

# **Dead City**

**by Timothy Lincoln, 1989-**

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You had to be careful in the old city, moving slowly and keeping to the shadows. It was just a simple fact of life now, something that I had to keep explaining to the new recruits around me, hoping that they might live long enough to become old soldiers. It was a hope that a lot of people shared, but one that was proving too hard for a large part of the soldiers that volunteered. Between the Raiders and the Gangs, most wouldn't make it past their first mission. Something that we pointed out to them through training, but they all pushed hard and passed into the ranks of the Civil Defence Force.

„Sergeant,“ I turned, keeping a watch on the buildings around us, holding a threat that was now part of the background of life. „You have to see this,“ said a young Private.

The mission was a simple one, slipping through the silent streets and searching for a missing team. Vincent Calloway, our section commander, had sent them out on a routine Scav run, picking over an old shopping centre for supplies. Just

routine and boring stuff, another fact of life in the Civil Defence Force, but something had gone badly wrong. I couldn't see any other reason for why they wouldn't have called in their situation or returned to base.

„Guess that explains where they went,“ I said, standing next to the young soldier and studying the mess before me. „Frank,“ I called, motioning over the Lieutenant. „I think we have them.“

Despite the medical and mathematical case, it was hard to believe how much blood there was in a team of soldiers. Standing in the small car park, surrounded by the broken down and charred vehicles, I wasn't sure what had taken place, but I knew it would be a bad idea to stick around. Still, we had a job to do and that meant looking deeper into the mystery. No matter what we thought about the prospect.

„Not a pretty sight,“ said Frank, stopping next to me and shaking his head. „What's your take Carter?“

I was silent for a moment, taking in the drying blood and sparkling shell casings. It was a hunch, but one that I knew was probably true, and very scary all the same. „Last stand,“ I said, voice barely escaping as a whisper. „What against, I have no idea,“ I added, wishing that we wouldn't have to find out, „But this isn't the work of Raiders.“

„Agreed,“ Frank said. It was the scattering of the casings, cars and walls used for cover as bullets had been loosed off in all directions. „Whatever attacked them came in from all directions and there was a lot of them,“ he added, „You don't use that much fire power for a few Raiders.“

„Raiders don't take the bodies either,“ I added, trying to put together the facts. Not something that anyone wanted to be contemplating right now, but it was something that we had to work through all the same. „Why take the corpses? Unless they're really short on food now.“

„A very good question,“ Frank said. „Also one that I haven't got a good answer to at the moment. But I intend to find one.“ Passing through the mess, it was a worrying thought, but we had to find out the truth. „Spread out and keep it tight,“ Frank said, „I want the bodies found.“

We moved on, sweeping the buildings around us and taking our time to get things right. There was no one left alive, not after the fight that had left that much mess behind. It had been a team of eight, much like the one that we was leading through the city, but they had all been well trained and well equipped to deal with anything that come their way. Yet, that hadn't helped them in the end. One last stand. A course of action for people that had exhausted all other possible plans and found themselves with no other way out. Take as many of the bastards with us as you possibly can. A place that no one wanted to find themselves.

I stopped at the door to a large shopping centre, intended as the target for the original team, now definitely KIA. Glass still hung in places, the rest spread out across the tiled floor, smashed into a million pieces. As the others closed in around me, I wiped away some dust with my sleeve, staring into the thick gloom.

„Looks stripped out,“ Frank said, standing at my shoulder and following my gaze. „Guessing they didn't find that out though,“ he added.

„Would have called it in if they had,“ I replied, squinting into the gloom and trying to decide on the best course of action. Someone had taken out the previous team, leaving nothing behind, and no one had managed to get off a distress call.

There was very little to see from outside, leaving no option but to head inside and take a look around. Every instinct told me to run, simply cut our loses and head back to base. Frank studied the limited view, moving closer and trying the door. As it slipped open, he sighed, turning back and facing me as he battled the decision.

„We have to check,“ I told him, not really feeling the conviction I put into the statement. Both of us felt it, tugging at our minds and calling out for us to run as fast as we could in the other direction. But part of being a soldier is about facing up to danger, putting yourself in the line of fire so that others can stay safe. I could accept the job, but some missions were harder than others. One team had already died fighting something that we couldn't identify, and now we was chasing it back into its lair. However you reasoned the situation, it was a stupid idea, but we had to find what the threat was and how to tackle it.

„Carter, take point,“ Frank ordered. „I want someone experienced up front,“ he added, stepping through the door and covering the foyer off to the left. „Just be careful,“ he added, „I don't need to tell you I want live soldiers, not dead heroes.“

„Only idiots want to be heroes,“ I muttered, shaking my head and covering the right.

here was no way that I would be taking any huge risks today, pushing through the busted up shopping centre and trying to keep the thoughts of a brutal death from my mind. All I wanted was to get back to the base without any trouble. With the death of the other team hanging heavy in my mind, I pushed onward into the main foyer. Someone had spent a lot of money on it at some point, but that had crumbled away with time and the asteroid strike, shattering the shopping centre as it had the world. Now all that was left behind was a few mouldy seats and the dusty tiled floor.

Sweeping the open ground, I paused, eyes fixed on a cluster of vines hanging across an old coffee shop window. There was something wrong. It took a few seconds to process what I was seeing, studying the organic brown-pink veins reaching out across the floor, but now I had an answer.

