

# *Dreadful Dead*

by

## *Ace Antonio Hall*

If Sylva Fleischer were a typical teenager, her future would involve cramming late-night for high school exams, resisting temptation to date bad boys, and spending all of a part-time job earnings on clothes. But Sylva is a necromancer, and far from normal. So when a mysterious pathogen turns its victims into the undead, she drops out of high school and joins a covert team to work for the FBI to save an American diplomat on foreign soil. Faced with the amount of deaths no teenager should experience, Sylva learns head-on why so many soldiers have PTSD.

### *The Dagger Towers, Dubai, Arab Emirates (The D.T.'s)*

I was the only seventeen-year-old girl, the only vampire, in the world whom those men trusted with their lives. They affectionately called me Sylvie, and I called them my brothers. Hell, I dropped out of high school to help those jar heads wipe out the apocalypse. Soon as I was recruited by the POTUS herself, they trained me like I was enlisted as a Navy SEAL, and I told them everything I knew about zombies.

Everything.

“I knew how to raise those rotsuckers from the dead since I was eight,” I told Johnson once, making him snicker. What I didn't tell him was that only a few months prior to joining the NAD, I'd been able to talk to some of them, right from the grave.

The Necrotic Affairs Division, which was an umbrella unit of the Critical Incident Response Group for the FBI, was sent to Dubai in February of 2013. We toured most of Europe and neutralized the threat of infection in every reported area. It had been a long ten months, and all twelve of us were fully exhausted. Every piece of undergarment I wore stuck to my skin, thanks to the ninety-five degree heat, unbearable humidity, and oh yeah, being in a sandstorm didn't help. Nope, not one bit. I wanted a long shower, a good nap, and a cold bottle of carbonated blood sitting by my cot when I woke up.

It was just after noon, and we were smack dab in the city center of Dubai at a dynamic rotating skyscraper called the Dagger Towers. The D.T.'s was the first building of motion to be constructed in the world with seventy floors boasting that each floor rotated independently at different speeds using wind turbines and solar power.

The ruler of Dubai and the vice president of the United Arab Emirates rented a thirteen-thousand square foot villa there at \$36,000,000 a pop. The Italian-born architect, Damoni Dagger, was the visionary behind the futuristic building and was reported missing since the infection reached Venice, Italy. The rumor was that he was safe and in hiding, but Col. Anders sourly hinted that one of the greatest minds of our era had become the architect of the undead.

We received comm that a family was stuck in the building. They were American diplomats. The Secretary of State told Col. Anders that Madam President basically said bring them home safe

or don't come home at all. One of the ambassadors, her sister, was visiting the Vice President of the Emirates. She was the one who supposedly sent the email from her cell phone before all contact was lost. Our orders were to extract the President's sister from the hostile environment, and bring her to the American Embassy. Yep, piece of cake.

The moment Hatcher landed the copter in the vacant parking lot, something didn't feel right, and my gut made sure I knew it. Most areas we visited had abandoned cars crowding the streets and surrounding areas. Here, it was like the official authorities were smart enough to quarantine the area ahead of the foreseen panic. I didn't like it.

There wasn't even any litter of tattered clothes and scattered trash in the streets. Everything was as clean as a bride's dress on her wedding day. We were all used to walking into chaos and creating more chaos. This was like walking into the Garden of Eden with muddy boots on, and it made us all a little nervous.

"This isn't the *Canadian Caper*," Col. Anders said, chewing on his cigar. He was our unit leader. "We don't have any allies to help us. But if our personnel evade danger, we are to exfiltrate her and any other notable *friendlies* out of there in one piece. Keep your heads cool ladies, and don't let this scorcher of a day burn your focus."

We all checked the first twenty floors, which were offices, and they cleared. The place was too clean, and Col. Anders joked that it was a set-up by Gary, and we all laughed like it was the funniest thing we ever heard.

Gary was the name we gave to any deadhead that seemed smarter than the rest. They were the deadheads that managed to open a door by turning the knob or sneak up on his victim without making a groan or dragging their feet. The name was based on a character in David Wellington's book *Monster Island*.

