

Those Left Behind: Alex Bloom

The alarm went off promptly at 6am the way it went off promptly at 6am every Monday through Friday so that Alex could get out of bed, shower, dress, have a yogurt, and go to work. So, in response to his alarm going off promptly at 6am, Alex rolled over, shut the alarm, and got out of bed. Alex never snoozed. It was against his nature. Though his life was mundane, his job menial, and the yogurt plain, he was a man of ritual and efficiency. Still, the very boring aspects of his life were starting to wear on him. He forgot to turn on his cell phone before getting into the shower. The shower itself took him almost twenty two seconds longer than usual, not that he noticed. When he opened his yogurt, he decided that he just didn't have the stomach for it and threw it away. If only he could throw away some of the other aspects of his life just as easily.

He dressed in simple brown pants and shoes with a white dress shirt and a tie his mother had gotten him almost fifteen years before when he'd graduated high school. On his way out the door, he didn't even notice that the light from his answering machine was blinking. He would never know that someone had tried to call him in the middle of the night and he had slept right through the ringing phone.

Alex lived in a two bedroom townhouse on the border between the city and the suburbs. The neighborhood was fairly low on crime, although there was some gang activity just inside the city line. His uncle had convinced him to buy the house when he'd begun to get serious with Catherine. Uncle Curt had called it a starter house and impressed upon Alex that it was important to make that investment early so that he had something to flip when he wanted to start a family. Three years later, Alex was still living in that house alone. He was still with Catherine, but couldn't force himself to propose. Catherine was more of a taskmaster than a girlfriend and, though he couldn't seem to break away from her, the thought of marrying her filled him with a dread that no apocalypse could ever match.

His office was in a seven story building about fifteen minutes from his house. On regular mornings, the traffic added anywhere from five to eight minutes to his commute. This morning there was no traffic. The only other moving vehicle he saw was a motorcycle with a single rider heading toward the center of town. There were some pedestrians wandering aimlessly. He didn't pay them much mind although he did give a second glance to the woman who had chosen to wander the streets in a white negligee.

He arrived at work in less than ten minutes, parked in the underground lot, and sat for a while. Realizing that he hadn't yet switched on his phone, he did so and waited for it to boot. The phone was two years old, running new software on outdated hardware. It took almost four minutes to boot. Alex had found it frustrating for a while, but had later simply budgeted it into his time. He didn't use it much so the battery lasted him all days. His ritual of shutting it and charging it overnight had served him well. As long as he remembered to boot it before going into the shower, he didn't have to suffer through the interminable process. Now he just waited, watched as the screen came to life, the logo danced, the sd card was prepared, and the phone told him that there was no signal in the underground parking lot.

Sighing, he pocketed the phone, got out of the car and headed to the elevator. It took a short time to arrive. He boarded, pressed the six button, and rode all the way up without interruption.

That was odd.

The car reached the sixth floor and the door opened. Before he understood what was happening, Alex was under attack. A figure rushed at him. At first he didn't understand. He stepped aside, thinking that this person was simply in an inconsiderate rush to board the elevator. Only when the figure wheeled and came at him again, brandishing a fire extinguisher, did Alex understand the situation. He ducked out of the way, heard a loud clang as the metal can impacted one of the rails lining the car. Slipping on his own feet, Alex scrambled out of the car and tried to put a little distance between him and his assailant.

As the person emerged from the elevator car, Alex recognized him.

"Bloom?" the man asked disbelievingly as he stood panting while the door closed behind him.

Eric Garretson was a middle management jerk who had a bit of seniority on Alex. He was bigger than Alex, struggling with a weight problem, and hairy everywhere except on top of his head. He was typical in his attitude, a man who had never outgrown his high school stardom despite the fact that high school had ended and life had deemed him one of its bitches.

"What are you doing, Eric?" Alex asked, still keeping his distance.

The sixth floor was mostly a maze of cubicles with a single open area near the elevators. There were three offices on the far wall as well as a break room with a soda machine and a candy machine.

"I thought you were one of them."

Alex didn't understand. He looked around for someone to explain it and realized that the office was silent. There was no one around.

"Where is everyone?" he asked suspiciously. Clearly Eric had gone mad. Had he killed everyone?

Lowering the extinguisher, Eric began to laugh. "Really?"

Alex stood there, continuing to be confused.

Eric continued to laugh. "It figures. Of all the people... So, what, you just got out of bed, got dressed, and came to work like it's a normal day?"

