

# Z O M B I E R I Z I N G **THE BEGINNING**

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## **Zombie RiZing:**

The Beginning

Drecks' Horde

Dragon's Wrath

Death's Door

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Zombie RiZing 1

## Chapter 1

Elizabeth wiped the sweat and muck from her forehead, took a couple of deep breaths and slowly leaned her head around the corner. The corridor was clear on the left; the right was a different story. She could make out four zombies in the darkness, possibly more, but no huge threat.

She turned back to her crew and used hand gestures to both communicate the threat and indicate they should turn left ahead.

“What?” said Sonny, with a glazed look in his eyes.

“Shh,” rage-whispered Elizabeth before she repeated the hand signals – four fingers aloft, then pointing right, a closed fist for no enemies, then pointing left.

“Three what?” came the reply.

Zhang Jing rolled her eyes. “Wow. Really?”

Elizabeth huddled everyone together and whispered her instructions. “I can make out four zombies to the right. They look like standard grunts to me. It’s pretty dark down there so we should be able to sneak to the left without being spotted.”

“It’s not ideal,” said Ms Simmons, “but if we take the middle stairwell we should be able to cut back to the science room on level two.”

There was a distant growl that gurgled and groaned at just the right tone to send fear into everyone’s heart.

“So are we doing this, or not?” said Vihaan as he tapped his cricket bat with menace.

Elizabeth looked at the five people in front of her.

Sonny Winterbottom – tall for his age, heavy set, pale skinned and still more than a little confused by the hand signal conversation. He carried a bag full of heavy rocks, one in his hand at the ready.

Zhang Jing – petite and polite, optimistically armed with her violin bow.

Ms Simmons – science teacher, attired in a mangle of black and purple with a solitary tuft of grey hair rebelling from the colour palette. She had a wand, but Elizabeth doubted it was anything but a prop.

Vihaan Pawar – all skin, bone and buck teeth. He surveyed the battlefield, frowned, then returned his cricket bat to his backpack and pulled out his slingshot. A convincing move to the untrained eye but Elizabeth had seen him operate both and knew the zombies were in no more danger now than when he had the bat.

Finally, Abby Carter – her wheelchair-bound best friend. Smart and funny, unable to talk and walk but great to laugh and listen. Elizabeth's rock. She noticed Abby's apprehension, winked at her and mouthed her reassurance. "We'll be fine."

Elizabeth tried – and failed – to think of another combination less likely to survive the Zombie RiZing. She took a deep breath and imagined she was surrounded by a crack fighting force. "Let's do this – let's kick some serious a—"

She was interrupted by the crash of lockers behind them, followed by a wheezy, slurping noise. Two zombies approaching fast... well fast for zombies... which is medium at best. But it did block any chance of retreat – not good news.

Zhang screamed. Sonny screamed louder – and at a higher pitch. Elizabeth's first instinct was to tell them to shut-up, but it was way too late for that. "Move it – left!"

They entered the corridor and turned left. At least that was the plan. But in his panic Sonny, who was pushing Abby, turned right. He took a few paces forward before looking up and seeing the zombies moving down the hall. Four had now become seven, alerted by the screams and the smell of living flesh. He skidded himself and Abby to a halt, which drew them a few metres closer to danger. The nearest zombies realised dinner was close and lunged forward – a move they seemed to save for such moments.

The closest grunt got to within a few metres. Sonny screamed even louder as he began moving Abby's wheelchair into a painfully slow three-point turn. He screamed, turned forward, screamed, turned back and screamed some more.

Sonny caught the putrid odour of the undead and felt a hand brush his back just as he found forward momentum back towards the crew. His scream paused momentarily as it dawned on him what the touch was – zombie flesh – then returned at louder levels and a higher pitch.

Zhang looked back down the side corridor they'd come from to see the two zombies there nearing as well. "Hurry up."

Vihaan let his slingshot rip at the nearest zombie of the seven – no 10 – lumbering after Sonny and Abby. The projectile

successfully impacted right between the eyes of a target. Unfortunately, it wasn't the intended one. "Whoops, sorry, Sonny!"

On a bright note, it did at least stop his screaming, replaced by the slightly less annoying and totally zombie-attracting, "Ouch, ow, ow, ow."