When you work as a Special Forces zombie slayer, it helps to read every piece of material on the zombies there was, whether it was fiction or not. It provided an insight that we felt gave us an edge to face any possible danger from the undead. A good commander knows how to break up tension and that joke did just the trick because the nervousness between us died.

Col. Anders and the rest of the guys checked floors 21-35. Spitz, Johnson, Twizzie, and I climbed the stairs up to the top ten floors, fifty-plus grueling floors. The power was still working but we learned our lesson back in Paris when the electricity went out on us and we were stuck in that tiny stupid elevator for an hour before getting out. Spitz must have said, "This sucks balls," a hundred times until I punched him and told him to shut up.

"There," Spitz said, wiping sand from his sunburned face with his hand. "One floor to go." He spoke in a low voice; his boots tapping up the stairs.

Spitz was always the point man, and led us into combat, the way his father did, and his grandfather before that. He was twenty-one and had already made the military men in his family proud with a purple heart from his tour of duty in Afghanistan. Col. Anders pulled a bunch of strings to get him in our unit. Spitz always seemed to be there for me, always. He never seemed to tire listening to me whenever I just wanted to vent.

We were all dressed in battle gear: green fatigues, sandstorm-weathered boots, hearts of honor, and weapons of destruction. I wiped the grimy sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand, and pulled my green-camouflaged Dallas Cowboys baseball cap higher, above my eyes.

"If the offices downstairs felt like a walk in the park," I said, speaking in a hushed tone also, "Up here is more like a tour of Hades. You think the tenants decorated enough blood and guts on the wall for their death party?"

Twizzie covered us from the rear. “Tell you what, Sylvie,” he said, in his heavy Southern drawl, and chewing on a strawberry Twizzler. “I’ll shole let you ask ‘em that when you git there.”

I patted my kukri knives, holstered in scabbards on a leather belt around my hips. “My guys here will ask *all* the questions.”

Spitz laughed and adjusted his gun holster on his shoulder. “That sounds better. Besides, if anyone is alive, I doubt if they will even be able to understand us.”

“You’ve got it backwards, Spitz,” Johnson said, inches behind me. “It’s the Americans that don’t understand foreign languages.”

Johnson, thirty-two, was a walking arsenal; a semiautomatic on his back, a sawed-off shotgun in his hand, a .38 on his hip, ammunition clips holding a party on his belt, and grenades sleeping with one eye open in a couple of his many pockets. To say he was an overachiever was, at best, an understatement.

“Everyone else all over the world, on the average, knows two—three languages, including English,” Twizzie said. “They’ll prolly understand us more than we understand them.”

Spitz chuckled. “Hah, you zom-butchers may be right,” he said, and spit a nasty wad of chew on the wall. It matched evenly with the string of gooey-brown intestines dangling from the very same wall.

I scrunched my nose up at that, and took the safety off of my striker-fired HK VP9 service pistol. I’d just gotten the gun and loved how it was fully-ambidextrous, which came in handy if a zombie grabbed my shooting hand and I had to switch and shoot real quick with my free hand.

Spitz gestured to my gun. “Now, aren’t you glad I put you on to that?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Don’t know much about guns, but I do know that this will be doing a lot of talking to anything that groans in a foreign language, walks with a limp and even remotely smells like it walks with the undead. I call her the *interpreter*.”

“Heh—heh—heh,” Johnson said, and tossed his fist out for me to pound it.

I tried to knock his hand off, getting him back because he always squeezed the heck out of my hand when we shook hands.

“Come on,” Spitz said, slowly pushing the door to the sixty-first floor. “Let’s finish this and get out of this hell tower.”

I carefully walked up beside him, pointing my gun at the opening crack, eye level. Inhaling, I secured my left hand on the gun, over my right hand, and bent my elbows to a forty-five degree angle.

Johnson positioned himself behind me, ready to storm onto the floor. We’d go in using a snake formation, checking each room, one-at-a-time covering each other’s backs and moving like a rattler through high grass, ready to strike at a moment’s notice.