Alex was beginning to feel extremely uncomfortable. He understood that something big had happened and that he had missed it, but he couldn't imagine what it was. He began to think back on his morning, the thin traffic, the wandering people. None of it gave him any clues. The

whole experience brought him back to middle school, to a time when the other kids would share a secret and then laugh at him for not knowing it.

"Come on," Eric said, walking past him. They negotiated the maze to the large windows on the other side of the building. There was a hospital there. Alex had gone there once when a computer had fallen on his head and knocked him out.

Don't ask.

The street beneath them was teeming with people. They seemed fairly calm, just wandering about aimlessly. Alex watched them for a few moments, still not understanding. He recognized the abnormality of so many people crowding around a hospital. Were they all sick?

Then he saw the police cars. There were several of them lined up at the curb.

Then he saw the policeman. He was limping and, even at that distance, Alex could see that he was missing an arm.

There were lots of people missing arms. There were some people missing legs, too. There were also bodies on the ground. They were torn apart and sitting in puddles of what Alex imagined had to be blood. He could see the blood now. It wasn't just in the street. It was on the people, too. It was on their clothes and their faces. From six storeys up he could see that there was something wrong with all of the people.

"They're dead," Eric told him.

Alex nodded slowly.

"No," Eric cried emphatically. "All of them. The ones that are walking around are dead, too."

Alex looked more closely. It made sense. He could see some people with horrible wounds.

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't," Eric said to him. "You're an idiot. I've worked with you for six years and you've always been an idiot."

Alex didn't know how to respond to that.

"I've been here since three this morning. I watched all those sick people die and then get back up. But that wasn't the best part. The best part was them attacking all of the well people and friggng eating them."

Alex looked away from Eric and back down to the street. The pieces were starting to fall into place. He was beginning to make sense of things.

Eric didn't see it. "It's Armageddon, Bloom. The dead are rising from the grave, and they are feasting on the living."

He looked at Alex as Alex waited for more information. When Alex didn't say anything, he threw his arms into the air. "Is the front of the building clear?"

"Clear?"

"Yeah, Bloom. Clear. Are there friggin' zombies out front?"

Alex shook his head. "Zombies? No. I didn't see any."

"Good." Taking his fire extinguisher, Eric rang for the elevator.

"Where are you going?" Alex asked.

"I'm sure as hell not staying here."

"Shouldn't we stick together?"

Eric laughed. "No. You think I want to hitch myself to your stupid wagon? No offense, Bloom, but I'm pretty sure you're not going to survive the day. Me? I'm going to find myself a teenage hottie in distress and start a new life in the country."

"That's disgusting."

The elevator opened at the same time as Eric put on an expression of mock offense. "I don't give a damn what you think. You're an idiot."

As he stepped inside, Alex felt a tiny bit of rage in his gut. "Good luck, Eric. I hope the zombies get you before your teenage hottie realizes what an ass you are and cuts your throat while you sleep."

There was just enough time before the doors closed for Alex to see the shocked and somewhat impressed look on his former colleague's face.

He never saw Eric again.

Alex spent the next thirty minutes completely lost. He wandered back and forth, looking out the window, staring at the blank computers, just...lost. Finally decided to boot up the computer. He waited while it came to life, watching as the screen flashed message after message. When it was finally done, he logged on and went right to the internet.

The breaking news was more than four hours old. Never had the news sites been so far behind. There were stories of a plague that had struck the entire world at once. As Eric said, people got sick, died, and returned to life. The undead were aggressive, violent creatures who fed on

anything they could catch. The stories got shorter and shorter, dwindling to nothing. The last of them didn't bother to sugarcoat the truth. Only a small fraction of humanity had been unaffected by the plague. Many of those had been slaughtered in the aftermath.

And yet there was Alex, oblivious to what had been going on while he slept.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He took it out and saw that it was Catherine calling. Catherine had survived. Oddly, his first emotion was disappointment rather than elation. That triggered a series of feelings within him that led him to a startling conclusion. He was not unhappy about the apocalypse. In fact, it was wonderful. He didn't have to worry about his life-sucking job anymore. He didn't have to earn money to pay the mortgage or buy the things that society deemed necessary. All he had to do was live his life, take care of his own needs, and be happy. He looked out the window at the mass of zombies wandering about. Toward the end of the block, he caught sight of some movement. There was a flurry of activity. Someone living must have wandered into the fray. The zombies had pounced.

So they were dangerous. He could handle that. And if Eric was right and Alex didn't last the day then he could handle that, too. Because the rest of his life, for however long it lasted, would be glorious.