The pain and scare combined to propel Sonny into new feats of strength as he powered the wheelchair into top speed, this time in the right direction.

"He's headed right for us," said Zhang.

"Move it!" screamed an out of control Sonny.

"He's not slowing down either," added Elizabeth as they all jumped out the way.

In one graceful motion Vihaan dived clear of the full-speed wheelchair, army rolled back to a crouching position, then aimed and fired his slingshot into the head of one of the oncoming zombies. At least that's what he meant to do. Instead, he over-rotated and went barrelling shoulder first into a set of lockers. He fought through the pain to unleash his weapon, which ricocheted off a locker door before ploughing back into his other shoulder. He was too ashamed to give any hint of pain.

"Get up!" yelled Elizabeth as she chased after Sonny and Abby.

Vihaan obeyed and joined the retreating pack. Ahead of them Sonny screamed (again) and screeched to a halt. Zombies. Dozens and dozens of rotting flesh zombies.

The group gathered together in the middle of the corridor as a horde of grunts cut off their exit in front and two smaller groups joined the crush to block access from where they'd come. They were trapped.

\*

## Chapter 2

Now, it's probably time to explain a few things about the world as it stands.

The planet has become unrecognisable in the 12 weeks since the Zombie RiZing. It was April 20th – International Zombie Day. Oh the irony.

It was just before dawn when the world changed forever. The dead, woken from their eternal slumber, rose from their graves, out for flesh. Society ceased to function in a single morning – school, work, sport, video games were all no more (well, maybe still a few video games) – all replaced by the need to survive.

It was not a need many people satisfied. Even in the panic and mayhem of that first morning before the world truly realised what it faced, there was nowhere to run, and most ended up infected like the animated corpses that dined on their flesh. It didn't take long for zombie numbers to grow. And grow. And grow. We may never know how quickly things got out of control, but most survivors think by the end of the second day they were outnumbered.

By the end of the first week only pockets of human resistance remained. Interestingly, it appeared the adults were targeted first. Very few remained before the zombies turned their attention to the kids.

### **The thing about zombies (grunts)**

Apart from the bad breath, unsociable biting habits and skin conditions that would make a pimple embarrassed, the most notable feature of a zombie is eyes that glow green or yellow. They're unorganised too; they mostly amble aimlessly alone or in groups with other grunts – very much like teenagers in that regard.

The most important thing to keep in mind is while the head survives they stay alive. Grunts are slow, can be easily outrun, but can burst move for short distances (no more than a few steps). A healthy human should always be capable of outrunning one. The problem is not their pace – it's their numbers.

### **Fun facts:**

If you play music a grunt used to like when they were alive, they will stop chasing you and dance. So picking the right music is critical. If the zombies are really old, The Beatles are a good bet (have some Rolling Stones for back-up). Middle-aged zombies will often respond to Dire Straits or INXS, but if they have any visible tattoos you may look at playing some



Metallica or AC/DC. It starts to get a little trickier to pick for those slightly younger zombies who enjoyed a great deal more music diversity when alive, but with a good eye for detail, a varied playlist on your iPod and a set of speakers – you have a great deal of power.

Interestingly, most male zombies will also dance to *Spinning Around* by Kylie Minogue, and you should get a better than 50% dance rate with *Gangnam Style*, but there are some awkward moments.

The point is, this method distracts them so much you could even put leis on them or dress them up, although this is not recommended.\*

\*Unless you're a fashion designer and all of your models have been zombified.

\*Or you're bored, which happens a bit when you spend your time laying low waiting for the next zombie attack. That said a game of cards is more encouraged than dressing up zombies for your own amusement.

\*It's not as much fun though.

\*

## Chapter 3

“If anyone’s got any bright ideas, then now’s the time,” said Elizabeth.

These grunts were young, a tough crowd thought Vihaan as he rifled through his music collection. “DJ Vihaan is on the case,” he said cranking LMFAO’s *Party Rockers*.

Instantly, at least half the grunts stopped marching towards them and started grinding.

Sonny lobbed a couple of rocks at the remaining attackers but his aim made Vihaan’s look clinical.

“Really? Gimme some of those,” said Elizabeth as she reached into his bag and pulled out some rock ammunition of her own. She positioned herself in front of Abby and started pelting the grunts.

