the saw-tooth ridges of the surrounding mountains. Every now and then a column of golden light would burn through a break in that cover and cast its beam of illumination down upon the besieged village of Creighton. It was then that Dane was granted the clearest view of the ruination that had befallen the town, and it was then that he sat up here on his mountain and marked targets through the spotting scope currently tucked into the folds of the pack placed carefully beside him.

He had spotted Plaid Man a few days ago. This particular Zee hadn't seemed to offer much of a challenge at the time, frozen as he was in the middle of a wide open intersection with nothing to block Dane's line of sight but the swirling snow that whipped off the rooftops lining both sides of Power Street. On the day he had first added Plaid Man to his log book, Dane had been scouting the lines of Market and Garden Streets, farther to the north. The plan had been to start at the top end of the village and work his way down the valley, taking out Zees wherever he found them. The theory from on high made just enough sense to be scary. If they started at the top, by the time the cold snapped and the Zees became reanimated once more, they might have built themselves a buffer so the Army could roll in and take out the few that were left at the south end of the town. It was thought that this plan might help save Killian from suffering the same fate as Dalton and Creighton.

Dane had his doubts.

For now, though, his detail was extermination. Let the big hats occupying the empty office towers down in the City make the decisions and draw up the plans. All Dane had up here was his rifle and glass, and a radio with which he could call in supply drops as needed. Other than that, he was on his own. Just the way he liked it. How he executed the plan that was sent in to him was his own choosing, so long as he stopped the Zees in their tracks before the advantage slipped away from them.

Having squared the Hensoldt's reticle upon Plaid Man's face once more, Dane watched through eighteen power magnification for any sign that his target was animate. The cold had frozen most Zees where they stood. A flash freeze had whipped down the valley about three weeks ago, turning the whole of that vale into one giant ice box.

The military, having pulled out of Creighton when it became apparent that the village had been lost, had set up road blocks farther north along the main highway, about midway between the top end of this hamlet and the southernmost edge of Killian township, higher up the pass. Dane had visited that blockade on the day he had been dropped in here. The organization was impressive: nearly one hundred troops, fully armed and ready to dispatch the first Zee that shuffled into their sights. They were backed up by machine guns, mortars, rocket launchers and even a trio of armoured vehicles mounting big-calibre chain guns in the flat turrets set atop their hulls. Anything that came trudging around the bend of that blacktop roadway was in for a nasty surprise, and was likely to find itself smeared all over the surrounding rock walls of the canyon in a cacophony of thunder and a hail of lead.

For the time being, though, the only lead that would be flying across the valley would be exiting the muzzle of Dane's own Steyr rifle at about 2,750 feet per second.

The time had come to loose one of the .308-diameter bullets down the barrel of his rifle right now. This would be his first kill of the day. If the weather held the way it was supposed to, at least for the morning anyway, he could mop up the length of Power Street and move south to start on the tree-named avenues first thing tomorrow.

Poplar, Beech, Walnut and Maple Streets cut parallel lines across the valley just to the north of the hamlet's downtown core. Previous reconnaissance had revealed that the shooting lanes offered on the Forest Sector (as Dane had come to name that section of town) were somewhat dicey, what with all the leafless branches and power lines stretching across the open spaces between rooftops.

In preparation for that next section of the village, Dane had found himself a trio of vantage points that offered moderate to good sighting lines from which he could reach out and tag about two dozen Zees from range. Those he could not reach from distance with his rifle he would finish off with the SIG Sauer pistol currently strapped to his right thigh, or the Benelli shotgun standing in the rack back at the cabin that was his base camp, when he made his once-weekly descent into town to take out stragglers he had missed from the heights above the village.

By his estimate, the Forest Sector would require three days of clear skies to empty out of Zees. Otherwise he would have to go down there and do it all at close range. He preferred to weed out the visible targets from afar, then drop down into the village on the weekends to take out the few stragglers he had not been able to reach from his vantage points. This was the pattern had set for himself. Not the ideal situation, to be certain, but it was far better than the alternative of leaving them there until the thaw arrived and their frozen

bodies came back to life once more. That was a prospect no one was looking forward to, and it was the reason he was up here in the first place.

With the Hensoldt's reticle still trained upon Plaid Man's face, Dane adjusted his stance one last time, then settled in for the shot. His right hand was closed around the wrist of the Steyr's synthetic stock. Through the turned-back flap of his mitten, his bared finger rested against the trigger guard of the rifle, not yet ready to engage the trigger itself. His left arm was curled beneath the rifle's buttstock to support that end of the weapon with a steadying embrace. His bearded cheek rested upon a padded bag wrapped over the stock, lending both comfort and support for the shot he was about to take.

With his right eye trained upon the reticle set inside the tube of the Hensoldt scope, Dane held his target in place while he took one deep breath, held it for a moment, then slowly exhaled until his lungs were half emptied. Only then, with his heartbeat thudding dully in his ears, did he slip his right index finger onto the gentle curve of the rifle's trigger and begin to add pressure that would draw that lever back.