If only it weren't for Catherine. He didn't want her in this life. He had barely wanted her in his old life. Should he break up with her? Should he just answer the phone and tell her that it was over? He reminded himself of Eric. He didn't want to be burdened with her overbearing personality. She was likely to get them both killed.

Then he had another revelation. There were no rules. He didn't even need to answer the phone. Let her think that he was already dead.

He began to laugh.

Setting his phone on a desk, he walked to the elevator and pressed the button. He waited a few short moments for it to arrive and then rode it down to the parking garage. He was feeling happy and excited. Then he saw the man sitting on the trunk.

He was just a boy really, probably sixteen years old. There was a stud in his nose and a chain dangling from his left ear. He wore a pair of jeans and a tank top with a leather vest. The vest was covered in patches advertising bands that Alex had never heard of. The boy's hair was long on one side and short on the other. He was tall and his expression was full of playful angst. On his bare left arm, Alex could see a bright red brand. It looked like a top hat with three legs. He'd seen the symbol before on the news. It was a gang brand.

"This your car?" the boy asked.

Stopping several feet away, Alex nodded.

"Can I have the keys, please?"

No rules.

Alex had geared himself up for dealing with the undead. The living were a different matter entirely.

"Before this gets real ugly,* the boy said, "I want you to know that I'm not really asking. I'm just being polite."

"I left them upstairs," Alex said.

The boy grinned and shook his head. "Dude, you can give me the keys or I can take them."

Alex ran. He could have given over his keys. It wasn't as if he was getting the car back anytime soon. Instead, though, he ran. It was a poor decision. The boy was younger and faster and he had friends. One of the previously unseen gang members caught up to him first, taking him off of his feet. Alex scraped his knee on the ground, but managed to brace himself with his hands before slamming his face into the pavement. The person who had tackled him was a beefy kid with heavy breath. All at once, Alex realized that just those few short paces had winded his attacker. He realized that he had an advantage.

Alex hit the gang boy in the eye.

The gang boy cried out, snarling in anger. There wasn't much time before it was three on one. Alex wouldn't have a chance if that happened so he hit the boy again. The original boy was approaching quickly and Alex was wishing for a weapon. Digging into his pocket, he fished out his keys and jabbed them forward. It was his apartment key that scraped across the boy's cheek, leaving a deep gash. His cry was enough to startle his larger friend into loosening his grip. Alex wriggled free, found his feet, and ran.

Even with his adrenaline pumping, he found the moderate incline to street level to be tiresome. He slowed, thinking suddenly, "I'm running for my life."

And then he began to laugh.

Turning, he discovered a gang boy in pursuit. The laughter died in his throat, but he didn't feel any fear. Even as he ran headlong into his very first zombie, Alex felt as if he was in complete control. The zombie was a small fellow, a couple of inches shorter than Alex himself. He was wearing a t-shirt and a pair of jeans. There was a torn baseball jersey hanging off of his shoulders. Without thinking about it, Alex grabbed the zombie by the shoulders and twisted him into his pursuer. The two grappled for a moment before the zombie sank its teeth into him. Alex was stunned as the gang boy screamed in terror. The wound wasn't even that bad, but he just sort of gave up, letting the zombie take more and more bites.

As Alex watched the scene, three more people emerged from the entrance to the garage. The lesser was an older man, probably a few years older than Alex himself. He was clean shaven with a tired look. He was wearing a white shirt and a tie, but didn't strike Alex as an office

worker. The other two gang kids deferred to him, and Alex didn't think it was because of the gun he carried.

Without hesitation, the man took aim and fired a bullet right into the head of the zombie. Then he adjusted slightly and fired a second bullet into the head of the wounded gang member. Alex flinched with each gunshot, but calmed when the gun was pointed at his own head.

"Why would you kill one of your own?" asked Alex. "He wasn't even badly hurt?"

The man regarded Alex for a moment and was then joined by his companions. "Bad enough. It's quick with a bite."

Alex looked at the dead gang warrior and the zombie laying near him. He let the implication sink in. Finally, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his car keys. Tossing them onto the ground in front of the man, he said, "It's yours. You were going to take it anyway."

The man grinned but didn't reach for the keys. "What's your name?"

Alex told him.

"There are no more rules, Alex. You'd better get used to that."

"Rules are one thing. Ethics are something else altogether."

"I'm not going to kill you," the man said suddenly, much to the chagrin of his followers, who immediately started to complain. He silenced them quickly. "Make no mistake, though. I'm not doing you any favors. I'd be very surprised if you last the day. I think you'll run into an end that's much worse than a bullet to the head."