Ms Simmons also stepped forward. “I feel the magic,” she said as she readied her wand and focused all her concentration on a chant.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes then grabbed a few more rocks from Sonny’s kitbag. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the wand start to glow.

Everyone turned to Ms Simmons, who repeated the chant over and over; something was happening. Then she stumbled over her tongue twister chant, became frazzled and the light at the end of the wand petered out.

\*

### **The thing about magic**

It exists. That’s the first rule of magic, according to Ms Simmons. But, as a white witch, she was bound to believe that. Unfortunately, a small and ineffective glow at the end of a stick was the only evidence the others had ever seen of it.

But she was right. Not only does it exist, but its power is growing. She’d been telling anyone who’d listen that the Zombie RiZing was not the result of some disease or science experiment gone wrong but the return of the most powerful force in the world – magic, both good and bad, returning to the world.

Ms Simmons felt it and she saw it in the auras of the others. There was magic everywhere and if the others believed, they could harness its power. She might have been able to convince them it was true if she wasn’t so completely useless at it herself.

Magic was real and it was growing in power.



## Chapter 4

They had reached the second chorus of *Party Rockers* and the non-dancing zombies were nearly at arm's length. Not that the song could be heard over the continued screams from Sonny. The five found themselves in a tight circle facing outwards against an enemy coming from both directions. The rocks and slingshot stones were doing little to slow them down.

"Anybody? Anything?" yelled Elizabeth.

"I could change songs?" said Vihaan.

"I think we're going to need something a little more ground-breaking than that."

Ms Simmons picked up her wand and started chanting again.

"Has anyone got anything that can actually help?" said Elizabeth.

Ms Simmons stumbled over her chant again then burst into tears. She stared at her wand and the magic it failed to deliver. "Why?"

"Maybe we could all hide behind Abby while Sonny pushes her through the grunts," said Vihaan.

Elizabeth punched him.

"Ouch."

Suddenly, the horde was on top of them. It seemed all hope was lost.

"No!" said Ms Simmons. "Not like this."

"I still haven't hit one yet," said Sonny as he threw another rock in between targets.

Elizabeth reached over to hold Abby's hands. "Just close your eyes, Abby, we're together. Always."

But as the words spilled from her mouth a humming started, distant at first, then it became a roar, then an explosion – a sonic pulse that emanated from the centre of the group and sent every grunt flying backwards at lightning speed until they ended up a mess of mangled zombie bits at both ends of the corridor.

As the ringing in their ears subsided, confusion remained. What had just happened?

Zhang looked at Ms Simmons. "How did you do that?" she said.

Ms Simmons looked at her wand. "I didn't."

Then it dawned on Elizabeth. She looked at her silent, wheelchair-bound friend. "It was you, Abby, wasn't it?"

Abby laughed. A liberated laugh – one of true freedom. She toggled through her iPad choices app to express her thoughts while the others slowly joined in on the laughter.

Vihaan scanned the carnage at the end of the corridor then looked at Abby. “Oh. My. God.”

“What was that?” said Zhang.

“Magic,” said Ms Simmons. “That, my students, was magic.”

Abby found the right choice in her app and pressed the button. “Boom,” said the voice.

“Boom!” said Sonny. “Mega Boom.”

“Magic boom,” added Ms Simmons.

“Couldn’t have discovered that talent about a minute earlier?” said Vihaan as they all laughed again.

Elizabeth hugged Abby. They all did.

\*

## Chapter 5

Defining friendship was never easy for Elizabeth. After all, her best friend couldn't speak. The two had been neighbours since Abby came into the world four months after she did. They spent a lot of time together as kids, attended the same schools and pretty much went everywhere together.

Elizabeth carried two photographs of them in her purse – one from a trip to Movieworld two summers ago and one of them splashing together at the beach as toddlers. The second produced mixed emotions. It made her happy and proud she'd known her best friend her whole life. It made her feel safe and loved, but also made her incredibly sad about what the disease had taken from her bestie.

It was not long after that beach picture that Rett Syndrome started taking things from Abby. First it was her walking, then her talking and her ability to use her hands. Within a few months Abby had gone from being just like Elizabeth to someone who could only manage crawling on the good days. It was unfair, totally and completely unfair.

