



Just one glimpse of the horror
in

The Morningstar Strain 6:
HEROES

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ONE: Ewan Brewster, Washington, DC

“This is crazy.”

The humidity in Washington D.C. on the third anniversary of the Outbreak was, in a word, unbearable. It painted every inch of Ewan Brewster’s exposed skin with a thick, gummy sweat that made him feel weary and filthy at the same time.

Air conditioning was a thing of the past, at least for the moment. The best he could do was take a deep breath and try and not think about how fucking *hot* it was as he stood spread-legged on the roof of the U.S. Capitol and squinted through his government issue binoculars at the undead mob stretching out before him on the National Mall. The sky above them was a mass of roiling gray clouds that flickered with lightning, blurred by rainfall just miles away over the Potomac. The day was so dark it looked more like predawn than two in the afternoon.

“There are no teams beyond the perimeter, are there?” He was speaking to his aide de camp, Cameron Hoffer, who stood two steps behind and two steps to the left of him, farther back from the railing than Brewster himself.

“They’re all inside,” she said. “Full patrol on the perimeter, of course, but other than that, safe and secure.”

“Good.” Brewster felt personally responsible for every one of the seventy-two men and women who were part of the D.C. beachhead. He didn’t want a single one of them at more risk than absolutely necessary.

Of course, they were all at risk here. The shamblers that had populated the streets of the national capital since the Morningstar Strain conquered the world had not diminished or died away in the intervening months. If anything, there were more of them than ever.

The National Mall stretched out for below him for more than half a mile, past the Grant Memorial and the – now, sadly – muddy and clogged Reflecting Pool to the Washington Monument, standing straight and tall and penile as ever. It seemed ridiculously clean and white even now, untouched by the end of the world and the zombies that crowded around its impregnable base.

But it does more than crowd, Brewster thought. *It mobs*. The Mall itself, and all the side streets and lawns and avenues that bordered it and fed into it, were filled, packed, *jammed* with shamblers. They stood shoulder to shoulder and back to chest with not so much as an inch of space between them. *Thicker than teenagers at a Carrie Underwood concert*, he thought darkly. And the number hadn't diminished since the day he and his original team of Hunters had landed here, months after the Outbreak and fresh from Recovered Omaha. The only thing about the shamblers that had changed was their color. There was no variation now; no mad mix of costumes and uniforms and street wear. Now they all seemed to be the same shade of sullen, grimy gray, made up of equal parts dirt, rainwater, and decaying human flesh. Beyond that, they simply did not change ... or disappear.

Brewster remembered the flickering ember of hope, many months ago, that once the Morningstar Strain had done its evil work, its victims would just ... fade away. The sprinters, still marginally human, would starve to death when there was no one left to each, and shortly after the shamblers would follow, when every human they *could* have eaten *had* been eaten. But the truth became evident all too soon. The number of sprinters did, in fact, thin as the last easy victims were taken and transformed. But the shamblers didn't dry up and blow away. They didn't even fall down. They just got to a certain point in their devolution and *stayed there*, frozen in time and often in space. They simply would not die a second death.

Thunder rumbled somewhere behind the National Gallery, not so far to the northwest. Brewster could see lightning dancing between the clouds, growing brighter and closer as he watched.

Anna Demilio, still the world's greatest expert on Morningstar – maybe the *only* expert, Brewster admitted – had figured out at least part of the

process. The sprinters, she had explained to him (and anyone else who would listen), were basically just the Morningstar Strain virus in a big flesh bottle. A sprinter's only purpose was to *spread the virus*. That's why it didn't stop and eat; it wasn't supposed to. It was supposed to bite and slash at any human it could sense, doing just enough damage to make sure the blood-borne infection had been transmitted. And when some as-yet-undetermined instinct told it that its mission was accomplished, it would move on, as quickly as possible, to find, bite and slash another victim. It never looked back and it never stopped. It was locked in forward gear until it finally was brought down by violence or accident ... only to return as a shambler, after it was dead.

But shamblers, she had said, had a different mission. As Demilio explained, they were there to *survive*, not spread, and survival meant *feeding*. Shamblers were slower, more relentless than sprinters, and if they caught any bit of living tissue – human or animal, it didn't matter – the shambler would eat and eat and *eat* until there was nothing left. No bone, no skin, not even a hank of bloody hair. She'd actually measured – *somehow*, he thought, *and I don't want to know how* – that a shambler could consume up to twice its body weight before it finally stopped. It converted virtually all of that tissue into a kind of sludge that was stored all over its apparently emaciated body, wrapping itself around muscle fiber from head to toe, waiting to be activated.