Alex felt himself begin to relax. "Maybe I'll surprise you, then."

"Maybe," the man said, offering Alex a genuine smile. "Maybe we'll see each other again. If that's the case, Alex, you've always got a friend in Dean Gordon."

With that, he scooped up the keys and headed back down into the garage. The others lingered for a minute, debating, no doubt, whether or not to defy Dean Gordon. Then they, too, went back down.

Alex didn't wait for them to drive back up. Instead, he began waking away from the building. He did not go toward the hospital. That would have been suicide. He found himself waking in the general direction of his house. That, though, was really just a coincidence. He had no more business there. Even the things that he might have wanted to gather were written off in his mind. For a long time, Alex Bloom had been life's whipping boy. He had allowed himself to suffer at a mediocre job and in a mediocre relationship. It was all gone now and he did not want it back. Not a nickel of it.

Despite the predictions of both Dean Gordon and Eric Garretson, Alex did make it through the day. In fact, he made it through several days. He took his food from the supermarkets and found secure places to sleep, like inside of a van or in a tree. He doesn't his days studying the dead things and avoiding the living things. If he got to choose his company, the dead were infinitely preferable.

Though he wandered a lot, he didn't stray from his home town. He was took interested in the dynamic that was developing. He saw several areas where the gangs had set up ambush points for weary travelers. While he didn't see any weary travelers, he was she they were out there. In fact, he became more and more sure that there were people out there in whom he could trust. He didn't need to be alone.

On the fourth day, Alex had his first encounter with the cult. He was walking through the streets of downtown, wary of the dead, when he saw three people in cloaks. He didn't know what to make of them at first. They seemed so out of place in the 21st century. They looked like lawgivers out of some medieval nightmare. Alex was immediately cautious. Whether they were simply religious people, or members of some wild cult, he couldn't know.

Still, he was curious. One of the worst parts of wandering the post apocalyptic metropolis was the boredom. These people at least seemed interesting. So he followed them. Keeping to the shadows, he trailed them. Unfortunately, they proved to be just as boring as having just himself for company. They didn't scavenge any of the stores. They didn't seem to be looking for anything. They just walked around silently, all in a line.

They parted after a while. Something about this made him nervous. He stood in place for a long time, not sure which of them to follow, or even whether or not he should follow any of them. When the last of them had drifted out of sight, he began to relax. He wasn't sure what it was about them that so unnerved him, but he made up his mind to avoid them in the future.

He had just decided to get out of the area when a noise behind him drew his attention.

"Are you a believer, brother?"

Alex turned and saw one of the cultists. Aside from his robes, he could have been anyone. He was wearing a pair of worn blue jeans. The robes covered his top but Alex suspected a t-shirt. The hood covered his face, but his voice was rich and smooth.

"A...what?"

From under the hood, there was a flash of teeth as the man smiled. "The dead are the new order, brother. The dead are our lords and masters. Are you a believer?"

Alex didn't know how to answer that question and, after a moment he knew that he had hesitated too long. The smile faded into the shadow of the hood and the man raised a hand.

"If you are not a believer, then you cannot serve save by sacrifice."

Alex did not like the sound of that. He didn't know what these robed figures were about, but he knew enough to recognize that he didn't want any part of it. Ever so slowly, he began to back away.

The man remained motionless. "You cannot run from your duty, brother. You shall join the new order or you shall be devoured."

With that, Alex could stand no more. Turning on his heels, he sprinted down the street. Behind him, the cultist let out a call. He was shouting for his brothers.

Turning down an alley, he looked to hide among the dumpsters. He was looking for a concealing niche when another of the cultists appeared at the mouth of the alley. He didn't approach, just stood there watching. His stillness was taunting.

Alex looked behind, but saw that there was no way out.

"What do you want from me?" he cried.

The robed man said nothing.

With no other options, Alex charged. He ran straight at the cultist, his head down, his legs pumping. He hadn't run that hard in years. His body was grossly out of shape. Thin and fit were two different things, he suddenly realized. Still, he had fear and adrenaline on his side. He would fight hard, even if only to end up dead. But when he reached the end of the alley, the cultist simply stepped aside.

Alex stopped in the middle of the road. Several days earlier, he would surely have been taken down by a car or a bus. Now, though, he stood panting in the middle of a deserted street. He looked up at the cultists in confusion, then saw two more approaching from down the road. Behind him, though, the way was clear. Glad of the path, he took it, once again testing the strength of his underused legs.