And it didn't matter one bit to Elizabeth, who still rated Abby as a perfect BFF. Sometimes they'd just hang out and watch movies. Sometimes they'd cook up a mess in the kitchen. Sometimes they'd get a makeover with hair, nails, everything. In fact, Abby was everything Elizabeth could want in a best friend - she was always happy to see her, there were no expectations and the silence didn't matter. It was just easy being in her company.

Over the years Elizabeth had made other friends who were perfectly capable of speaking. None of them were as trustworthy or as close as Abby. Words, Elizabeth had decided long ago, were overrated.

\*

## Chapter 6

As per Ms Simmons' suggestion, the group fled the hallway and raced up the access stairwell, arriving at the Year 8-10 science room in silent formation. Elizabeth took point at the door and examined the room through the glass – the coast looked clear. She entered slowly, checking the areas that had been hidden from view.

Her heart still raced from the close call. She gently tapped the nearest desk with the stone in her hand – loud enough to lure out any zombies hidden in the room but quiet enough not to attract any from further away. After a few seconds she repeated the noise – no grunts. She did a quick sweep of the room, examining all potential grunt-sized hiding places. Clear. She called the others in.

Ms Simmons was last through the door. She eased it closed as she entered, then scanned the room, which had been ransacked already – cupboards opened, beakers broken and chemicals spilled. She surveyed the damage and issued everyone with masks to protect them from any airborne nasties.

“OK,” said Ms Simmons returning to her teacher’s voice (perhaps triggered by their arrival in the classroom). “It looks like we’ll have to be happy with whatever we get. Gather any chemicals, mixing containers, scalpels – anything that’s still in one piece.”

She cleared some space on the main work bench then joined in the hunt.

“Why are we looking for weapons when we’ve got the biggest one sitting here,” said Sonny, directing his attention to Abby.

“True that,” said Vihaan.

“Please tell me you didn’t just say that,” said Zhang.

Vihaan ignored her and turned his attention to Elizabeth. “Do you think she can do that again? Like whenever we needed it?”

“What are you asking me for?”

Everyone looked at Vihaan as he assumed the unsure look Abby had seen a thousand times before. He repeated the question, but slower and louder.

“Just because she can’t speak doesn’t make her deaf and slow,” said Elizabeth.

Vihaan adopted a defeated position that involved hunching the shoulders and lowering the eyes – it was a pose that could only be performed at this level by a master, someone with an

overbearing mother and two older sisters. He mumbled some sort of apology that was too low in volume to be heard.

Abby, meanwhile, had found an appropriate response on her choices app. “I think so.”

Vihaan found a new glimmer of confidence in her response. “There you go. Mega weapon.”

“I’m tired,” came the voice from Abby’s communicator.

“I can see it in your aura,” said Ms Simmons. “I know enough about magic to know using that amount of power will drain her for some time.”

“How long?” said Vihaan.

Ms Simmons fixed her eyes on her wand. “I’m not sure. It’s beyond anything I’ve experienced.”

“And you say we all have this aura,” questioned Zhang. “Does that mean we could do that too?”

“Yes. Your auras grow stronger every day. I’ve never seen anything like it before. There’s magic there, you’ve just got to find what works for you.”

“How?”

“That’s not for me to say, it will be different for everyone.”

\*

### **The thing about weapons**

When you’re up to your eyeballs in a zombie apocalypse, and you have any thoughts of ongoing survival, you’re going to need some weapons. Serious weapons.

If Elizabeth and her friends were being graded for the cache of weaponry they’d amassed since the RiZing, they would be lucky to get a D-. A slingshot, cricket bat, violin bow, some rocks and Ms Simmons’ “magic” (air quotes intended).

It meant their favoured tactic was avoidance rather than battle. But things were starting to get desperate. Zombies were everywhere and they were getting more adventurous with where they roamed. Even worse, the group’s food situation was deteriorating and on the next run they took, they would have to venture beyond school grounds. Then there were the other gangs – both within the school and beyond. Every other group they’d seen had been more heavily armed.



There was a group of Year 10s in one of the classrooms near the oval, some of the oddball older kids hung out in the art & design centre and various small groups owned a classroom here or there. Then there was the clan that claimed the canteen. They were by far the biggest group and full of older students. By owning the canteen, they owned the best remaining food supply and they weren't in the mood for sharing.

