

ONE

ALICE WAS BEGINNING to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the hill, and of having no Biters to shoot. Once or twice she peeped through her sniper rifle's scope, but could see no targets. 'What is the use of an ambush,' thought Alice, 'without any Biters to shoot in the head?'

Alice was fifteen, and had been born just three months after the Rising. Her older sister and parents sometimes talked of how the world had been before. They talked of going to the movies, of watching TV, of taking long drives in the countryside, of school.

Alice could relate to none of that. The only life she had known was one of hiding from the Biters. The only education that she considered useful consisted of three simple lessons: if a Biter bites you, you will become one of them; if a Biter bites someone you know, it doesn't matter whether that person was your best friend; they were now a Biter and would rip your throat out in a heartbeat; and if you could take only one shot, aim for the head. Only the head. Nothing else would put a Biter down for good.

So here she was, lying on a small hillock, her rifle at her shoulder, waiting to pick off any stragglers who escaped the main force. The first few years of her life had been one of hiding, and of surviving from one day to another. But then the humans had begun to regroup and fight back,

and the world had been engulfed in a never-ending war between the living and the undead. Alice's parents were part of the main assault force that was now sweeping through a group of Biters that had been spotted near their settlement in the barren, bleak landscape that Alice knew as home. These had been the prosperous suburbs of what was once New Delhi—where millions had died in the Biter outbreak and then millions more as governments tried to contain the outbreak by using nuclear weapons on the key outbreak centres—but were now known simply as the Deadland.

Alice had been around weapons for as long as she could remember, and while all humans now needed to be able to defend themselves, Alice had shown a special talent for fighting, perhaps one her mother did not always approve of. Her mother had wanted Alice to do as the other young people did and stand on guard duty close to the settlements, but Alice had always wanted to be in the forefront, to feel the thrill that came with it.

She could hear the occasional pop of guns firing, but so far no Biters had come their way. Jane was lying quietly, as always obedient and sombre. Alice could not bear just waiting, getting bored when the action was elsewhere, so she crawled away to the edge of the small hill they were on and peered through her scope, trying to get a glimpse of the action.

That's when she saw him. The Biter was wearing pink bunny ears of all things. That in itself did not strike Alice as strange. When someone was bitten and became undead, they just continued to wear what they had been wearing

when they were turned. Perhaps this one had been at a party when he had been bitten. The first Biter she had shot had been wearing a tattered Santa Claus suit. Unlike kids before the Rising, she had not needed her parents to gently break the news that Santa Claus was not real.

What was truly peculiar about this Biter was that he was not meandering purposelessly but seemed to be looking for something. Biters were mindless creatures, possessed of no intelligence other than an overpowering hunger to bite the living. She braced herself, centring the crosshairs of her scope on the Biter's head. He was a good two hundred metres away and moving fast, so it was hardly going to be an easy shot.

That's when the Biter with the bunny ears dropped straight into the ground.

Alice looked on, transfixed. Then, without thinking of what she was getting into, she picked up her gun and her backpack, and ran towards where the Biter had seemingly been swallowed up by the ground. Her heart was pounding as she came closer.

For months there had been rumours that the Biters had created huge underground bases where they hid. There were stories of entire human armies being destroyed by Biters who suddenly materialised out of the ground and then disappeared. However, nobody had yet found such a base and so these stories were largely dismissed as being little more than fanciful fairy tales.

Had she managed to find such a base?

Alice's excitement got the better of her caution, and she ran on. She should have alerted her sister, she should have

called for reinforcements, she should have done a lot of things. But at that moment, all she thought of was where the Biter had dropped into the ground and what would happen if she had truly found an underground Biter base.

She was an excellent shot, far better than most of the adults in the settlement, and she was fast. Since she had started training, she had been told by all her teachers that she was a born fighter. She had always topped all the combat lessons. She could put a man twice her size on the mat in the wink of an eye, and she had shown her mettle in numerous skirmishes against the Biters. Yet, she was not allowed to go on raids far from the settlement. That had always grated, but with her father being one of the leaders of the settlement, she was unable to do anything to change that. He claimed that her excellent shooting and scouting skills were better used in defensive roles close to their settlement, and had promised her that when she was older he would reconsider, but she knew that was a nervous father speaking, not the leader of their settlement.

This could change all that.

Suddenly she felt the ground give way under her and she felt herself falling. She managed to hold on to her rifle, but found herself sliding down a smooth, steep and curving slope. There seemed to be no handholds or footholds for her to slow her descent or to try and climb back up. She looked up to see the hole through which light was streaming in disappear as the tunnel curved and twisted.

Alice screamed as she continued falling in utter darkness.

Alice was totally disoriented in the dark and winded by her fall, and it took her a few minutes to get her bearings. She saw that her fall had been broken by a thick cushioning of branches and leaves.

When her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw a sliver of light to her right and crawled towards it.