Behind him, the brothers issued their loud call.

Three minutes later, he was out of breath. He stood with his hands on his knees. There were office buildings here. Perhaps he could disappear inside one of them. He couldn't run anymore.

At the end of the street, a figure appeared. This person was not a cultist. She wore no robes. In fact, she wore nothing at all. Her body was bare and thin and bruised and grotesque. There was dried blood all around her mouth. Alex wasn't afraid of her. He'd been avoiding the dead successfully for days. When he turned, though, he saw the brothers and understood.

You will join the new order or you will be devoured.

Another zombie appeared behind the first. Then another. The cultists called out, this time more loudly. They were chanting something. At first, Alex couldn't make it out. The word was so strange and out of context. Then it came to him. Feast. The word was feast.

Caught between the dead and their purveyors, Alex had little choice. He daren't go into a building now. In the first place, he'd be cornered like a rat wherever he went. In the second place, he could see the lobbies filling up with more of the dead answering the call.

In the minutes that had elapsed, he had managed to regain his breath. There were more than half a dozen dead approaching him now and the cultists were closing in as well. He had never fought. Not once since his encounter with Dean Gordon and his cronies. But he would fight now. He had no choice.

The trick to managing oneself in the world of the dead amounted to breathing room. If he allowed them to confine him then he was done for. Even if he could pull himself free, he would be somehow infected. That's what the cultists meant when they said join the new order. He was to be infected and turned.

Slamming into the naked girl, he sent her sprawling. There was something wrong with her ankle so it had been easy to put her off balance. She was nothing, though. Alone, she had presented no danger. Those behind her were more closely grouped. Alex weaved back and forth in an effort to confuse and split them. When it became clear that his efforts were in vain, he changed tactics. He began moving in a way that would draw those from the outside into a tighter tangle. It seemed to be working, too. But more dead were arriving by the minute. He needed to get around this first group fast so that he could start dealing with the next.

In a moment of stupidity, Alex allowed himself a backward glance at the three cultists. They had not moved from the end of the street, apparently satisfied with the predictable outcome of the encounter. Alex was just damning them silently when he was grabbed from behind. He was lucky not to get bitten. Bringing his hand up, he managed to catch the zombie under his chin and push back. But his attacker held on tight and others were closing in.

Suddenly there was a loud blast. Alex couldn't see anything beyond his own struggle and refused to be distracted again. Certainly the blast had come from a gun. Was someone helping him?

With doubled effort, he bent the zombie over backwards and slung his arm around the unfortunate creature's neck. The hold was of little use as a tool of submission, but it did put the zombie off balance. Another had already come close enough to touch him. A third was just out of reach. Oddly enough, Alex felt no fear. There was tension, of course, but he somehow manages to avoid blind panic. Maybe it was because of the gunshots. Maybe it was because he understood that his situation required action or death. Or maybe it was because he simply did not fear the dead.

Alex did not know any combat moves. He hadn't been in a fight since the second grade. That fight had ended badly. But the zombies were so stupid that they were almost completely

ineffective. As he had surmised by watching them over the past several days, they were only dangerous in large numbers. They used a very simple grab and hold tactic that only worked when the intended target was busy trying to prevent others from using the same tactic. Alex well recognized that, at that particular point in time, he may very well have fallen victim to it if not for his as yet unidentified rescuer.

There was another loud report from the gun.

Suddenly clear of adversaries, Alex took a moment to look around and take stock. Three men had joined him. The most aggressive was a tall man with a hard, angular face. He was wearing grey slacks and a blue button down shirt. The sleeves were cuffed and the protruding hand were wrapped around a shotgun. Clipped to his belt was what looked like a policeman's badge. The other two men most hung back. Each was armed with a melee weapon. One, a small Chinese man wearing a sweatshirt and jeans, held a crowbar awkwardly. He swung it badly when the zombies came close. The other was taller, though not as big as the leader. He had a goatee that had probably, at one time, been well groomed. He wore a pair of glasses. Wielding a baseball bat, he seemed much more capable of taking on the dead. Two lay at his feet.

A cry from down the street caught the attention of all four men and they turned to see the three cultists charging at them. The big man, who had been about to fire his gun at another group of zombies, instead turned it and fired at the robed men. Two of them went down in a spray of blood. The third was unfazed.