The gang's plan had been simple up until this point. They'd locked down the teachers' wing as their home base. Ms Simmons had the key and no one else was allowed in or out. From there they snuck around, avoiding detection and scavenging as much food as they could from vending machines, lunch boxes and lockers.

They stuck to the parameters they'd set themselves and did pretty well for a while. But now the food was running seriously low and there was nowhere else in the school to find more.

It all added up to a big problem. Soon they would have to journey outside, but would then be exposed to more zombies, rival groups and who knows what else. They would have to be prepared – armed and prepared.

\*

Ms Simmons stared at the bounty on the table – a random and unconvincing collection of chemicals and containers. “I think we can make this work.”

“How?” said Vihaan.

“Well, we have enough here to make some explosive combinations – certainly more than enough to distract a few hungry zombies.”

“You sure? With that?”

“Absolutely.”

Vihaan looked at what amounted to a number of clear liquids and various other pieces of paraphernalia – he was far from convinced. “Will it work better than your magic?”

Ms Simmons walked up to the blackboard, picked up the duster and hurled it across the room, hitting Vihaan on the back of the head as he turned to protect himself.

“Ouch!”

“Say what you want, but between magic and science I think we're going to feel very protected.”

“I'll feel safe when we've stocked up on weapons from the maintenance shed.”

“Weapons aren’t the answer, young Vihaan.”

“We’ll see, we’ll see.”

As some of the group readied themselves to leave, Elizabeth was drawn to the window. The science room gave her an excellent field of vision, all the way to the big buildings in the city. Behind her shoulder, Zhang shared the view.

“How many people do you think are still out there?” said Zhang.

Elizabeth thought on the question for a moment. “Hard to tell. I’m mean, look at us, if we’ve made it this far, anyone can.”

“True, but a lot haven’t.”

“True.”

“Is that the shopping centre?” said Sonny as he joined them at the window. “That big grey roof?”

“Yep,” said Elizabeth.

“That’s a long way away.”

“I used to walk further than that to school every day.”

Elizabeth looked at Sonny, she could tell he wasn’t keen on leaving the school. None of them were, really. The school had been all they’d known since the RiZing. It was safe. But she also knew a trip was inevitable if they wanted more food. If they wanted to live.

“I’m sure we’ll be perfectly fine,” said Ms Simmons as she wheeled Abby over to join the others.

Elizabeth looked at Abby. “Do you want to get up?”

Abby had a tray on the front of her wheelchair, where the iPad was kept. On the left of the iPad was a green ‘yes’ button, on the right a red ‘no’. She tapped the green indicator with her left hand. Elizabeth smiled and began removing the tray. Vihaan moved in to help.

Soon Abby was sitting on the counter near the windowsill. Behind her Elizabeth, Sonny, Zhang, Vihaan and Ms Simmons stared across the city. Each imagined the future in their own way. Staying positive, well, that was their first challenge. The vista beyond the window wasn’t any help in that regard as there were few signs of life on this gloomy afternoon. Plumes of smoke rose up, unhindered by human intervention. It was a new world. It was their world.

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## Chapter 7

There were two wheelchair access ramps between levels in the main building. One ran alongside the main staircase near the front entrance, the other was on the exterior of the building on the oval side. It was here the group found themselves outside for the first time in a long time. The afternoon was murky, grim even, as heavy clouds moved low and fast across the sky. A storm was brewing.

Weather aside, things were looking up. The path from the ramp to a nearby shelter shed looked clear of grunts and, once they'd passed, it was only a short walk to the maintenance shed near the cricket nets at the side of the oval.

As usual, Elizabeth had been on point. She was the first to step outside. The dank corridors of the school were long past getting claustrophobic. She drew a deep breath of outside air, but nearly gagged at the assault on her nostrils. It was putrid – rotting flesh, rotting food, rotting everything. She lifted her jumper over her mouth to filter out what she could.

As she worked her way down the ramp, she could hear the others making the same unpleasant discovery.

“Eww, Sonny, gross,” said Vihaan as he waved his hand in front of his nose.

“Wasn't me,” said Sonny, like a seasoned campaigner in denial.

Ms Simmons gave Vihaan a clip over the back of the head. “Keep it down, you two.”

Vihaan hunched again, but continued trying to waft away the mystery stink.

