



Dark Days (Dead City)

By James Ponti

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Molly and the Omegas fight to contain the storm unleashed by Operation Blue Moon. As they do, Molly's personal life is thrown into turmoil when she discovers that one of her closest friends has joined the ranks of the undead, a development that threatens the Omegas as well as Molly's relationship with her mother.

As Molly and her friends fight the Dead Squad (a special NYPD task force made up entirely of zombies), they discover that the world's largest gold reserve is kept in a vault eighty feet below the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. They find a photograph of the vault's construction in the 1920s and realize that the construction crew was led by none other than the leader of the undead, Marek Blackwell. Could this explain the source of all his money? And if so, what is he planning to do with it? Is he rebuilding Dead City...or is he building an undead army?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

James Ponti was born in Italy, raised in Florida, and went to college in California. After receiving a degree in screenwriting from the USC Film School, he began a career writing and producing television shows for the likes of Nickelodeon, Disney Channel, PBS, Spike TV, History Channel, and Golf Channel. James loves writing, travel, and the Boston Red Sox. He lives with his family in Maitland, Florida.

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Dark Days



The Hamlet Suite

The biggest lie perpetrated by the Christmas card industry has nothing to do with flying reindeer and everything to do with snow. Greeting card snow is festive and fun, but real snow is just cold and annoying. That's why all the people on the sidewalk were hurrying to get out of it. Well, all of them except for me.

"You know we could always wait inside," Grayson said, pointing toward the lobby with his head so he didn't have to take his hands out of his pockets. "I hear they've got electricity and heat."

"If we go in the lobby, Hector will send us up to the apartment; and I don't want to go to the apartment without Alex," I replied. "I want us all to go together. Like a team."

Hector was the doorman in Natalie's building, and like all good doormen on the Upper West Side he didn't let you just hang out in his lobby. He kept you moving, especially when the weather was bad. That meant we had two options: stand in the snow and wait for Alex, or go up to Natalie's apartment and start without him.

"Let's just give him five more minutes," I said. "If he isn't here by then, we'll go anyway."

It was the first time we were visiting Natalie since she'd been released from the hospital. The first time the four of us were going to be alone since the epic failure that was New Year's Eve, when Marek Blackwell came back from the dead and Natalie wound up in intensive care.

Even though I was excited to see her, a part of me was dreading it. I felt responsible for everything that happened and wouldn't have been surprised if she blamed me too. I was worried that our friendship, which meant everything to me, was about to come to a sudden end. That's why I wanted to wait for Alex. I needed all the friendly faces I could get.

"Is everything all right?"

A police officer was asking us. He was tall, over six feet, and had broad shoulders. His name tag said PELL and he was curious as to why Grayson and I didn't have enough sense to get out of the snow.

"We're fine, officer," I replied. "We're just waiting for a friend."

“Well, don’t wait too long or you’ll catch cold,” he said. “Or even worse, your ears might freeze off.”

“That would be bad,” I said with a laugh. “I like my ears right where they are.”

He gave me a strange look and replied with sudden seriousness, “I’m not joking. Do you have any idea what that looks like?”

I traded a bewildered glance with Grayson before I asked, “Do I have any idea what that looks like?”

“What it looks like when your ears freeze off?” he said. “It’s terrible. Let me show you.”

With no further warning, Officer Pell reached up and peeled his left ear off the side of his head. A pulpy green membrane hung from it as he dangled it in front of my face and started laughing. That’s when I noticed his orange and yellow teeth and realized that in addition to being one of New York’s Finest, he was also one of New York’s Deadeast. He was a Level 2 zombie with a twisted sense of humor.

I let out a scream and that only made him laugh harder. Between the snow, the traffic, and everybody rushing along the sidewalk, no one even noticed. You gotta love New York.

“Let this be a warning,” he said as he waved it by the lobe, pieces of zombie ear goop flinging past our faces. “We’ve got our eyes on you.”

He thought for a second and chuckled before adding, “And now I guess . . . we’ve got our ears on you too.” With that, he flicked the ear right at me and it stuck to my jacket.

I did a hand flap dance for a couple seconds until I knocked it off, and by the time the ear hit the ground, Officer Pell had disappeared into the crowd.

Grayson stared at me in stunned silence before stammering, “Did that really just happen? Did that really just happen?”