When the sear met its breaking point, the release of the firing pin housed inside the bolt came as an audible click. Barely a millisecond later the boom of the round exploding from the barrel's muzzle echoed across the valley. It crashed upon the far wall of mountains across the vale from his position, then sounded back upon him like a roll of fading thunder.

At the moment of detonation, the image that had been so clear through the riflescope was lost in a flurry of movement and vibration. But Dane, having become accustomed to the Steyr's response, rode through that recoil and continued to hold upon his target until the image stabilized once more. It was in that final second of flight time that he fixed his eye upon Plaid Man's face just in time to see the impact of the bullet, and confirm yet another kill for his log book.

The bullet slammed into the Zee's face, making contact just above the bridge of Plaid Man's nose. It bored through his head with little or no hesitation, then blasted through the rear of his skull in a spray of blood and bone and brain matter that stained the waist deep snow gathered around him. The Zee's head snapped backward upon its neck with the force of that impact.

Had the snow not been there to pack him in place, Dane had no doubt the thing would have toppled backward and crashed to the street where it would have lain prone atop its own wreckage. As it was, though, the Zee simply rocked forward once more and held fast there, its chin coming to rest upon its chest while its head lolled forward, exposing the ruin of its now emptied skull for Dane to see in all the clarity that the fine glass of his chosen optics could offer.

Rolling slightly to his left, Dane dragged a small nylon pouch containing his rifle log and notebook slightly closer so that he could jot details next to the entry listed there for Plaid Man. There were similar entries for more than sixty other Zees Dane had spotted and marked throughout the village since his arrival here on the mountainside. Each entry included a sighting date, location, position, designation as male or

female, adult or child, and any distinguishing markings or characteristics that might allow for identification once the clean-up crews started up from Dalton in the spring.

Dane had also added a few details for his own records, including an estimated range to target, atmospheric conditions at the time he made each kill, and the date and time of each shot taken.

Plaid Man had been his seventy-fifth extermination since he had started the shooting phase of the clearing-out campaign twenty-one days ago. According to the signs posted at either end of town, Creighton's population had been 550 souls at the time the first Zees had shuffled up from Dalton and overrun the town. Current estimates put about one-third of those inhabitants making it to the Safe Zone beyond the barricade up toward Killian before the town had been lost. That left about 350 or so locals still unaccounted for. And that was where Dane came in.

He had been commissioned by the Army to take on the role of hunter for this macabre operation. Official statements released to the press insisted the activities being carried out up here were a 'cleansing', a means by which to contain and exterminate the Zee epidemic before it could progress any further. Reports said similar operations were happening all across the country, on various scales. Even the neighbours to the south had taken notice of their efforts, and it was now widely rumoured that Sweep-And-Clear crews were operating on the other side of the border, using the methods being utilized by men like John Dane as a template for their own missions. Those same news reports were feeding kill numbers back to the big hats down in the City, suggesting that this phase of the war against the Zees was starting to turn their way.

Personally, Dane couldn't care less about what anyone else was doing. He cared only that he had his own job to do, and that it was getting done. The pages filled with measurements, details and kill specs was silent testament to the successes of his own efforts.

After marking his notations on Plaid Man's demise, Dane slid his notebook back out of harm's way, then reached up and worked the Steyr's bolt handle: up, then back. A spent casing of polished brass glittered in the veiled daylight as it tumbled from the rifle's ejection port and landed near the edge of the shooting mat. Dane gathered up that casing and slid it into one of the five elastic loops stitched to the far side of the lace-on pad affixed to the rifle's stock. Pushing the bolt forward and down again stripped another round from the rotary magazine and rammed it home into the firing chamber, making the rifle ready to use upon his next target.

"Where are you?" the hunter muttered to himself while he settled in behind the rifle once more and adjusted its angle to engage another quarry.

Dialing back the Hensoldt's magnification ring allowed him a wider field of view of the village below his position. Storefronts and brick façades fell back to HO scale while he shifted his crosshairs from the ruins of Plaid Man's remains to the form of a scraggly-looking woman standing farther along the length of

Power Street. Once his crosshairs fell upon her, Dane adjusted the zoom ring, then slid his finger up against the rifle's trigger with well-practiced familiarity.

The boom of the report rumbled through the valley. He had no doubt that the troops manning the barricade up toward Killian heard that shot, just as they had heard every other shot he had made since he had embarked upon this dark and lonely campaign.

DAY 25

Yesterday had been a good day, at least as far as the kill tally was concerned. He had racked up nine in total, a personal daily best. Power Street looked to be cleaned out. Today was Saturday. The weekend was here. As was his pattern, he would climb down the mountain and make a sweep through the town, double-checking Castle Avenue as well as the recently cleared Power Street to make certain he had not missed anything. By the time he made his report by radio this evening, he should have real numbers to provide to the Powers That Be who were running this whole operation from afar.

Close-in work required very different weapons than the ones he used at distance. As he moved about the old hunting cabin that had become his base of operations, Dane came to stand before a rack of long guns set near the front door. The Hensoldt-equipped Steyr rifle was right there where he had placed it upon his return last evening. Alongside that rifle was a tactical Benelli M4 semi-automatic shotgun fitted with a compact holographic sight and a collapsible butt stock. The third gun was a CQB-length AR.15 carbine tricked out with Picatinny rails, vertical fore grip, red dot sight, and twin high-capacity magazines held together with a nylon coupler.