The virus altered the human body after death in a number of ways. It discarded all the parts that didn't contribute to feeding and surviving. Higher brain functions went first; the sense of taste and even the tongue itself quickly dissolved, along with the entirely pointless vocal cords and lungs. The nose and all the olfactory organs withered within hours – that's why so many shamblers had no noses and faces that looked like skulls. Ultimately only the eyes and ears remained intact and functional – improved, actually – along with the parts of the brain that responded to visual and aural stimuli in the search for food.

Still, once a shamble got what it wanted, once the tank was full ... it stopped. Cold. Demilio called it a 'dormant state,' but Brewster didn't like

that word. It sounded too passive, too safe. *They aren't dormant*, he said as he looked down on the millions – literally, *millions* – of shamblers in front and below him. *They're ... waiting. They're poised.* And the minute they heard or saw something that might mean *food* – a twitch of motion, an unusual sound -- they would turn and take it, eat it, store it ... and continue.

He hated them. He hated them with a depth and permanence his younger, pre-Morningstar self could never have imagined. But now, as he looked on the virtually endless wave of them, thick as a polluted sea, he couldn't help himself: he was almost overwhelmed with anger and disgust and a bottomless compulsion to end them *all*.

The day grew even darker and lightning struck the Washington Monument. Of course it did no damage; the remarkable cap at the very top of the spire, made of pure aluminum, took the bolt and channeled it away, just as it had since the Monument's construction, when aluminum was almost a precious metal. The other landmarks along the Mall – the Smithsonian, the National Gallery, the Air and Space Museum and the others, as well as the building he was standing on now – all had equally efficient but far less showy lightning protection systems; he was safe here, he knew. And despite the boom and crackle of the approaching storm, the sea of shamblers didn't even flinch at the sound. They had long ago identified it as *not-food*, so it wasn't important.

“You want to come inside?” Hoffer asked

“In a minute,” he said, still not lowering the binoculars. “Check and see if the perimeter patrol needs anything.”

“Already done,” she said, ever the picture of efficiency. “We're in good shape.”

Brewster shook his head without lowering the binocs. “No,” he said. “We are not. We're just no worse than –”

A huge bolt of lightning, a jagged finger that looked as thick as a Cadillac, lanced out of the clouds and struck the perimeter fence. The sound was immediate and massive, so loud and strong it actually made Brewster take a step back and re-center himself.

The ocean of the undead didn't move.

In all the months they had been in DC, they had failed completely at recovery. Despite their best efforts, they had barely been able to clear anything more than the Capitol Building itself and the lawn out to the Grant Memorial, just this side of the sad old Reflecting Pool. At that point, they had managed – with far too many casualties – to erect the standard two-layer perimeter fence, just as they had in Omaha and elsewhere standing, to the west at 3rd Street, the north along Constitution Avenue and the south along Independence. But they hadn't been able to clear and hold anything more – not even the Supreme Court or the Library of Congress, though it was right across First Street to the east.

There are just too many of them, Brewster knew. And they just keep coming.

The lightning struck the outer fence directly in front of the Grant Memorial. It blew the steel mesh into small bits that flew in every direction, and even decapitated or dismembered a half-dozen shamblers with its shrapnel. But that didn't stop them. Quite the contrary

The sea of shamblers had always focused its brutish group attention on the light and noise of the recovered Capitol Building. They had been waiting, *waiting* for a moment like this. Now, the instant there was a breach in the perimeter fence ... they *moved*.

Brewster saw it clearly from his post on the southern side of the Capitol's roof. The mass of shamblers surged forward, as thick and slow and relentless as magma from an erupting volcano. It would take them only a few moments to reach the inner fence, and if that were to breach ... they would take the Capitol itself in minutes.

“Shit!” Hoffer said. Then, into her walkie: “Perimeter Two! Breach –”

“We're on it!” a voice grated from the radio. “Running a cut-out already!”

Brewster could see that: one of the huge, specially outfitted panel trucks was already moving across the Capitol lawn, then anchoring itself just inside the inner fence, right where the shambler horde would hit. Even if the sheer

weight of the mob managed to break or collapse the barrier, the shamblers couldn't move forward: they would hit the solid steel wall of the truck .

This wasn't the first time a breach had occurred, and Brewster knew damn well it wouldn't be the last. Still, they would need every able body they could muster to close the tear right now and repair the damage before it got completely out of control.

He whirled around and shoved his binoculars into Hoffer's hands. "Coordinate from here!" As if on cue, the sky opened up and rain fell – thick, hard, and blood-warm. The summer storm had arrived in full force. "I'm on Tac Two!" he shouted, his mouth almost at her ear, and when the trim, hard-faced blonde gave him a tight nod, he turned and ran: into the Rotunda, down the stairs, straight to the Capitol's front doors.