The floors were rotating like a slow merry-go-round; the wind turbines whined quietly. If you stood still long enough and looked out of a window from one of the floors, you’d see the east, north, west and south side of the city in a matter of minutes. The building won a ton of awards and made a lot of noise in the architectural world.

Still, silence tackled the stench of death in the air. All our breaths were labored, but controlled. Even the most accomplished athlete breathed hard after an extensive workout. Walking up all those steps had my calves and thighs burning like molten lava.

Since I was a kid living in Hawaii, the energy force of the dead called to me. It let me realize at a young age that even dead bodies emitted energy, at least for a while.

*The dead all around us, waiting, I thought. I sense them.*

The villa we were entering was dark. All of the blinds over the windows were closed, and the lights were turned off. According to the schematics of the building, each villa had stair access, an elevator for passengers, an elevator for a vehicle, a garage and nine rooms, including the kitchen, arranged in a somewhat circular floor plan.

“Targets ahead,” I said. “Six, maybe seven of them.”

Spitz opened the door wide enough for me to stand eye-to-eye with an undead man in a bloody turban. The dead guy's eyes were bulged, and he snarled, drooling yellow liquid through the crooked teeth. Half of his face was gone, revealing his skull. I fired my Heckler point-blank into his face.

*Paow—Paow!*

His head exploded in brain matter and blood. The deadhead dropped, half of his body lumped in the core part of the hallway that led to the large entertainment den. It must've been a large family living here. Body parts and torsos were spread throughout the place. One body stretched spread-eagle beneath a white grand piano. Another slumped over a low rectangular table sitting in front of a seventy-foot flat screen TV.

“Go,” I said. “Two at twelve o'clock.”

Johnson went in and it didn't take long for him to spot the deadheads. They were on their knees five feet in front of the door with their backs to us, lurching on a headless body. When Johnson came in, one of those snacking deadheads turned and met a bullet with his name on it.

*Mr. Kapow, I'd like for you to meet Mr. Ffitht!*

Twizzie shot the other one in the back of her head, and she fell face-down onto the floor; her tangled hair webbed in a pool of blood.

We moved like a well-oiled machine, back-to-back snaking around the thirteen-thousand-foot villa. Spitz opened a bedroom door. I broke off the snake, went in, cleared the room, and slithered back into the snake formation.

“Check the garage,” Spitz said.

There was a brand new tangerine orange Ferrari in there. Two love-struck teenagers, my age, seventeen—eighteen, were dead in the car. Their insides were now outside and bloodied up the inside of the beautiful vehicle.

Twizzie threw up chunks upon sight. I knew him well. It wasn't because of the dead bodies. We'd seen plenty of corpses. It was the fact that a perfect ride like that was tainted with such a mess. He loved exotic cars as much as he loved Twizzlers.

He rejoined the snake, though, fully composed, slipping another strawberry Twizzler into the side of his mouth. We had one more room to go; a bedroom. Spitz went in, told us to stay back.

“Clear,” he yelled after a few seconds.

The next eight floors were empty. We had one more to go, then we could rendezvous with the others and leave Dubai. We hadn't found the POTUS' sister, and the chances were starting to dim that we ever would.

When we reached the top floor, a glimmer of hope entered my heart. I heard heartbeats. Many of them; beating rapidly. Pulse rates probably fueled by fear, was my initial guess. The dead were also up there. I felt their energy reaching out to me, almost whispering their chilling breaths, brushing against the tiny hairs on my skin.

“Possible package on this floor,” I said. “Three, maybe four are alive.”

“Jesus,” Johnson said quietly. “It still gives me the willies how you can hear a person's heartbeat standing ten feet away.”

“It gets to me, too, sometimes,” I said. “But you can't say it doesn't come in handy.”

“That it does, Sylvie,” Twizzie said. “That it does.”

Spitz opened the door slowly. It squeaked. He froze for a moment, before pushing it open again. Although it was silent, the heartbeats coming from the villa apartment drummed in my ears like someone was tapping my ear lobe; sounds of their breathing barely caressing my ear drum.