Elizabeth hit the bottom of the ramp, then followed the outer wall of the building to the corner. She hated this bit – always having to be out front. She paused, took a few deep breaths – not pleasant – then peered around the edge. Good news – there were no grunts anywhere, all the way back to the staff car park. It looked like they wouldn't get any surprises from behind as they moved towards the shelter shed. She used a few hands signals to give the all clear and issue directions. Everyone nodded approval, then turned their attention to Sonny. His confused expression changed a number of times as he tried to decode the signals. He noticed all eyes on him and, in a panic, just nodded, the most unconvincing of acknowledgments.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, then led the group on to the next target.

They shuffled in single file formation across the courtyard to the shelter shed. Again, Elizabeth took point and peered inside first – all clear again. It was too quiet today – she shared a look with the others that conveyed her concerns, and also urged them to follow her on.

At the far end of the shed, Elizabeth paused before peering around the corner again. This time they weren't so lucky. Several zombies were gnawing on a corpse – possibly one of the older students from another group. They were so engrossed in their dinner they didn't notice her. She pulled her head back and collected herself with another series of deep breaths before taking another look – five grunts, a good 15m away.

A new plan was needed. She would have to redirect the team between the library and resource centre, instead of moving behind the library. The new route wouldn't take much longer, but it would take them out on the fringes of the oval rather than behind the buildings where she felt safer. It also meant crossing the 10m of space between the shelter shed and library in complete view of the dining grunts.

Vihaan nudged Elizabeth's shoulder. She looked back to find him wordlessly asking 'What's the plan?' with a demanding expression on his face. She began a series of hand signals, indicating the number and location of the zombies, what they were doing, the change in planned direction past the library and the need for complete silence. Again everyone nodded their approval... then turned to Sonny.

If his expression had been glazed before, this time it could be described as anywhere between bewildered and stupefied – probably closer to stupefied. There was a long, long pause as everyone watched the cogs in his mind slowly tick over. He stood there, staring into the distance, mouth agape, with only the odd blink indicating life.

Elizabeth repeated the signals.

Sonny's look of bewilderment continued – he was at risk of rigor mortis.

Elizabeth muttered something under her breath, inaudible but definitely not pleasant. She checked on the status of the five feasting grunts – still tonsils deep in dinner. She returned her attention to

Sonny yet again and repeated the signals once more.

Several seconds later he responded with a wave.

“What?” Elizabeth whispered to Sonny before she signalled Zhang to keep watch over the zombies.

“What do you mean what?” said Sonny.

“What’s with the wave?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

“But you waved at me,” said Elizabeth trying her best to stay calm.

“Only after you waved at me.”

By this point Elizabeth looked nearly as confused as Sonny. “What are you talking about?”

“You waved at me, and then said you were hungry and we should go to the library.”

“I wasn’t wav—”

“Which makes absolutely no sense, because everyone knows you can’t eat in the library. They have signs, you know.”

“Five!” rage-whispered Elizabeth. “It wasn’t a wave – I meant five zombies, down there.”

“Ahh,” said Sonny.

“...and they’re eating,” added Zhang, along with the eating signal.

“Ahh,” said Sonny.

“So, we’re going to change direction,” said Ms Simmons.

“Ahh,” said Sonny.

“Heading towards the—,” started Vihaan.

“...library,” came the voice simulator from Abby’s choices app.

“Ahh,” said Sonny. “Got it.”

“So can we please just move,” said Elizabeth, “quietly and slowly towards the library.”

Everyone collected themselves and moved in line behind Elizabeth as she checked the status of the zombies. Nothing had changed; they moved out. Slowly, silently they headed towards the library, eyes fixed on the zombie threat to the right. Dinner was definitely a student; you could make out the blue and white of the jacket – the one footballers liked to wear.

It really brought the situation home, seeing an older, fitter, stronger student end up as an all-you-can-eat buffet at hotel zombie. Vihaan had his slingshot at the ready. Elizabeth angled the group out to the left as she neared the path between library and resource centre – she didn’t

want any surprises as they ventured down. All was clear. She looked back to the grunts – all good.