As she went deeper into the tunnel, the smell was unmistakable—that familiar rotten stench came from only the decayed bodies of the undead. Though no stranger to the stench in the aftermath of many a skirmish with the Biters, she found herself gagging. As she came closer to the light, she saw that the tunnel opened into a small room that was lit by crudely fashioned torches hung on the walls.

She could hear voices. As she peeped around the corner, she saw that the rabbit-eared Biter she had followed down was in animated conversation with two others. One of them was, or had been in life, perhaps a striking young woman. Now her skin was yellowing and decayed and hung in loose patches on her face. Her clothes were tattered and bloodied. The other Biter with her was a plump, short man who seemed to have the better part of his left side torn off, perhaps by a mine or a grenade. The Biters were talking in a mixture of growls and moans, but they seemed to be communicating with each other.

She had heard whispers that the Biters were not the mindless drones that many adults considered them to be, but most people dismissed those accounts as fanciful tales. She wondered if there was some truth to those rumours after all.

Now that she got a closer look at the rabbit-eared Biter, she

realised that he had been in life not much older than her. Perhaps he had indeed been on his way to a costume party when he had been bitten. As he turned his head, Alice saw what may have once been a smile now replaced by a feral grin that revealed bloodied teeth.

Alice's heart stopped as Bunny Ears looked straight at her. For a second she hoped that he had not seen her, but he bared his teeth and emitted a screeching howl that sent a shiver up her spine. As all three Biters turned to look at her, she exploded into action.

Alice's grasp of the alphabet was tenuous despite her mother's many attempts to teach her. She saw no use for letters; there was nothing to read. But what Alice could do almost without conscious thought was to thumb the safety off her handgun and bring it up to a two-handed hold within three seconds.

The first shot took the fat Biter squarely in the forehead and he went down with an unceremonious flop. As the two others bore down on her in the characteristic slight loping, lumbering gait, she fired again and again, the shots from her gun echoing in the underground cavern. She hit the female Biter at least twice in the chest and then knocked her flat with a headshot.

Bunny Ears was barely a few feet away when Alice's handgun clicked empty. She cursed under her breath. It was just so much easier to shoot at targets in practice or snipe from hundreds of metres away, compared to being so close to Biters out for her blood, and with her heart hammering so fast she could barely keep her hands straight.

Alice heard footsteps and howls behind her, and realised

with a stab of panic that she was well and truly trapped between Bunny Ears and others who may have come behind her down the hole.

She looked around frantically and saw a small opening in the wall to her right.

She ran towards Bunny Ears, diving down at the last minute beneath his outstretched fingers, which were crusted over with dried blood. She swept her legs under the Biter, coming up in one seamless motion as Bunny Ears fell down in a heap. She ran towards the hole in the wall and turned around to see at least four more Biters coming behind her.

Alice fumbled at her belt for the lone flashbang grenade she had slung there. She pulled the pin and rolled it on the ground behind her, as she ran at full speed into the darkness of the hole. She heard the thump of the grenade a few seconds later, and hoped that the intense flash of light it emitted would slow down her pursuers for a few seconds and buy her some time.

With that came a sobering thought. Time to do what? She was stuck deep inside what seemed to be a Biter base, and was running ever deeper into its recesses. Now, Alice thought, she had perhaps got more thrills than she had ever bargained for.

She was well and truly trapped.

Alice ran till she was out of breath and stopped. She went down on her knees, more tired and scared than she had ever

been. The darkness and narrowness of the passage she was in made her feel disoriented and claustrophobic.

At least, she could no longer hear footsteps behind her. That did not surprise her. While the flashbang would not stop the Biters, she knew they hated very bright light, and it would certainly have slowed them down. Also, she was very fit and could outrun most of the people in their settlement. The Biters were feared for their feral violence, but their stiff, loping gait meant she would be able to outrun them in any flat-out race. The problem was that she was trapped in their base, and all they had to do was to tire her out.

When she thought she heard distant footsteps behind her, fear gave her a second wind and she started running again, clutching her side, which had begun to hurt from the exertion. She ran into a wall, and fell hard on her back, realising that the tunnel turned ahead of her.

Past the turning was what appeared to be a door, framed by light coming from behind it. She ran towards it. As she came closer, she was stunned to see a familiar drawing on the door. It was a seal with an eagle framed by letters that were barely visible in the light. She started trying to read and got past the U, N and I before she realised she did not need to tax her limited reading skills to understand what it showed. She had seen a similar seal in old papers her father kept locked away in a dusty box. This was where her father had once worked.

Her father had once told her about having worked in the United States embassy in New Delhi before the Rising. She had understood little of what he had meant, though other kids around the settlement had told her that her father had been some sort of important man in the governments of

the Old World. They had told her that she and her family had come from another land called America, which was why her blonde hair and fair skin looked so different from her brown friends.