“Guys,” I said. “I’m sensing an overwhelming amount of the dead in this villa.”

Spitz had the door open to about six inches. “So what are you saying? That we should—”

The door swung open wildly, and a horde of the dead rushed us, knocking the gun out of my hand. Two deadheads, both fat naked men pinned Spitz to the wall. Their lips were peeled away revealing their entire jaws. They snapped their teeth trying to bite into his face. He struggled to keep them away and was losing the battle.

One of them backed into me awkwardly and knocked me back. I slipped down a few stairs on my back; my elbow painfully smacked hard onto the cement stairs.

“Shit!” I yelled.

My gun bounced down to the bottom of the second half of stairs. Johnson and Twizzie's boots rushed by me, spraying gunfire, freeing Spitz from their deathlock.

The deafening report in the stairwells lit the air with a burning smell. I somersaulted backward and onto my feet at the middle of the stairwells, and snatched out my kukri knives.

“Retreat, retreat,” I yelled. “There are too many of them!”

Before I could finish my sentence, a female deadhead wearing a tattered sky blue Afghan burqas bit into Twizzie's neck. He screamed and reached for his wound. Blood sprayed out of his neck onto the walls. Twizzie's body tumbled over and rolled down the stairs, stopping at our feet. Spitz fired into the zombie's head, killing her, but three deadheads ambushed him, and four others entered the stairwell, forcing Johnson and me to back down the stairs.

“We have to get inside that villa,” I said.

Spitz climbed the railing and jumped ten feet down to the bottom part of the stairs. We ran down behind him. He picked up my gun and with his gun and mine, pointed them in our direction. Johnson ducked while still running down the stairs, and I spun over to the rail and slid down it. Spitz fired multiple shots into the crowd of deadheads stumbling down the stairs, hitting two of them in the head. More flooded out of the villa.

We ran into the villa below us and shut the door to the stair well. Breathing hard, with our backs to the pounding on the door, we looked around, nervously. Even though we had just checked that floor, our adrenaline was up and our survival instincts were at a critical-high level.

“How many do you think are up there?” Johnson asked.

“Those villas can cram a capacity of ten people per room if necessary,” I said.

“Ninety flesh-eaters in one party is one I’ll be the first to ditch,” Spitz said.

“They got Twizzie,” Johnson said. “Ripped his nose right off his face.”

“It's not like you haven't seen that before,” I said.

“Not one of us,” Johnson retorted.

I felt like I betrayed Twizzie's honor by my previous words, so said nothing that time.

He slapped his chest. “He was my brother!”

“Look,” Spitz said, in a calming voice. “We've got to get up there.” He pointed at me. “Colonel Anders give you the key cards to the elevators?”

“Yeah,” I said, reaching in my front pants pocket. I produced a thin gold-plated card. They each had Arabic writing on it, but one had a black stripe across one end of it. “The black-tipped one is the car elevator.”

“All right,” Spitz said, taking the black-tipped key card in a trade for my gun. “Johnson and I will take the vehicle elevator up. You take the civilian one.”

I nodded and slid my gun back into its shoulder holster.

“We’ll go first,” Spitz continued, “taking out as many as we can but most importantly stealing all of their attention.”

Johnson nodded. “You come up after you hear us wetting them dead bitches up and pop them m’fers in the back of their ugly grills,” he said, his coffee-colored skin nearly flawless, besides the glaze of sweat.

Spitz started moving toward the car elevator. “Keep your heads on and we’ll get out of here in one piece, hopefully with all intended personnel.”

They went up and sure enough, within seconds, I heard a wave of gunfire. I put the key card in the slot, the elevator opened, revealing three young zombie girls, dressed in long robe-like black abaya cloaks. Their faces were covered in a black head dress so that all I saw were their dead eyes hungrily staring up at me.

They hissed and reached their little arms out toward me. In three precise moves, I sliced their heads off with the blade of my knife which easily curved to a length of thirteen inches. Their heads hit the floor like flat soccer balls dropping in the mud. Their tiny bodies slumped to the elevator wall and slid down, almost in perfect synchronization.