The Steyr was his weapon of choice for the day-to-day requirements of this deployment.

The AR was there in case the shit really hit the fan.

For the days when he made his close-in sweeps, the Benelli M4 was his weapon of choice.

On his way out the door, Dane pulled the M4 off the rack and checked its load. A red plastic hull informed him that the chamber was loaded. The magazine tube slung beneath the barrel held five more rounds. An additional eight shells were at the ready in the saddle mounted to the left side of the receiver. The gun had been equipped with a high intensity light mounted to the left side of the synthetic fore arm. That light would burn through even the darkest shadows when he entered the buildings of the town, and would enable him to see his targets to ensure clean, quick kills.

With the SIG Sauer pistol riding in its customary place on his right thigh, and spare magazines fixed to his left leg, Dane snagged his radio from the charging unit set upon the counter near the sink. He had been running a portable generator since setting up this base camp. The quiet little engine produced enough juice to keep his two hand-held radios alive so that he could stay in touch with the garrison beyond the northern blockade. When he needed a supply drop, a chopper was flown in to deliver food, ammunition or medical supplies as he requested. If things took a sudden turn, he could be extracted from here with a little more than an hour's notice. But for the most part, his radio use was limited to twice-weekly status reports. And that was just fine with him. He preferred to work alone.

The first thing that hit him when he stepped out through the cabin's front door was the balmy temperature. It was still cold out here, easily twenty-five below zero, but that temperature was higher than it had been over the past few days. Hardly a spring thaw, he reasoned, but even a slight rise could trigger certain undesirable side effects. He would be wise to watch his step as he ventured into town.

Standing next to the door were a pair of cross-country skis, and a pair of narrow-gauge snowshoes. The valley had been blanketed with more than four feet of snow since the arrival of winter. It was that snowfall that had trapped most of the Zees where they stood, frozen in place, making them easy pickings from the heights above the village. Dane, however, did not trust the snow to hold his weight. The skis and snowshoes meant he was able to operate on top of the white stuff, instead of wading through it, a definite tactical advantage.

After slipping his boots into the neoprene bindings of the snowshoes, he started down the mountain along the old bush road that led into the town. Whoever had once owned the cabin he had converted into his private little Bat Cave had been kind enough to cut a rough track up from the highway. Dane had been dropped in by helicopter, but the road had allowed him to make sweeps of the town to mop up the Zees he was not able to take with his rifle.

The walk down the mountainside to the edge of town took about half an hour. Despite the cold, Dane felt a line of sweat dampening the fabric of the shirt stretched across his broad back. His legs were not quite burning with the unnatural exertion of walking such a wide stance as was required with the snowshoes on. He was in better than average shape, he knew, but by the time he got back to the cabin later this afternoon, his thighs would be humming from the workout he was putting them through. Still, some things had to be done, regardless of the cost or the pain.

The Marathon chronograph strapped to his right wrist told Dane it was nearly 10.00 hours by the time he reached the northernmost edge of the village of Creighton. He had swept these first streets several days ago, dispatching two dozen or so Zees that had made it this far. From the last three trips into town he knew that he was clear until he reached Canal Street, two blocks north of Power. He had yet to clear Canal, Market and Garden Streets, and now had the residual leftovers on Power Street to deal with as well.

Might not have brought enough ammo, Dane figure to himself. When he got back to the cabin this evening he would make his radio call-in and request a resupply drop. An Army helo would pass over before nightfall and hover at thirty feet, too high for a Zee to jump up and endanger the crew. A crate of whatever provisions Dane requested would be pushed out the side door for him to recover. That was it, plain and simple. The Army had decided that Dane's own boots would be the sole and last pair to set foot in the area around Creighton. Those had been the terms of his contract. He could live with those terms.

As he crossed the intersection of Main and Wentworth, Dane spotted the Zees he had taken out some ten days ago. Their ruined corpses were right where he had left them. Most stood upright, half-buried by the tsunami of snow that had swept through the village. A few, the smaller youths and children, were entombed up to their chins. Those had been the harder shots. Not because they were children — Dane knew this detail was not for everyone; not everyone could shoot a kid, not even a Zee-infected kid — but because there had been so little of them to spot from his shooting positions upon the cliffside.

Off to his left he spied the shattered head of a little girl jutting up through the windblown snow. Her blonde ringlet hair was matted and tangled now with the remains of her cranial cavity. She had been among the first few Zees Dane had dispatched on his preliminary sweep through the town not long after his arrival here. A 9-millimeter hollow point round from the SIG Sauer pistol had blasted through her forehead and emptied her brain matter through the shattered rear of her skull.

Dane felt neither guilt nor regret for that action. It was his perspective that he had ended the little girl's suffering, just as he had ended the suffering of those other residents of Creighton whom he had sighted down the slide of his SIG, down the barrel of the Benelli shotgun currently in his hands, or through the Hensoldt scope attached to the Steyr rifle. Those men and women and children had not been human anymore. In fact, they had been as far removed from human as one could possibly get. Dane's actions had been merciful, he reasoned, putting an end to their torment.