„Frank,“ I waited, squinting into the the gloom and trying to find a solution to the problem. With the sudden appearance of the weird vines, my mind suddenly shuddered to a halt, plans evaporating in seconds. „What the hell is that?“ I added, edging forward and frowning.

„Looks like a vein of some kind,“ Frank said. „What it is, I have no idea.“ He paused, searching the darkness above and shaking his head. „Not sure I want to find out what it is,“ he said, „But I bet it has something to do with our missing team.“

„Only one way to find out,“ I replied, moving forward and scanning the area. Everything felt wrong, but it was the only answer that we had and nothing about the plant thing made any sense. Closing in, I slowed, nose filling with a sticky sweet smell, sending a slow shiver through my body as I came to a halt. The stench was hard to describe, rotting meat boiled in honey and mixed with an undertone I couldn't place.

Everyone stood still, eyes glued on the twisted and swollen bodies scattered around the tiled floor like leaves on a giant plant. „What the hell is that?“ I muttered, lowering my rifle for a better look.

„Nothing like I've ever seen before,“ replied Frank, „But now we know where the bodies went.“

„But what the hell is happening to them?“

The question hung in the air, playing on the mind of each man as he studied the scene before them. A root slipped in through the throat, head gone and opened up like a flower on the others, fleshy petals smoothed down around their shoulders and neck. Despite a more or less constant fight with Raiders and gangs, this was the strangest and most gruesome thing that I have ever seen. There are some sights that you never forget, no matter how long you live or how much you drink.

„I have no idea,“ Frank replied, shaking his head as he edged closer.

„Are they dead?“

It was the same Private that had found the scene earlier, shaking slightly as he studied the scene and wished that he had picked a different career.

„I sure hope so,“ I replied, moving closer to cover Frank. Nothing made sense, leaving me with little to work with but the basics. Anything might happen, and all we could do was react to anything that attacked us. Much like the team had done before, leaving them broken and dead on the floor.

Pausing a few steps away from Frank, I watched, trying to work out what was causing the ice running up my spine. The movement was small, merely a twitch of the hand, but it was enough to notice. „Frank,“ I kept my voice calm, rifle lifting as he backed away. „Might be a good idea to leave.“

Everything happened at once, things flicking from bad to horrific in a matter of seconds. Bodies leapt into action, rooted to the plant like puppets on a string, lunging for us as we moved backward. Loosing off a few rounds, hands working on automatic and collecting a few body shoots for good measure, I could see that we was in massive trouble.

The body closest to me staggered, tethered upright by the vein and spilling an oily green gunk across the floor. At that moment, the world exploded around us, monsters with fleshy limbs expelled from every part of the building. Much like a lot of soldiers, I have been known to scream in my sleep, but now I had a real reason to do so. A set of nightmares that would last for a long time, providing of course that I made it out of the nightmare around me.

Bullets tore up the air around me, pulping flesh and bone as our team fell back. Whatever way we fought, there was no chance that we could win the fight. All hope for the other team was lost as we tried to escape. People screamed, ripped apart by the freaks and hauled away to who only knew where. It is a topic on which I will not reflect, but I suspect that there might not be just the one plant thing. Six men down, leaving me and Frank alone in hell, firing fast as we reached the door to the car park and bolted for the clear.

Creatures moved all over, bouncing off walls and changing shape as they ran our guns. Blood erupted from each hit, felling some and just about slowing others, spreading the green gunk across the open ground.

„Aim for the heart,“ I yelled, pushing back and keeping Frank close by. If we got separated, broke from the staggered reloading pattern that we had fallen into, then we would die. Ignoring the urge to run, I emptied the dregs from my rifle and hurled it at the nearest creature. Down to just a pistol, hope was fading fast, watching Frank lash out as he was overpowered and hauled off by the freaks. I heard the screams, tentacles and teeth sinking into flesh as I broke into a run heading out of the car park. Monsters chased me, catching a round as they tried to block my path back to the tube station and my only route to freedom outside of the city. Something that I could not afford to let happen.

The trip was a blur, running with everything that I had and praying that I made it. With a city of monsters on my tail, I had a lot of motivation. After what felt like forever, I escaped into the narrow entrance, vaulting over the turnstiles and into the main lobby that led deeper into the earth. Without breaking step, I headed into the tunnels, ignoring the snarls and fading roars as I sprinted along the corridors and onto the track.

Slowing down as I reached the end, heart thumping in my chest as I tried to catch my breath, walking the last few feet onto the platform as I headed for the open air above. Passing out into the open ground around the station, I stopped, looking back into the tunnel and surveying the inky darkness. Muddy fields surrounded me, broken up by the odd broken car or lorry, pressed down into the ground as if scattered by a giant child.

My heart was racing, nausea sweeping through my body as I turned slowly. Nothing moved behind me, tunnel silent as I waited for the freaks to creep out, holding the empty pistol against the things that never came. With no team and no bullets, I turned and ran for home, hoping that I might make it to the safety of the main base. Maybe, just maybe it would be OK, but I had to warn them about the freaks that had taken over the city. About the threat that was facing our kind. Feeling the acidic burn through my body, lungs burning as the green vapour from the gunk worked its way down, I knew that it wouldn't be long before I was passed on or part of the threat that would face the whole of humanity. Yet, I still had to warn them, as long as I was still breathing, I had to get warning to the others.

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