I stepped over them, hearing gunfire from the guys still lighting up the air. I pushed the elevator button to go up and the doors slid together. There was no way that I was going to look down at the children’s fallen bodies. Corpses of young girls probably no older than ten who once had a family, and a future. No way I was looking down. No freaking way, man.

Staring forward, I put my kukri knives to bed in their scabbard, and unholstered my gun.

*Time for the interpreter to speak to the dead.*

The elevator doors slid open and the sound of gunfire rung in the air. I stood in the core: a circular space which encased the car garage, elevators, stairwells and narrow walkways with four separate entrances into the villa. The civilian elevator led right into the family room, or den.

The guys were shooting at my three o’clock, so after I did a quick scan of the den, I carefully moved with bent knees and laser focus, to my right. There was a small theater room that I ducked my head into.

Clear.

I kept moving.

The next room was the master bedroom. If it wasn’t covered in blood and guts, it may have been a pretty cool room. The paintings were all covered in blood, the walls, the carpets, a mess of death. Shoes were scattered, part of a foot was in a ladies brown sandal, bone sticking out. I checked the closet, saw nothing, and kept moving.

“Anytime, now!” Johnson yelled.

The sound of the gunfire was moving further away from me. The next room had wooden floors, a sauna, hot tub and massage tables in it. There were several deadheads piled on the floor, and I assumed that this may have been where the boys started their tour of the multi-million dollar villa.

The kitchen, more bodies. Guest bathroom, motionless corpses. Bedrooms, shot-up bodies of teens and children ... and ...

Heartbeats!

“Sylvie, you up here?” Spitz yelled.

“Yeah, room right behind you,” I yelled back. “Think I’ve got something!”

“Well, there weren't as many as we thought,” Johnson said. “We've almost wiped them all out, just about twenty more. We'll be there in a hot sec!”

It smelled like the family had pets; dogs, I thought, at first. I raised my gun and walked into the room, carefully. The guys didn't have time to check any rooms. They were busy spraying the unfriendly neighborhood zombies. We were a strong unit, like a family, we covered each other's backs, and spent so much time together, we were truly brothers and sisters. I'd have a long cry back home over Twizzie's death, I decided.

The heartbeats were beating very rapidly, almost like there were—I saw four cages in the corner on the floor; two on top of each other. There were three black dwarf rabbits in there. One of the cages was empty.

*Sorry, Mr. Bunny if you were zombie meat.*

In the other corner was a fifty gallon fish tank full of colorful tropical fish. The room was decorated with old-school monster posters: *Godzilla*, *King Kong*, *Frankenstein*, and even the *Bride of Frankenstein* made an appearance. Cast model cars, all Porsches, lined up on a tall dresser. I lowered my gun, smacking myself in the head for being so dumb with the palm of my hand.

Something fell.

My gun shot back up, and I spun, pointing it at the closet. The firing from the guys stopped, and I guessed they'd killed all the deadheads in the place.

Slowly, I opened the door. My heart was racing. I knew something was in there. As soon as the door was wide enough, a rabbit zipped out of there and dashed into the empty cage.

I jumped back like a million rats just crossed my path, and heard laughing. The boys were watching me with amusement.

“Jerks,” I said, holstering my gun.

“Zombie bunnies, huh?” Johnson said, grinning.

Spitz smile faded, and so did Johnson's; both of them raised their guns. Instinctively, I woke up my kukri's from their little nap, snatched them out of their scabbards, and spun at the same time.

A stinking little boy bathed in blood and guts walked out of the closet. His eyes were red, and he stumbled over the lip of the door, his arms reaching. He wore jeans, a green-striped shirt and a Green Bay Packers baseball cap.

Just as I swung one blade down toward his neck, he spoke.

“Did you save my—”

My eyes widened.

*Omigod, he's alive!*

I didn't have enough time to stop the force of my swing from hitting him, so I leaned back, and slashed his chest. He screamed, and went flailing backward into the closet. His blood spatter sprayed my face. I stumbled forward, dropped my kukri knives and caught him in my arms before he hit his head on the closet door. His body was warm, his blood poured all over my fatigues, and I looked back at the horror on the faces of Spitz and Johnson.