Beyond the shattered head of the little blonde girl, Dane spied other bodies that had been *liberated* by his shooting skill. Each of those corpses remained exactly as he had last left them. None had moved so much as a muscle, save for the old man down by the mailbox on the far side of the street. He had toppled over in the last windstorm and now lay face-up where the sidewalk might have been, his body half-buried by the drifting and blowing snow. Dane simply glanced his way, marked his position to memory, then continued on toward the centre of town.

When he reached Market Street, he spotted a dozen dead Zees along the length of that avenue. Each of them had been taken with head shots, for that was the only guaranteed way to drop one of their kind. Upon infection by the virus that had taken hold within them, a person's brain was completely rewired so that it operated on the most basic of levels only. Survival was the single driving force that compelled an infected Zee to attack a healthy person, and to infect them in turn.

Exactly how the virus itself was transmitted from one host to another was still the Great Unknown. There were rumours that all of this had started in a lab somewhere, that the Zee situation that was now encircling the globe had somehow been the work of scientists or doctors who had been seeking a way to enhance human performance. Their first test subjects had been physically fit individuals: athletes, gymnasts, dancers, trainers. The plan had been to introduce some means by which the researchers could gauge their natural abilities, then augment those strengths to overcome the boundaries that limited their potential. Later, the enhancement chip implant had been made available to Everyman, in an effort to bring even the most challenged individual into a world without limitations.

A noble idea, in theory, until it had all gone wrong.

Whatever their origin, once the program that ran those enhancement chips had failed, those thousands — if not *millions* — who had been augmented by the installation of those chips had broken out into the open world where they had scattered like roaches before an exterminator's wand. Driven by their carnal instincts, they had besieged the citizens of small towns and big cities alike, pouncing upon their victims and attacking them with teeth and claws, and raw, unadulterated fury. The simple exchange of bodily fluids, most commonly a bite wound from one who was already burning with what reports were calling the Zee Virus, was a death sentence. There was no cure, no coming back from the brink. Once the virus entered a healthy person's bloodstream, it rewrote their DNA, deleted their personality, and reprogrammed them to become an inexhaustible killing machine.

Dane was not certain what contracts like this one were supposed to achieve, other than stalling the inevitable. Mankind was on a downward slide, to be replaced by these mindless, programmed *things* that had once been human. Killing even a few hundred of them, as he was now tasked to do, would hardly change the outcome in the grand scheme of things. But a whole shitload of money had been thrown at this concept of aggressive sterilization, and not a small portion of those funds had been waved under his own nose. It might be considered a form of profiteering, he had decided at the outset, but since the world was used up anyway, why not go out with a few extra dollars in your pocket? Hell, there might even be some time left to put it to good use before the end finally came crashing down around them.

Once he had reached Market Street, Dane turned west and started down one sidewalk. As he passed each of the figures frozen there in the snow, he paused to check their condition. Most had been taken with a bullet fired from his own rifle over the past weeks. The few he encountered that were not yet finished were quickly dispatched with a blaze of buckshot from the Benelli at point-blank range. By the time he reached the end of the street and turned back to run the length toward the east, the once white snow was stained red by the carnage left in his wake.

The vast majority of the Zees had been out in the streets when the first cold snap and the ensuing snowstorms had enveloped them. It was here that they had been frozen in place, stilled in mid-stride so that

most of them looked like statues carved by the hands of some unknown artisans, then left out for others to gaze upon. Dane stopped in front of each one of them and stared into their faces for a few moments. He half expected to see some flicker of life behind those dimmed eyes. Not once had he seen anything but a soulless corpse staring back at him. There was no emotion behind any of those faces. They were dead things, lifeless things.

They did not flinch when the Benelli's big, dark bore came up and locked upon their faces.

They did not plead for their lives, or growl defiantly while Dane set his finger upon the shotgun's trigger.

They died without making a sound. And perhaps, in the end, that was the most disturbing part of this whole sorry ordeal.

At the far eastern end of Market Street, Dane paused to reload the Benelli shotgun. He had dispatched five more Zees down this side of the avenue, including one that had somehow locked itself inside a laundromat. The reports of those gunshots had peeled off the surrounding buildings, echoing down the valley so that the creatures that had overrun Dalton must have heard those shots.

Part in parcel with clearing the streets was the role of checking doors and investigating any houses or structures that appeared to have compromised. Dane found no such breaches on Market Street, but he had encountered a small nest of Zees up on Canal a few days ago and had been forced to take them out with his pistol and shotgun until his ammunition had run dry. The Zees there had apparently trapped a family inside their home, forcing them to retreat to the basement. When Dane pushed past the pile of corpses he had created and broke down the wooden door at the top of the basement steps, he had found the family gathered there below. The children had been laid face down upon the cold concrete floor so that they had not seen the guns that had killed them. The adults lay in separate corners of the room, each with a rifle barrel in their mouths and their brain matter splashed upon the walls. The Zees hadn't gotten to them. Mom and Dad had made certain that hadn't happened to their children. Way to go, heroes.