As he neared them, the cultist changed his tactic. Instead of attacking directly, he began grabbing the dead by their clothes and dragging them into the fray. They clawed and bit at him, but he didn't seem to care. Of course, he was joining the new order. He tried to thrust them at the four men, but couldn't seem to turn their attention from his own bloodied body. Before long, he grew weak. Like sharks in a frenzy, the others turned toward away from the Alex and his rescuers in favor of the blood. When he realized what was happening, the cultist cried out in delight, proclaiming his worthiness while promising the living that they would one day also join the ranks of the dead.

There was a tug on his arm and Alex turned quickly, ready to defend himself. But it was just the man with the glasses urging him to come away. Grateful, he followed them down the street and away from the carnage.

A few blocks later, they stopped so that the big man could reload his weapon. He was laughing as he did so.

"What's funny?" Alex asked, knowing by the way the Chinese man rolled his eyes, that he shouldn't have spoken.

The big man chuckled some more as he worked.

"I asked you a question," Alex said in a more firm tone.

The man looked up at him crossly, then went back to his gun, saying, "Anyone can run into a group of the dead, but it takes a true blue moron to piss off the monks."

The Chinese man shook his head.

"Antonio..." the man with the glasses began, but Alex cut him off.

"Don't talk to me like that," Alex said. "Don't ever talk to me like that."

Antonio finished loading his shotgun and showed Alex steely eyes. "I just saved your life, buddy. I'll talk to you however I damned please."

"No you won't," Alex said. "Do you think that gun makes you the king? With a brain like yours, it'll just as likely get you killed as save your life."

Now Antonio's expression went from hard to angry. "Did you just call me stupid? Are you out of your mind? Let's see how much trouble it'll cause if I point it this way." Antonio turned the gun so that the barrel was aimed right at Alex.

"Antonio, don't!" shouted the Chinese man.

"Shut up, Adam. I'm not sure I want this douchebag hanging around with us."

Once again, Alex couldn't find it in himself to be afraid. "I see a badge on your belt. Were you a cop or did you steal it off a dead man?"

Antonio lowered the gun and held it out to the man with the glasses. "Matt, take this."

"Rather have at me with your fists?" Alex asked. "What kind of a cop were you then? I bet you were a bully, the kind of cop who hassles a kid just because he has baggy pants or a Mohawk."

"Matt," Antonio ordered but the man made no move to take the gun.

Alex pressed. "You're no better than the gang scum that stole my car." Alex would have guessed that this comment would have been the last words he'd needed to get Antonio to throw down the gun and attack him. Instead, it seemed to take the wind right out of the cop's sails. Instead of dropping the gun, he lowered it quietly and softened.

"I get it," he said. "I'm a cop. You're the victim..."

"I'm nobody's victim," Alex shot back. "That's what you need to get." Then he softened, too. "Anyone on his own can get caught in a bad situation. It doesn't make him less of a person. Thanks you for saving my life. Let's now both be stronger."

Antonio looked at him queerly for a moment, then burst out laughing once again. Both Adam and Matt seemed to relax.

"What are you a preacher?" Antonio cried.

Alex shook his head, smiling. Then he extended a hand. "Alex Bloom. Middle management."

Antonio laughed even harder at that, taking Alex's hand and shaking it vigorously. "Just what I need! Another useless tagalong." But all of the condescending venom had come away from his tone and Alex took it in stride.

Antonio Jones was exactly the man Alex had surmised. He used his shotgun even when doing so was unnecessary and even dangerous. He led them with a blustering bravado that Alex found tiring yet, though he had many opportunities to walk away, he found he did not want to be alone. The others were better, but still questionable company. Adam Li was a psychiatrist who needed a psychiatrist. His demeanor was as small as his stature. He deferred to Antonio despite the fact that he clearly despised him. He was a prisoner of his own fear. The man with the glasses was a surgeon named Matt Baker. Alex was at first impressed with his resolve but then realized that Baker's attitude was misleading. He was, in fact, the opposite of Li. Instead of being a slave to his fear, he was completely accepting of his fate. He didn't seem to care whether he lived or he died. He also wasn't a surgeon. He was a research scientist who had told Antonio he was a surgeon so that he wouldn't be labeled a "useless tagalong".

Late on the sixth day, they found themselves on the south side of the city. Here, the tall buildings gave way to houses and general suburban life. They came to a public park with a playground and a path for walking or biking. There was a large open area in the center where people had probably played ball or thrown the frisbee or just laid out in the sun. It was nighttime now and the park still seemed to be used. There were people wandering through. Dead people.

"It's too open here," Antonio said.