Suddenly, there was a roar – distant and wheezy – to their left. A zombie on the other side of the quadrangle had cottoned on to their presence. Before long a couple more appeared out of the shadows and started growling and heading their way. They were too far away to be a direct threat but Elizabeth picked up her pace knowing they could still prove a threat if–

“They’re on to us too,” said Vihaan, looking at the original five grunts.

“OK, speed it up,” said Elizabeth, “nearly there.”

One by one the feeding grunts released their grip on meal No. 1 to start the pursuit of meal No. 2 – a six-course mega buffet of under-sized human. Bits of flesh, sinew and other non-identifiable body parts stretched like mozzarella across the quadrangle from zombie to corpse as the entire schoolyard landscape started to resemble a gross version of elastics. The frustrated zombies growled and groaned, louder than before

Elizabeth and her crew increased pace into a jog. If they could get past the library and around the corner, there was a chance they could lose the grunts before things started to spiral out of control.

The noise started to build as zombies near and far wheezed for human. Suddenly they started appearing in the library windows, attracted by all the noise. Somewhere, glass broke and the noise level increased. In the rising panic, Zhang let out a squeal, which always seemed to elicit a similar cry from Sonny.

Another window smashed, this time right in front of them. Glass shattered on the ground and zombie arms reached out through the window frame.

“Nearly there,” screamed Elizabeth. “Ruuuuuuuuun!”

They picked up speed as a window broke on the resource centre side of the lane and more grunt hands reached out for them. There was banging from behind the walls – both buildings must’ve been packed full of zombies.

Then the fire-exit door at the end of the lane exploded outwards and a dozen or so desperate grunts fell through the opening, blocking most of the

width of the lane. Elizabeth pumped the brakes. She yelled “Stop” and turned back to see the others skidding to a halt just as the mozzarella zombies blocked the other end of the lane.

They were trapped.

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## Chapter 8

### The thing about noise and food

It's a killer combo in the *Zombie RiZing*. Situations, like the one right now in the quadrangle, can go from nothing to epic in seconds. Zombies (grunts) have four states of existence, and they all revolve around noise and food. To their wilted brains when they hear noise they think food – and they've got a pretty one-track mind.

These are the stages...

Dormant – like those in the library. Barely existing, almost in hibernation, waiting to be alerted to the chance of a meal. Triggered when they haven't eaten for some time.

Roaming – your standard zombie mode. Like those to first detect the group from the far side of the quadrangle. Aimlessly roaming for food – slow, random but quick to follow noise. They conserve energy but keep moving and will not stop until they've reached that noise, or a louder noise attracts them.

Hunting – they've detected food near and they're on the march to get it. Even in this mode they conserve their precious energy. If they are far away from the source, they'll move as quickly as they can, directly towards their target. Once they are within range, they'll go into full hunting mode – single-minded and aggressive.

Although they're never fast, they can close down short spaces remarkably quickly.

Feeding – the ultimate state of a zombie. Self-explanatory. Survival tip No. 1 – don't be there when this is happening.

So when Elizabeth and her crew were spotted across the quadrangle it only took one noise from one roaming grunt to trigger a chain reaction of zombie noises that alerted every grunt within earshot. Dormants, roamers and feeders all became hunters, leaving the humans on the verge of being mozzarellad near the 'no food in the library' signs.

\*

Elizabeth assessed the situation – a laneway lined with zombie arms reaching in from left and right, five mozzarella zombies at one end of the lane and about 15 at the other in a tangled mess on the fire exit door. Her first instinct was to head back to the



mozzarellas, but then she realised the other group that had first spotted them would be getting close. There could be many more just outside the exit. It had to be the fire-exit grunts – and fast – before they untangled themselves and found their feet.

“Follow me,” yelled Elizabeth as she made her move. She ducked under a few searching zombie hands from a window on the left, then vaulted over the pile of fire-exit zombies to the end of the lane. She checked the situation beyond – it looked clear. She turned back to the group and urged them forward.

First to follow, Vihaan got within a metre of the fire-exit zombies before pulling out of his jump. Instead, he eased his back up against the resource centre wall and inched his way past their outstretched arms. Zhang was close behind, but instead of following she decided to wait for Sonny to arrive with Abby and the wheelchair.

That’s when the real extent of the problem became clear. Abby’s wheelchair was too wide to push past the gap between the resource centre wall and the pile of zombies twisted up on the door. “We’re stuck,” said Sonny.