Dane was returning to the central intersection at Main Street and was preparing to trudge south to Garden when something caught his eye. At first it looked like a deformed tree rising from the sidewalk along the windowless side of a convenience store standing on the far corner.

Narrowing his eyes and taking a step forward, he spied what looked like a dark-skinned Hispanic male Zee slumped against the trunk of that tree. His tattered jacket and thick dark hair had camouflaged him, making him all but invisible beyond a half dozen paces. The Zee's arms were raised up, his wrists crossed over one another. His forehead rested upon his forearms. From this perspective he looked very much like a drunk who had leaned against the tree, perhaps to take a leak, and had fallen asleep there.

Dane moved closer, the Benelli rising to his shoulder so that the red dot of its electronic sight was directly in line between the hunter's eye and the Zee's head, half hidden behind the trunk of that tree. He

stopped when he was a little more than ten feet from the Hispanic man. Together both men stood motionless, one breathing, one most definitely not.

The snow here was thinner, having been partially blown aside by the wind sweeping down Main Street. The Hispanic Zee was buried only to the middle of his thighs, Dane noted.

After several minutes of watching that figure for any sign of life or movement, an idea came to the fore. The Hispanic man would make a good barometer by which Dane could measure the condition of the village. So long as the cold weather held, his targets should remain frozen in place, immobile, unmoving. That was the pattern that the Powers That Be had noted back at the briefing before he had been dropped off here. Winter's cold stopped the Zees in their tracks. By taking careful consideration of Hispanic Man's position and posture, Dane could record any change that occurred over the next days or weeks, and apply those results to the rest of the townsfolk he had yet to encounter during his sweeps, or from the rocky heights above the valley.

"Your lucky day," Dane decided as he lowered the Benelli shotgun and stepped around the Hispanic Zee. From one pocket of his heavy coat he drew a can of fluorescent orange paint. Pilfered from a hardware store up on King Street, Dane used its bright colour to mark targets he could not see from the mountainside.

Turning the paint can's nozzle toward the blank wall of the convenience store, Dane carved a long vertical line, followed by two angled lines to form a tall arrow pointing out the location of the Hispanic man. He would be able to see that arrow from any one of the shooting sites he had mapped out on the mountainside overlooking the town. From there he should be able to gauge the Zee's condition at any time.

By midday Dane had swept both sides of Garden Street. He had dispatched six more Zees, and come upon three others inside a ransacked home. The Benelli had taken care of the ones on the street; the SIG had cleared the house.

Once outside again, he turned his face up toward the sky where fresh snowflakes were beginning to fall. It was a long hike back up to the cabin where he had made his home for the duration of this contract. Fresh snowfall would make the trek even more tiresome. The clouds lingering over the mountains spoke of a good layer of powder yet to come. It was early still, but Dane did not like the way the day's conditions were deteriorating. Time to pack it in.

The first flakes of falling snow had dusted the shoulders of his coat by the time he reached the foot of the rutted road that led up the mountainside to his cabin. Less than five minutes later, and only halfway along that route, flurries had given way to a full-on whiteout. Even with the snowshoes lashed to his feet, the climb up the steep path to shelter was becoming treacherous. Twice Dane slipped and fell. The second time he landed badly, banging one knee against the sharp edge of a rocky outcropping half hidden beneath a layer of fresh snowfall. By the time he had regained his feet, fresh blood was oozing from an open wound visible through a tear in his pants.

Somehow, though, despite the pain that coursed up and down the length of his leg, Dane managed to trudge onward. By the time he reached the cabin, the snow had cast a blanket over the mountains and the valley below. There would be no further hunting today, he decided. And if the weather held, tomorrow might be a scrub as well. Best he settle in for the night and take care of that injured leg. He might need it to dig himself out of here once this latest system passed on and the weather broke at last.

DAY 28

Three days. The storm had taken three full days to blow itself out. During those seventy-two hours the wind had rattled the roof of the cabin, had shaken its walls with such violent force that Dane was certain he was going to wake up to find himself in Oz.

No such luck, though. By the time the last of the storm had dissipated, it was midafternoon on the third day. Dane opened the front door to a world that was brighter and infinitely whiter than the one he had left behind on that late afternoon when he had climbed up the mountainside following his visit to the village of Creighton.

Too much down time, he told himself while he gathered the Steyr rifle from its place near the door and checked the loads set into the rotary magazine. There were five .308-calibre cartridges waiting there. He had loaded the magazine the night before. Another five rounds had been set into the loops of the cheek bag tied to the rifle's stock. He had two more magazines in the zippered pocket of the kit bag, giving him a total of twenty rounds for this sortie out to the cliffside. Optimistic, perhaps, but better to have and not need than the other way around.