By the time he made it to the soldiers defending the breach, a truck just as large as the one he had seen from the roof had arrived. He knew the driver: Gaby Ortiz, a damn good mechanic and a seasoned fighter. He had been right beside the blocking vehicle when the lightning struck; he needed no orders.

Brewster stopped at a knot of soldiers waiting inside the first perimeter fence, pausing just long enough to have a loaded M4 shoved into his hands and a bandolier thrown around his neck. Then he snatched up one of the new Morningstar Scythes they'd developed – a fresh back, recently arrived from Fort McCoy – and turned back to the action that was happening beyond the perimeter gate, barely fifty yards away.

Gaby, bald head shining in the pouring rain, was driving straight into the tide of shamblers. The right side of his truck scraped along the fence and threw out sparks despite the downpour. Shamblers fell and crunched beneath the snow-chained tires of the vehicle as Gaby ground through them, one foot at a time, carving a patch through the undead and blocking the breach with his trailer.

Brewster heard another roaring engine close behind him, over his shoulder. He didn't have to turn to know it was one of the modified front-loaders they had salvaged from the Botanic Gardens, a trim little Japanese

vehicle with another steel barrier bolted to the arms it held in front of its cab, where the shovel used to be. He knew there was another front-loader on the far side of the churning mob, effectively blocking its spread farther down the bare strip between the two fences. *No man's land*, Brewster thought grimly as he gripped his scythe. *And no shamblers' land, either.*

The rebuilt, post-Morningstar infantry had learned a great deal about how to fight both sprinters and shamblers. Rule Number One: save your ammo if you can. Number Two: don't get within arm's length of the bastards. And third and most important: *aim for the head. Nothing else matters; just aim for the fuckin' head.*

As any half-decent marksman will tell you, it was hard to get a clean headshot from more than a few years away. The head was a small target; that's why cops and soldiers had always been trained to aim for the center of mass. But that wouldn't work with a sprinter or shambler; a body shot didn't stop or even slow down an infected or resurrected human. The survivors had been forced to develop new weapons and tactics to fight them, tools and approaches that were far more efficient when it came to close-up combat with the dead.

Weapons like the Morningstar Scythe. Agriculture scythes had long poles, called the snath, that arced downward, to a single sharp, viciously curved blades. But it was a *downward* arc because they were meant to cut grass only five or six inches above the ground. Morningstar Scythes were supposed to slice just as efficiently, but five or six *feet* above the ground – essentially just above the shoulders. So the snath curved the other way, upwards, and the handles – the nibs – were placed differently for better leverage and control.

Ewan Brewster had been involved in the design of the Morningstar Scythes; he had been one of the first to train with them, too. He knew how well they worked if properly used. And he was using them properly now.

He made sure he was least ten feet away from any other defenders as he rushed to a clot of shamblers who were moving relentlessly towards the fence. He didn't want to get too close to anything human when wielding

a scythe; this weapon had a long reach, and it could easily swing out of control and do more damage than good.

He skidded to a stop on the wet grass, less than ten feet from the moving wall of shamblers and off to one side. “*This way, assholes!*” he bellowed, as he planted his feet, raised his weapon and swung with all his carefully controlled might.

The blade bit into the throat of the nearest shambler – originally male, just under six feet, with clothing so decayed Brewster couldn’t tell if it had once been a suit or a shroud. He barely felt any resistance as the homicidally sharpened blade sliced straight through the creature’s throat and separated its head from its body.

Now: shift, turn, step, and swing back the other way. Aim for the shambler to the left of his first target: another man, originally fat, now just folds of desiccated flesh that looked like the remains of a mummified shar pei stuffed into a tank top. This one went down, too, almost as quickly. But this time Brewster felt it in his shoulders and upper arms.

This was the single greatest drawback of the Morningstar Scythes: as wonderfully efficient as they were, they took a lot of physical strength to wield, and you got tired. *Fast.*

Two more. Three. He hit the fifth shambler a little too high, in the jaw and cheek instead of the throat, and the blade paused there for an instant, jittered, and he had to re-plant his feet and push to get the blade through to complete the task and get it free. That would be the worst thing of all: losing the scythe because of a bad hit. He had to face it: it was time to rest for a minute and go to his alternative.