He didn't like the south side. Before the ApocalypZe, he had worked out of a south side precinct. The plague had taken most of his colleagues and the zombies had taken the rest. He and Matt and Adam had tried to set up a stronghold in the precinct but someone had opened the holding cells and the doors and the place had been overrun. That had seemed to both destroy and strengthen him. He had become tougher than ever but had refused anything other than temporary shelter.

"Just a minute," said Alex, looking across the park. "Isn't there a church at the other end?"

It was hard to see in the dark. The power had been out for days so there were no lights. In the daytime they'd have been able to see.

Antonio nodded.

"It's a big one, too, right? It's made up of bricks and stained glass?"

Antonio nodded again.

"It would be nice to have someplace safe to sleep for a change," said Adam.

"I don't like it down here," Antonio said.

"Let's just check it out," Alex pushed and so they did.

Crossing the park, they avoided the straggling dead. Every time Antonio raised his shotgun, Alex gave him a warning glance. They had argued many times over his frequent use of the weapon. Besides the casual waste of ammunition, hardly a renewable resource, the noise always brought more dead than it could kill.

Across the park, the church came into view as a solitary structure surrounded by zombies.

"It's not even Sunday," Antonio quipped, though there was little mirth in his joke.

Alex shook his head. "There must be someone inside."

They watched from a safe distance for a while. Adam kept looking at Alex as if he expected some sort of earth shattering decision. Antonio shifted from one foot to the other impatiently.

"I want that building," Alex said finally.

They all looked at him.

"You're welcome to it," Antonio said finally. "It was nice knowing you."

"It's a perfect stronghold," Alex continued, oblivious to Antonio's subtle objection. "They've already got boards on the first floor windows, but they don't know how to keep the dead away."

"How would we keep the dead away?" asked Adam. Antonio looked at him as if he'd been betrayed.

Alex shook his head dismissively. "The dead aren't really very dangerous. They're predators, but their greatest strength is the fear we have of them. Dead people walking around violates all of our laws of nature and faith."

"They're not even dead," Matt whispered as if a sudden understanding had come to him.

"There's a living parasite inside each one of them, making them simple machines."

"We need to clear the dead away from the church and..."

"Hold on there, Captain," Antonio interrupted. "There must be twenty or thirty of them..."

"Forty six," said Adam.

Antonio gave a moment to a condescending look, then continued. "What makes you think the people inside are even going to want our company?"

"We're going to make their community better and safer. Wouldn't you say that clearing the dead is a good start?"

"I think you're a loon. We're gonna turn around and walk away from this mess." He looked for confirmation from Adam and Matt but was disappointed.

Adam looked down at his shoes.

Baker had words for him. "Antonio, you've held us up through the worst of this mess. When it comes to a fight, there isn't anyone I'd rather have on my side. But this kind of decision? We need to play to our strengths and we need to recognize who to follow and when. Even you."

A shadow crept down over his features, starting on his brow and covering the whole of his face. Antonio Jones did not like to be reprimanded, no matter how politely. His knuckles were white as his fingers squeezed against the barrel of his gun. Then it passed. In a heartbeat, he was himself again, for better or for worse.

He looked at Alex. "What did you have in mind?"

Alex was suddenly stymied himself. No one ever asked his opinion, let alone a man like Antonio Jones. He was nobody's leader. And yet, he had somehow become one. The ApocalypZe had turned him into one. Ever since his encounter Dean Gordon, he had taken charge of his life without ever stopping to realize that he had done so.

If his hesitation was noticed by the others, no one said so. Quickly, he began to speak. "It would be better if we could lure them away. If we kill them, we'll probably attract more while we're clearing the bodies."

Antonio nodded his head once. "There's only one thing that attracts these monsters. I guess I'm bait."

"Not so fast," Alex said. "They seem to like a loud noise. We could move a couple of blocks away and fire off a few rounds with your shotgun. That ought to attract them."

Antonio looked at the gun. He hated to shoot it without aiming at something, but he nodded anyway.

"Get out of there quick," Matt advised. "You might wind up attracting groups from all sides."

"Don't worry about me," Antonio said. "You guys have the hard job."

The three men looked at each other, confused.

"Hell, am I the only one of us with even half a brain? If this is gonna be worthwhile, you gotta figure out a way to stop them from coming back."

Alex hadn't thought of that. And yet it was so elementary. If they wanted to use the church as a stronghold, they needed to come up with a defense system that cloaked them as well as protected them when discovered.

He nodded, having no idea how that would be accomplished.