The skis might have offered an easier ride over the freshly fallen snow to the shooting sites he had mapped out earlier in the week. But the possibility of sliding right over the edge of the mountain and falling to his death seemed less appealing than that thought of trudging to his destination with the awkward snowshoes lashed to his feet. Besides, a tumble over the cliff was not a guaranteed kill, especially with the newly fallen snow adding a layer of cushioning to absorb his fall. Oh, he would still be hurt, quite badly, he expected, if he happened to blunder over the edge, but there was a distinct chance that he would only be injured, perhaps seriously enough that he would not be able to move, leaving himself there to freeze to death. Or worse.

And so, with the rifle in his hands, Dane plodded through the fresh snow, moving along the ridgeline to the far tableau where he had chosen the best site from which he could begin his clearing of the Forest Sector.

He was three-quarters of the way to his destination when he spied the bright orange arrow he had painted on the side wall of the convenience store at Main and Garden to mark the position of the Hispanic Zee. Taking a moment to catch his breath, Dane spied a nearby outcropping of bald rock. Angling that way, he eased himself down upon the cold stone, then swung the rifle up to his shoulder so that he could peer through the scope toward his target. A twist of the magnification ring brought the orange arrow into sharper focus. A slight downward shift showed him the Hispanic man, right where he had left him.

But not quite.

Something was different. Something subtle, but noticeable. There was a definite change in the position of Hispanic Man. His brain and his gut told him so. Yet try as he might, Dane could not determine exactly what it was about that Zee that had changed.

He remained focused on that target, watching through the lenses of his riflescope for the clue to reveal itself. There was a half expectation that he might see the Hispanic Zee actually *move*, and yet such a possibility seemed unlikely, perhaps even impossible. Still, the air was warmer than it had been over the past few days. Not quite enough to suggest an actual thaw was in the works, certainly not, but beneath his heavy winter jacket and outer vest, Dane felt a trickle of sweat run down his back.

He sat like that, as unmoving as the Zee he was watching, for nearly a quarter of an hour. Finally, when it became apparent that nothing was happening that there had been no change in Hispanic Man's posture or position, Dane lowered his rifle and climbed back up to his feet. He spared one last look at the Zee he had been watching, but from this distance it was impossible to determine if that *thing* had moved at all.

"Mind games," Dane said to no one but himself. "Just the mind playing games. That's all. Nothing more."

Right, his brain fired back in a voice he recognized as his own, laced with an ultra-heavy dose of sarcasm. *You just go on believing that.*

Onward. There was work to be done, and the little hand and big hand floating above the dial on his wristwatch said time was a-marchin' on, whether he chose to stay here or march along with it.

By the time the sun dipped down behind the towering peaks of the mountains to the west, Dane had used up all twenty rounds of ammunition he had brought along for his rifle. There were nineteen fewer Zees with their heads intact down on Poplar and Beech Streets. He had fired one spoiler, only his fourth since he had started this turkey shoot campaign. He figured that ratio of hits to misses was an acceptable one, even by his high standards.

On his way back to the cabin, he paused at that same outcropping of rock where he had peered down on Hispanic Man earlier in the day. The incessant voice nagging away inside his head insisted he should stop again and take another look, just to make certain nothing had changed.

Despite his own silent assurance that things were exactly as they had been several hours before, he found himself once more sitting on the exposed rock looking down at the orange arrow painted on the side of the convenience store. It took him a moment to locate Hispanic Man. When the crosshairs of his scope settled upon the chosen Zee, Dane almost started. There was definitely something different about the thing's posture now, his subconscious insisted away. Look at his right arm.

Adjusting the magnification ring of the big Hensoldt scope, Dane zoomed in on the Zee. He noted the position of the figure's right hand and arm, more to confirm to himself that nothing was out of place than to actually prove his inner voice to be wrong. He stared at the disheveled figure for several moments, noting how the new snow had entombed him, burying him up past his waist now.

But the arm, his mind fairly prodded him. The arm looked different somehow, not quite how he remembered. Was it lower? Was the elbow straighter? Were the fingers that had been hooked into claws slightly more open, less aggressive?

Or was the fading light simply playing tricks with the gathering shadows that were enveloping the town below his position?

Dane decided the second possibility was infinitely more plausible. He had seen enough for one day. Besides, it was getting colder again as night came on. Beneath his damp clothing, his body was beginning to shiver. Time to head back and call it a night.

Hispanic Man would be there in the morning, he reasoned.

DAY 29

God damn it, he *had* moved!

Dane leaned harder into the stock of his rifle. He adjusted the parallax dial on the Hensoldt scope in order to bring the image to the best clarity he could manage. He turned the magnification ring one way, then the other, zooming first in to tighten the image on the ragged Zee down below, then out to a wider angle that included the brilliant orange arrow he himself had painted on the wall beyond the

Hispanic Zee and the tree against which he had been leaning. But regardless of how wide or narrow he dialed it in, the result was the same.

When Dane had painted that arrow, its tip had been pointing directly at the crown of Hispanic Man's head. Now, though, the Zee had moved *around* the tree so that the marker arrow was now pointing to empty space. Empty space where Hispanic Man *had been*, but was no longer.