I carried him in my arms as we rushed him back to the copter and Hatcher sped toward the American Embassy. We all met at the bottom of the D.T.'s covered in sweat. Col. Anders found the President's sister. She was unconscious, but alive. Col. Anders ID'd the little boy as her son from a photo text message. Somehow they got separated. Zombies will do that; break families apart.

“Don't go to sleep,” I said, kneeling beside him, once we got on the copter. “We're going to have you patched up in no time, okay? What's your name, handsome?”

The boy was lying on the floor, wrapped in a dark green blanket. He opened his mouth. His little blue eyes stared at me solemnly. “Ste ... phen ...”

My heart was breaking. “That's a cool name. I like that name. You stay awake, Stephen.”

“Did you?” he said, and then coughed. “Did you ... save the bunnies?”

I glanced up at Johnson, who killed the rabbits, saying they may have gotten infected. “Yes, the bunnies are safe.”

“Mom—mee?”

“Your mommy is safe, too.”

At least that wasn't a lie.

Stephen smiled. “You thought I was ... a zombie. *Tricked you*, just like I did them.”

I nearly broke down.

This boy is dying because of me. Me—Me—Me!

“Yes,” I said, sniffing. “That was so smart of you to camouflage yourself with guts so they couldn't detect you. That's why you have to live, you're a survivor.”

His eyes closed.

“Come on, Stephen. Stay awake, honey.”

I looked up over at Hatcher. “Dude, how much longer?”

“ETA, ten minutes,” Hatcher replied.

Stephen opened his eyes half-way. “You saved ... bunny?”

I wiped a blood-tear from my eye. “Yes, yes, the bunnies are safe.”

Stephen's eyes opened wider. “You cry blood,” he said, pointing at me with a trembling hand.

It was a little trick my body did the moment I became a vampire.

“Um, yeah,” I said, wiping a tear, and chuckling nervously. “Guess I do.”

I grabbed his tiny soft hand and squeezed it softly.

Stephen gazed at me, and then a confused look washed over his face. “You're Sylva ... Sylva Slasher. Saw you on TV.”

“Yep,” I said, tears streamed down my face. “That's me.”

“Did you ... kill the ... bunnies?” he said, and closed his eyes.

His head rolled over to the side. I checked his pulse, but already knew. I heard his heart stop. It wasn't beating any longer. I killed him. His mother would wake up and learn that I stole her baby away from her. I was the death dealer and I dealt her a bad hand of fate. She would tell her sister, Madame President, that I killed her nephew. They would both come to hate me.

At least *friendly fire* had a name, something people could wrap their heads around. No one liked it, but there was a name to the act that softened the blow of death. The only name for me, a zombie slasher, when something like that happened, when I accidentally killed an innocent child ... was murderer.

“Stephen, wake up, honey,” I said, shaking him. “Wake up! You've got to wake up, little guy. You're a survivor—a survivor—a hero! You've got to wake up!”

When I screamed at the top of my lungs for him to wake up, someone, I think it was Johnson, pulled me away and hugged me. I cried in my *brother's* arms until we got back to the embassy, and wept well into the night.

I was mad at myself for being so careless. I was mad at Johnson and Spitz for laughing at me, and distracting me when that stupid rabbit hopped out. I was mad at my supposedly *family* in



the NAD for even putting me in such a predicament. Hell, I was mad at the world for getting infected.

I'd become a murderer and that really pissed me off. Every single day of my life, that's what I did, kill. Kill the threat. Kill the deadheads. Kill my mind, becoming numb to death. I hadn't been the same since little Stephen died. There was only one thing left to do. I needed to leave NAD and get my life back. Col. Anders probably cursed me many nights over glasses of bourbon and cigars, telling the empty bottle of booze that I committed treason, that I let my country down, or abandoned my special ops brothers. They could call me traitor all they wanted but I just wanted to be a teenager again, and I didn't want to kill anymore.

The End