Antonio smiled, revelling in the fact that Alex, just this once, didn't have all of the answers. Then he turned and trotted away, disappearing quickly in the dark.

Less than five minutes had passed when the first loud clangs barked out through the streets. The noise was so near and so loud that all three men jumped in shock.

"That's no shotgun," Baker remarked.

Alex shook his head in agreement. Antonio really didn't want to fire his gun at nothing.

Over by the church, the surrounding zombies began to stir. The noise was repeated. It sounded like metal on metal, as if Antonio was banging on a security gate with a pipe. Ever so slowly, the outermost layer of the dead began to peel away from the group. They seemed unsure at first, tempted by this new attraction but reluctant to leave a place where they knew there was food.

"They're not going for it," Adam said nervously.

"Give it a minute," said Alex.

As Antonio kept up the noise, more and more of the zombies took the bait.

"It's working," Alex said excitedly. "If he just..."

Then there was the sound of a shotgun blast.

Matt's face fell. "Could they have reached him that quickly?"

"Follow me," Alex ordered as he left their hiding spot and began to cross the park. He kept to the shadows, the other two men following in his footsteps. He didn't want the zombies, now slowly breaking up only to coalesce again on the other side of the park, to see them.

Another shotgun blast and he was truly concerned.

And truly helpless.

When the last of the undead had wandered away from the church entrance, Alex urged them forward. There had been one last shotgun blast and then Antonio's reports had fallen silent.

"How are we going to get in?" Adam asked. "They're not just going to answer if we knock."

Alex went right up to the door and tried the handle. Much to the surprise of his two companions, the handle turned and Alex was able to push his way inside. They paused on the threshold, suddenly wary of what they would find inside. Why would the occupants leave the door unlocked with a horde of ravenous zombies just outside and waiting for them?

Alex moved forward first. It was his job, he knew, to lead them inside. It was his job to lead. All along, Antonio had been posing as their leader while Alex had pushed and pushed at his boundaries. He felt like a usurper, but knew that he wasn't. The truth had made itself clear to all four of them. What Alex Bloom had been before the ApocalypZe was gone. Even stubborn Antonio Jones could see it and had willingly abdicated. It brought a warmth to Alex that he had never felt before. He felt kinship with these three men, most of all with the bullish Antonio Jones himself.

Inside the chapel they found almost twenty five people. There were men, women, and children. In one corner was a stockpile of cans, many of them used and empty. The place smelled. The people were dirty and pathetic. They did not even look up to see who had entered, their fear long since replaced by an acceptance of their fate. Instead, among the whimpers of the damned, heads dipped in prayer, the steady hum of the pious filling the large space.

"Do you have any weapons?" Alex asked the crowd, his voice echoing through the chapel.

Heads lifted slowly, some taking the time to finish their prayers before acknowledging him. No one spoke, though. They were a flock of sheep, unable to respond independently.

Matt and Adam looked around the room as did Alex. Travelling with Antonio Jones and his attitude had made them feel just as these people appeared. The ugliness in them pushed forward on their pride. They were not the lowest of cowering animals as they had believed. These people were worse. Matt and Adam each found a way to pity them.

Alex didn't have time for pity.

"I asked a question," Alex said to the group.

"This is a church," hissed an old man with what sounded like an Irish accent. "Have some respect."

The man was dressed in a plain pair of slacks and a stained white tshirt and yet Alex pegged him as the reverend.

"Sorry," he said, stepping forward. The man was sitting toward the front of the chapel. "Have you been leading these people?"

"I lead them in prayer," he said, the edge slipping from his voice. "You men are welcome to join us in our final days."

Alex looked at the faces of the people around him. What did he see in those eyes? Was there fear or had it been swept aside by the promise of joining God? Was there defiance? Was there any strength at all, anything to give him any indication that these people were worth saving?

All people were worth saving.

And that's when he saw the tinder that he needed to cause the spark. There was, in those forlorn expressions, the last remainder of the last emotion to flee in times of extreme crisis. There was hope. Alex Bloom saw hope.

"Thank you, no," Alex replied to the reverend. "I think it's more appropriate that you join us as we build a future."

Eyes glazed with misery began to sparkle as that hope kindled.

At that moment, Antonio Jones appeared in the doorway, his shotgun cradled in his arms. He seemed none the worse for wear aside from being somewhat short of breath.

"Holy crap," he said as he looked around the room. "This is even worse than I thought."

Alex nodded and a smile came to his face. He agreed. And yet, in so many ways, it was so much better than he could have ever expected.