Before leaving the cabin this morning, Dane had checked the temperature on the thermometer hung outside the window over the kitchen sink. The mercury had plummeted since yesterday, dropping a whole ten degrees overnight. The air was noticeably colder, crisper. The snow that had been freshly fallen the day before and lay soft and fluffy upon every surface was now crystalized and as hard as ice. So the possibility that Hispanic Man had simply thawed out was off the table. That meant only one thing: he had moved on his own power.

A shiver ran down John Dane's back. It had nothing at all to do with the weather on the mountainside where he lay.

Let's be reasonable, Dane told himself. *Let's think this through. Okay, so the Zee moved. But only a little. Less than a foot, really. He might have fallen that far, simply slid in place. Trapped as he was by the snow, he would have circled around the tree and ended up where he was now.*

A good thought, but hardly realistic. Hispanic Man had been buried to his waist after the recent snowfall. Any tipping one way or another he was about to do would have happened days or weeks ago, before the snow ensnared more than half of his body in its icy hold.

So, what then? Had he walked?

Occam's Razor came into play here: The explanation requiring the fewest assumptions is likely correct. But what did that mean?

It meant the Zee had walked. Maybe just a step or two, but he had WALKED.

Peering through his riflescope, Dane stared at the Hispanic Zee. He sent a mental projection down into the village, daring that figure to move again, to take another step. If he did, Dane's finger, resting on the rifle's trigger, would add two more pounds of pressure, just enough to break the sear and send a 168-grain hollow point boat-tail round screaming from the barrel to cross the six hundred yards or so of empty space between here and there. That bullet would blast into the Zee's head just above his left ear. It would expand on impact, turning whatever was left of Hispanic Man's brain to Jell-O, and sending it through the shattered back side of his skull to splash upon the wall of the convenience store right there next to the bright orange arrow Dane had painted on his previous visit into town.

Come on. Move. One step. Show me what you've got.

Dane remained motionless upon his shooting mat. He ignored the chill that was beginning to breach that protective layer between his belly and the snowy ground underneath. He ignored the tingling that was

beginning to set into his toes, then his lower legs. His eye remained fixed upon the Hispanic Zee framed in by the crosshairs of his rifle scope; his finger remained curled against the trigger.

Downrange, Hispanic Man stared straight forward with vacant, unblinking eyes. Dried blood had stained his olive-coloured skin to a blue-black tone upon his chin and cheeks. His lips were black with the remnant gore of his last meal. Thin hair that had once been black but was now streaked with lines of grey and silver lay plastered upon his high, sloping forehead. His clothes were covered in filth. He looked every bit the part of an undead monster in a Hollywood blockbuster film.

Minutes ticked by, marching slowly toward hours. The sun made its slow pass over the mountains and the deep, narrow valley below. Shadows shifted from one side to the other as though the whole of the village had become one great and massive sundial.

At the very edge of the limited field of view offered through his rifle scope, Dane thought he saw movement. There was nothing down there, he knew, not a single living soul. Still, a reflexive action caused him to shift his rifle's muzzle toward that motion. The viewing angle inside the Hensoldt scope shifted in turn, coming to rest upon the shape of a child-sized figure emerging from behind a dumpster standing behind the empty convenience store. The dumpster occupied part of the parking area that served the residential apartments above the lower storefronts. Dane had not checked those dumpsters. He had been meaning to do so on his last trip down to the village, but he had been sidetracked by Hispanic Man.

“Clever boy.”

Movement again. This time back toward the older Zee. Dane shifted that way. In the magnified image of the rifle scope, Hispanic Man half-shuffled, half-fell so that he nearly tumbled past the tree against which he had been leaning.

Dane felt the blood in his veins suddenly turn to ice.

Hispanic Man moved!!! His brain fairly screamed at him. *HE MOVED!!!*

His finger acted of its own accord, drawing back upon the Steyr's trigger. When the recoil came, it was entirely unexpected. At the instant the boom of the rifle's report slammed from the barrel, the image captured inside the Hensoldt scope became an unrecognizable blur. It took only a second for that image to stabilize once more, but in that moment the bullet he had loosed had streaked across the void to find its target. Hispanic Man's head exploded like a ripe grapefruit, just as Dane had known it would. The contents, bearing a striking resemblance to puréed pudding, splashed upon the wall of the convenience store, adding a dark stain outlined in black and red to the weathered siding.

Dane's right hand moved from the grip of his rifle to the handle of the Steyr's bolt where it did its magical drill. Up-Back-Forward-Down. Another round slid smoothly into the chamber. The gun was ready to fire again. All it needed was a target.

Downrange, Hispanic Man was done. The impact of the slug that had struck him had thrown his body against the wall. Off balance, he had tumbled to one side and now lay like a pile of discarded rags at the foot of that structure. Whatever possibility or danger his sudden reanimation might have threatened was over now. That particular Zee would not be harming any living person ever again.

As the adrenaline bled itself out of his system, Dane drew his notebook toward himself and logged his latest kill. After several moments, once he had regained control of his limbs and muscles and senses, he shrugged off the demise of Hispanic Man and went back to the task that had been assigned to him: the elimination of Zees in the town of Creighton.

Shifting upon his shooting mat, Dane set his rifle scope upon one of the figures visible on Poplar Street. This one was a woman, blonde, maybe thirty years of age. Perhaps younger. She was looking his way.