I nodded rather than answer, worried that if I opened my mouth my lunch might spew all over the sidewalk.

The encounter was disturbing, and not just because his ear stuck to me. (Although, by no means do I want to diminish how disturbing that particular detail was.) Looking back, it seemed as though he’d been waiting for us, like he knew we were coming. There was also the ominous threat that we were being watched. But worst of all was the idea that there was a Level 2 zombie on the police force. An L2 has no conscience, no sense of right and wrong. Combine that with the power of an NYPD badge and it’s a terrifying mix.

Alex was oblivious to all of this when he finally arrived a couple minutes later. He gave us a funny look and asked, “What’s wrong with you two? You don’t look so good.”

I still felt sick to my stomach, so I signaled Grayson to answer instead. He filled Alex in on what happened and by the time he was wrapping up the ear throwing portion of the story, I’d finally calmed down enough to talk.

“Are you sure he was a cop?” Alex asked. “And not just a security guard in a similar uniform?”

“Positive,” I said. “He was NYPD.”

“What does he look like?”

“Let’s see, he’s tall and spooky and . . . oh, yeah . . . he only has one ear,” I snapped, even though Alex didn’t deserve it. “Imagine Van Gogh but in a police uniform.”

Alex ignored my attitude and kept asking questions. It’s the type of focus that makes him a great Omega. He wanted to run through everything while it was still fresh in our minds. “Did he have a precinct number on his collar? A name tag under his badge?”

“I didn’t notice any number,” Grayson said. “But he did have a name tag. His name is Pell.”

“That’s good,” Alex replied. “That’s real good.”

That’s when I remembered another detail. “He also had a patch on his left shoulder. I noticed it when he turned to rip his ear off his head.”

“What did the patch look like?”

I closed my eyes and tried to picture it fully in my mind. “It was red and had a dog on it, maybe more than one dog. I’m not sure. I got kind of distracted when he started peeling off his ear.”

“A lot of the squads have their own patches,” Alex said. “He could be with one of the K-9 units. I’ll check with my uncle Paul to see if he can help.”

Uncle Paul was a longtime police officer and a real father figure for Alex, whose actual father had almost no involvement in his life.

“Now for the most important question,” Alex continued. “Are you two going to be okay?”

To be honest I wasn’t sure. I took a deep breath, and despite my typical dislike of snow, the flakes falling on my face were cool and soothing. I just stood like that for a moment and then I said, “Yes, I’m okay.”

“Me too,” added Grayson.

“Good, because we’re about to visit someone who’s recovering from a serious zombie attack, and I don’t want to get her worked up about another one. You saw her in the hospital. She’s nowhere near full strength.”

“You’re right,” I said.

“Should we even tell her about it?” asked Grayson.

Alex thought about this for a moment. “We’ll see. For now let’s just play it by ear.”

It took me a second to get the joke.

“Oh . . . by ear . . . that’s so funny,” I said sarcastically.

Alex tried to keep from laughing as he said, “Just checking to make sure you still have your sense of humor.”

Although Natalie lived on the twelfth floor, her family had temporarily moved downstairs so their apartment could be remodeled. Considering it was already the nicest apartment I'd ever seen, I couldn't imagine how they were improving it. But as someone who hates heights I was more than happy with the change. We took the stairs to the second floor and knocked on the door to 2-B.

"Check it out," Grayson said, pointing to the number. "Hamlet."

Alex gave him a curious look. "What do you mean Hamlet?"

"2-B," he said, as if this were obvious. "'To be or not to be, that is the question.' It's, like, the most famous line in the play."

"Have I ever told you that you're weird?" Alex asked.

"Yes," replied Grayson. "Frequently."

Natalie opened the door, but only part way, and peered out at us. Her face was pale and she had a confused, almost sleepy look in her eyes.

"Hey, Natalie, it's so great to see you up and out of the hospital bed," said Alex.

She cocked her head to the side and squinted as she studied him more closely. "Do I know you?"

It was devastating.

"Of course you do," he said. "I'm Alex. We've been friends for years. This is Grayson and Molly."

She studied our faces but didn't seem to recognize any of us. I was heartbroken. I think we'd assumed that since she'd been released from the hospital, she was doing better. Now we just stood there silently as we tried to think of what to say.

That's when she laughed.