None of that mattered much to Alice, or to anyone else anymore. The old governments and countries were long gone. Now all people, irrespective of their old countries, religions or politics, were bound together in but one overriding compact: the need to survive in the face of the Biter hordes. She had heard tales of how human nations had waged wars against each other, driven by the gods they worshipped, or the desire to grab oil. Alice remembered laughing when her teacher at the makeshift school in the settlement had told her class about those days. She had thought her teacher was telling them some tall tales. What was it the old folks called them? The ones who had read stories before the undead rose and the world burned?

Yes, fairy tales.

When Alice heard footsteps behind her, she snapped back to the present. She struggled with the door in front of her, trying desperately to open it. She found a handle and pulled it with all her might. The door was made of heavy metal, and it sapped all her strength to open it enough for her to slip through. She looked back when she heard the roars and saw darker shapes appear in the dark tunnel. She pushed the door shut, hoping that what she had heard about Biters being stupid was right—there was an old joke about how many Biters it took to open a door.

She looked around the room, which was lit by a single small kerosene lamp on the ceiling, and filled with papers

and files that crammed the shelves lining the walls. There was a small desk in a corner with some big printed papers with lots of writing and some pictures. Alice thought these might be newspapers, of which the older people on the settlement spoke fondly. She was fascinated by the pictures and words she saw. She didn't need to read the words to know what they showed. They were relics of the last days during the Rising and its aftermath. There were grainy pictures of the first appearances of the undead, which she imagined for those who had never seen before them must have been quite a sight. Then there were pictures of burnt and charred cities: the remains of the looting and the chaos that had overtaken so many cities in the last days.

Alice had been so transfixed by what she saw that she had forgotten all about checking the room. Hearing footsteps, she screamed in frustration when she realised that there was another door, partially obscured by a chair, which was ajar. What she had taken for escape was, in fact, nothing more than a death trap.

She took out her handgun from her belt. As she felt for the safety, she remembered with dismay that in all the chaos she had forgotten to reload. She had no time now as shadows darkened the door. She unslung the sniper rifle from her shoulders. Inside the room, it was of no use as a long-range weapon, but there were other ways to make it count.

As a child, Alice had forever been getting into scrapes. Her parents would often tell her to back down once in a while, instead of wading into every fight. But once, after she had shot two Biters during a night raid, her father had got quite drunk in celebration and he had told her that no

matter what the odds, she should never give in to fear. To be afraid in the face of the undead was to die, or worse, to become one of *them*.

Alice felt her fear slip away. She knew that the Biters tried to bite and turn every human they found, but also that the humans who fought back the hardest sometimes enraged them so much that they ripped them apart, killing them instead of turning them into the undead.

Better dead than undead.

That was the motto of her school where they had been taught survival and combat skills. Before the Rising, little girls had played with toys and watched TV, Alice had heard, but she and the other girls at the settlement had grown up playing with guns, explosives and learning the best way to destroy the undead.

She swung the rifle in front of her like a staff, moving it around her fingers so it cut sharp circles through the air.

Three Biters came in. As the first reached for her, she cracked him across the forehead and leaned toward him, sweeping his legs under him as he went down. The next up was a squat woman wearing the tattered, bloody remains of a sari, and incongruously enough, a huge diamond solitaire earring on her left ear. The right ear was missing. Alice delivered a roundhouse kick that sent Ms Solitaire stumbling back and then reversed the sniper rifle in her hand, firing a single shot that disintegrated the Biter's head.

The third Biter, a tall man with his jaw missing, was almost upon her when she hit him hard in the face with the butt of her rifle. Biters might feel no pain, but it unbalanced him enough for Alice to jump back a

few steps and put another round into his chest. Only a headshot would put down a Biter for good, but a high-powered sniper rifle bullet did impressive enough damage and slowed one down, no matter where it hit. A gaping hole opened in the Biter's chest as he slumped back. Alice knew he'd be at her throat soon enough so she tried to chamber another round in her rifle.

Her right arm was caught in a strong, cold, clammy grip. She screamed and dropped her rifle. Bunny Ears was back and he was bringing his face back to bite her arm.

Alice kicked him in the shin, but he did not even wince as he came closer to delivering the bite that would be the last thing Alice felt before she became one of *them*.

Alice head-butted him, and as he staggered back and loosened his grip on her arm, she vaulted over the desk and stood with her back to the wall.

There were six Biters gathered in front of her. Alice suppressed the welling panic within as she unsheathed the curved hunting knife that was always by her side. Bunny Ears snarled and screamed in rage, a hellish concerto that was soon taken up by all the Biters in the room. Alice had heard of this ritual before. It meant the Biters were going to rip some human apart instead of trying to convert them.

Alice knew it was a losing battle. She was hopelessly outnumbered and even if by some miracle she managed to drive the knife through one of the Biters' brains, that would still leave several of them to rip her apart. But she was not about to go down without a fight.

Alice reversed the knife in her right hand and stood with her legs slightly spread apart, as she had mastered in

countless hours of unarmed combat practice. She slowed her breathing, focussing on the creatures in front of her, trying to block out her fear, trying to still her mind. As Bunny Ears stepped toward her, she gripped the knife handle tight and readied herself.

Better dead than undead.