No, he realized, not just his way, but *at* him. Directly *at him*.

Not possible.

Dane looked again. What he saw there in his rifle scope set his skin crawling, his nerves on edge. His body's fight-or-flight response was firing to life, urging him to pack up his rifle, pick up his mat, and Get The Fuck Out Of There, Right The Hell Now!

Blondie was not only looking at him, she was *snarling* at him! Her bared teeth were blackened with the gore of the last victim into which they had bitten. Her knitted sweater was tattered and torn, its front stained with blood. Knee-high boots ended short of a denim skirt that hung just below her knees.

But none of that mattered. What mattered was that Blondie was moving. She was lifting one leg out of the wind-swept snow that filled the road where she had been trapped. Her movements were painfully slow and deliberate, like those of an actress whose scene had been filmed at an impossibly high frame rate. Yet unlike Hispanic Man, there could be no mistaking the fact that she was moving, that she was trying to walk. And that she was heading this way.

Dane put a bullet into her head, watching with satisfaction while her skull snapped backward and her brains splashed upon the snow behind her.

More movement. Other Zees were coming to life. One by one they began to twitch, then shudder, and finally wriggle and writhe where they stood in an effort to break free of the snow that held them in place. There were clusters of them, he counted, all moving at once. Where previously there had been only cold, inanimate figures, now the streets were filled with shuddering, writhing bodies that had once been human beings, but were no more. It was like someone had thrown a switch or sent a signal from some unknown broadcast tower to the robotic chip implanted in their heads. Whatever the cause, the Zees scattered on Poplar Street were beginning to come back to life.

Dialling back the magnification of his scope, Dane shifted his barrel to the south. There were more than a dozen Zees visible on Beech Street. More on Walnut. All of them, figures that had been as cold and

motionless as statues over the days and weeks since he had first arrived here, were beginning to move, to pull themselves free of the snow, and turn themselves toward the north. They moved with a singular purpose. Not one of their number appeared to deviate from that routine.

Whatever was happening down there, Dane realized, his purpose here on the mountainside was over. It was time to call for an extraction. Time to get out while he still could. The Zees had become the Army's problem. It was their turn to deal with them. All Dane could do was radio in his observations and perhaps give them some warning about what was headed their way.

His radio was back at the cabin. One call, one click of the transmit button, and he would request an extraction chopper. It would take them about an hour to reach him. Maybe a little longer. All he had to do was pack up and wait for the bird to arrive and take him away from here.

Down in the valley, more Zees were trudging north from Walnut and Maple Streets. They were moving to join their brethren who were starting up Main Street, toward the empty convenience store and its side wall marked by the bright orange arrow Dane had painted, as well as the remains of Hispanic Man's head. They were picking up speed. They had a purpose. They had a destination in mind. Dane had little doubt that it lay somewhere up the highway, past the blockade put up and manned by the Army. It lay somewhere beyond the town of Killian, farther up the valley.

Dane had no idea where the Zee horde was actually heading, and he didn't care. All that mattered was that he got out, that he got away before they came for him. And they would be coming. The angry glare he had seen in Blondie's eyes had told him so. He had taken more than a hundred from their ranks. They would want his blood in return, and they were coming to get it. Well, not if he had any say in the matter.

At the cabin, he placed the Steyr rifle in the rack next to the door, then grabbed one of the radios and keyed the transmit button. His voice sounded strained and alien, even to his own ears.

"Baseplate, Baseplate, this is Outfield One requesting immediate dust-off and extraction. Repeat, this is Outfield One requesting immediate dust-off and extraction. Area has been compromised. My mission here is done. Respond with ETA. Over."

It took several moments for the reply to crackle through the radio's speaker box. A woman's voice, calm, composed, reassuring.

—Outfield One, this is Baseplate. Message received. EVAC unit is en route. ETA, forty-five minutes. Report status of landing zone. Confirm and copy. Over.

Dane's thumb pressed the button once more. "Roger, Baseplate. Copy your last. Forty-five minutes. LZ is clear at this time, but Zee is on the move. Will secure LZ for incoming bird. Over."

—Understood, Outfield. Hang tight. Bird's on its way.

After clipping the radio to his belt, Dane adjusted the fit of the knitted cap drawn upon his head, then started for the door once again. As he approached the threshold, he grabbed the AR.15 rifle from the rack

and brought its butt up to his shoulder. A tug on the charging handle fed the first cartridge from the seated magazine into the firing chamber. His thumb reached up and swept the safety lever down to the OFF position. He would hold the area around the cabin until the evacuation chopper arrived. Then, and only then, would he surrender this place to the Zee. They could overrun the cabin. They could tear and rip and eat whatever they wanted once they got here, so long as it wasn't Dane himself.

A low afternoon sun shone its golden rays directly into his face as John Dane stepped through the cabin door for the last time and turned the muzzle of his rifle toward the half-beaten road that wound up the mountainside from the village below.

They would be coming.

Let them come.

He was ready for them.

Kevin Bell

— *Orillia, 15 July 2015*