"You guys are such suckers. You should see your expressions," she said as she finally opened the door all the way. "Welcome to the Hamlet Suite."

"That's not funny," Alex bellowed. "That's not funny at all."

"Ooooh," I mocked. "All of a sudden it's Mr. Comedian who doesn't have a sense of humor."

"By the way, did you hear what she called the apartment?" Grayson asked as he gave Alex a little poke in the shoulder. "The Hamlet Suite."

"That only proves that you're both weird," he replied.

I think it was the first time I'd laughed in weeks.

Once she stopped pretending she had amnesia, Natalie seemed more like her normal self, although her voice was still weak. We had gourmet hot chocolate that her mom special ordered from a café on the Upper West

Side (It was ridiculously fancy, with shaved peppermint bark and marshmallow chunks, but it was beyond delicious) and we sat down in a family room that looked oddly familiar.

“Why do I feel like I’ve been here before?” Grayson asked, looking around.

“Because you kind of have,” she said. “This apartment is ten floors directly below my apartment, so the layout is identical. My parents had everything brought down and put in the exact same place. Every room, every wall, every everything looks the same. Well, everything except for my room.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“It looks a little less bedroom and a little more intensive care unit,” she said. “I guess it’s an advantage of having surgeons as parents. They have access to lots of medical equipment.”

She tried to play it off as a joke, but I could tell that it bothered her. In a weird way, though, it made me happy. Natalie’s parents rarely made time for her in their busy lives. Maybe now, when she needed them most, they were finally coming through.

“Speaking of your parents,” Alex said, “are they around?”

“Nope. Dad had to go to the hospital to check on a patient, and Mom is running some errands,” she replied. “We’ve got about thirty minutes until she gets back, so let’s start talking.”

That gave us just enough time to talk all things Omega. It also let me tell them what I’d wanted to say since the stroke of midnight on New Year’s Eve.

“Before we talk about anything else, there’s something I need to say.”

I took a deep breath and just tried to blurt it all out at once.

“I’m so sorry. I’m so breathtakingly sorry. Everything’s my fault. I didn’t just think Marek was dead, I was certain of it. I saw him fall from the top of the George Washington Bridge. There was no doubt in my mind. You all believed me . . . and I was wrong.”

“Yeah,” said Natalie. “About that. How did he survive the fall?”

“They rebuilt him,” replied Alex. “They used body parts from his brother and cousins to make him whole again.”

“Okay,” Natalie said. “There goes my appetite for the rest of the day.”

Then she looked right at me.

“So how is that your fault?”

It turned out she didn’t blame me. None of them did. I don’t know why. I mean, I still blamed myself, but it was an incredible relief.

Once I’d gotten my apology out of the way, we tried to fill in the blanks for Natalie about what happened

that night. Not surprisingly, her memory was incomplete.

“How much do you remember?” asked Alex.

“Let’s see,” she said, straightening her posture. “I remember Molly calling us all to the steps in front of the library. And I remember the showdown in the old printing press room. There were a lot of bad guys and not so many good guys until Molly’s mom and her Omega team arrived. Then there was a big fight, and that’s where it starts to get fuzzy.”

Grayson asked, “Do you remember who you were fighting?”

Natalie nodded. “I think it was the big redhead, right? Edmund.”

“That’s right,” I said. “It was Edmund.”

“So what happened to him after he was done with me?” she asked.

We exchanged glances for a moment before Grayson answered.

“Alex happened to him,” he said.

“It was unbelievable,” I added. “Edmund didn’t even get to throw a punch. Alex saw what he did to you, and he unleashed the wrath of krav maga and killed him on the spot. And when the others saw what he did, they all pretty much ran away.”

The memory of this quieted us all for a moment, until Natalie looked over at Alex and said, “Always my hero.”

“That’s funny, because a few minutes ago you didn’t even recognize my face,” he joked. They shared a look and it was pretty great. It was a look of total trust and friendship. During their time in Omega they had each saved the other too many times to count.

“So what’s the plan?” she asked, breaking the moment.

“What do you mean?” I replied.

“Marek’s back and Dead City is more dangerous than ever,” she said. “How is Omega responding?”

The boys and I shared a nervous look, and then I turned back to Natalie.

“We’re not,” I said. “Omega has terminated all activity.”

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Kim McLoughlin:

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