There were roughly eight hundred shamblers between the truck and the fence – or had been, when Gaby blocked the breach and set his brake. As soon as he was set, the driver began to methodically head-shoot the shamblers at the back of the horde from inside the truck’s cab, using a crossbow with a rifle-stock mount and an apparently endless supply of fire-arrows. These were another innovation; they required no loss of precious ammunition, and no need for a clean shot: just set the arrow, light it with your sparker, and

hit the undead son of a bitch anywhere in the shoulders, neck, or head. The crossbow flew with hundreds of pounds of pressure; when it hit, it hit *deep*, and when it did it half-exploded on impact and set fire to the remains. It was a perfect weapon for shambler-killing from a fixed position when there was plenty of prepared ammo at hand.

By the time Brewster had a chance to check on the driver, there were already two dozen zombies on their knees or already down with their heads on fire, burning brightly despite the rain.

Close to thirty defenders were cutting the shamblers down using a variety of specially made weapons. It would take something like a thirty-to-one kill ratio to take them all, Brewster knew, but they were working on it, they were getting –

There was a sharp howl, half a scream, from his right. Brewster stepped back a few feet and let the scythe fall as he brought up his M4 and turned.

Stan Bennett, a twenty-four-year-old recruit from Fort Campbell, had miscalculated. He'd let a shambler – a relatively small one, a thing that used to be a narrow-shouldered teenage girl – get a step too close, and his shot with his beloved CZ Redhead had gone wide. Now the over-and-under shotgun was flying through the air, lost to Bennett when the shambler dug its teeth into his arm and *bit*, hard and long. He couldn't shake the damn thing off, Brewster saw. No way ... and at this point, it wouldn't matter if he did.

Brewster watched as the soldier groped for his machete holster, desperately trying to pull it free and take the shambler down, but Bennett was off-balance and one-armed. And now a second shambler, an impossible skinny man who had been turned in his thirties, was on Bennett too, clawing his rib cage open from the other side and burying its face in the soldier.

There was nothing to be done. Brewster fast-walked in from his side; he saw Jim Kurasaki doing the same from the other side, pulling his Magnum as he came. They both aimed carefully and low, trading a total of three shots, one for each head, then quickly backing up and out, taking down

three more shamblers approaching the carnage before they holstered their firearms and went back to the scythes.

Lightning flared and thunder boomed almost directly over their heads. The rainfall doubled in its violence, though Brewster hadn't thought that possible. He was soaked to the skin, like everyone else, and now visibility was dangerous low. "NO FIREARMS!" Brewster shouted. "CROSSFIRE!" Though the horde was already reduced by two-thirds, he knew the last of them, trapped between human forces, would have to be brought down by bladed weapons or fire-arrows only. There was too much chance of injury from friendly fire as the soldiers drew closer to each other from opposite sides of the mob.

Gaby Ortiz had run out of easy targets. A smart man would have stayed in his cab, above the action and perfectly safe. But Gaby was more brave than smart, like most of the DC defenders. As the last of the mob moved away from him, he hopped down from the truck, crossbow in hand, so he could continue to do damage ... but he moved a little too quickly and carelessly for his own good. A shambler with linebacker-wide shoulders came lunging out of the storm and nearly took him – but Lindsey Kelp, a tall women with more stringy muscle than a man twice her size, brought her battle-axe – a genuine, no-shit *battle-axe*, Brewster noted – straight down on the linebacker's head and split it cleanly in two. Its bloody fingers were no more three inches from Gaby's throat when it fell for the last time.

Gaby didn't even take the time to thank her. They just turned back-to-back and shot and cut down twenty more shamblers from where they stood.

It took the humans another twenty bloody-black minutes to finish it up. The last two creatures were literally stomped to death by three friends of Sandy Panetta, a tough middle-aged combat trainer who had tripped on a downed shambler at just the wrong minute, even as the battle had been winding down. Still, her comrades in arms didn't waste any bullets on the last of the shamblers. They kicked the legs out from under them and let their steel-toed boots do the rest.

It would have been poetic justice if the storm had abated as the fight with the shamblers had ended. But it didn't. The weary twenty-eight surviving defenders of the Capitol just double-checked the security of the breach-block as the rain continued to pound down, then slogged back to the perimeter gate, exhausted and half-drowned.

Barely more than an hour after it all began, Brewster was back on the Capitol roof, binoculars in hand, waiting for the downpour to finally move away. It was showing no sign of losing strength, even though the last of the late-afternoon light was already fading from the sky.

The ocean of shamblers remained. It seemed entirely undisturbed by the lightning strike, the breach, or the storm. They were quiet again. *Waiting.*

"This isn't working," he said to his assistant, not really caring if she could hear him over the sound of the rain rattling on the shelter's roof. "We need to go to Plan B."

"There isn't any Plan B," Hoffer said. She didn't sound any happier about that than Brewster felt.

He grunted. "Then we need to make one," he said.