“If you’ve got any ideas,” said Zhang, “now’s definitely the time.”

Ms Simmons was backing up towards them, facing the mozzarellas. “Hurry up!”

Zhang leaned in towards Abby: “Abby go boom?” She watched as Abby curled her hands up into fists, closed her eyes and tensed her body. But there was no boom.

“She’s probably still exhausted after the last one,” said Ms Simmons.

Sonny reluctantly moved the wheelchair closer to the fire-exit zombies – the gap was definitely too narrow. They’d have to create more room, or drive the right wheel over zombie heads and arms.

Vihaan cranked out a tune through his speakers and the sound of Katy Parry’s *Roar* filled the air.

Zhang gave him a pitying look as some of the zombies were distracted by the music. But the gyrating zombies hadn’t solved the problem of not enough space for Abby’s wheelchair.

Elizabeth pelted rocks at the fire exit, trying to keep more zombies from joining the fray. They were amassing in great numbers, blocked by those already tangled up outside. “Ideas? Anyone?”

“We need some sort of ramp,” said Sonny, “to get the right wheel over.”

“Brilliant! We just need some wood. It doesn’t even have to be that long, just sturdy,” said Vihaan as he loaded up his slingshot and let a pebble fly.

His shot landed between two mozzarellas at the far end of the lane and got caught in the stretchy goop, which absorbed the impact and bent back before returning it in Vihaan’s direction with interest. The pebble hit him in the forehead. “Oh, come on!”

As Vihaan doubled over in pain Zhang found the answer. “Your cricket bat!”

“I can’t see right now, let alone swing it.”

“No. Your cricket bat as the ramp.”

“What?” said Vihaan. “No way.”

“Genius,” said Elizabeth as she moved toward the injured Vihaan.

“You can’t, it’s a Gray Nicholls.”

Elizabeth pulled the bat from Vihaan’s backpack and lifted it high above her head.

“Careful,” he cried.

Elizabeth brought the Gray Nicholls down on the head of the nearest zombie. There was an unpleasant gushing noise as the bat settled into the head to form a sturdy ramp. She tried to wriggle it around – it was wedged into place.

“That did not sound careful,” complained Vihaan.

“Hurry up,” screamed Ms Simmons as the mozzarellas lunged close enough to swipe at her.

Sonny pushed into the wheelchair with all his might, aiming the right wheel for the cricket bat. He was successful, and he and Abby went flying over the exit-door grunts to safety.

Ms Simmons followed close behind, chanting something the others didn’t understand, with her wand over her shoulder. It had no effect.

“Move it!” said Elizabeth as she noticed the wood panelling around the door frame start to groan and split. “Now!”

Zhang hadn’t studied physics, but she knew enough about momentum that she decided to wait until Ms Simmons had bolted past and then follow, rather than jumping in her way. It was

a wise choice as Ms Simmons felt one of the window hands brush her, looked to see what happened, stepped on something she shouldn't have, rolled her ankle and came crashing down face to face with the cricket-bat-skulled zombie. She screamed.

Zhang swooped in to help raise Ms Simmons to her feet but the teacher screamed out in pain. Suddenly, something grabbed Zhang by the shoe. She screamed and poked around her feet with her violin bow – it wasn't having much affect.

The groaning of fractured wall and zombies intensified. The noise was almost unbearable, then a 5m section of the library wall crumbled into the lane, unloading dozens and dozens of zombies almost on top of Ms Simmons and Zhang.

\*

## Chapter 9

Later, when the rest of the group asked Zhang what had happened as the zombie wall fell towards her, she was very light on detail. The truth is she was in the zone as her new ability chose that moment to reveal itself. Now sometimes, thinking is dangerous. Not in everyday life but in emergency situations, because thinking takes time and time costs lives. It's all about quick reactions - instinct. That's why fighters train - so when it matters most their body acts before their mind thinks.

Zhang was no fighter, yet, but as she did have magic inside her. It just needed a trigger to get out. That presented itself amidst the chaos, noise, adrenalin, panic and confusion as a wall of zombies fell towards her.

She remembered holding her arm out to protect herself and screaming, 'nooo', as loud as her lungs would let her. Then she remembered a blinding blue light emanating from her hand – or was it her violin bow? Whatever the case, when her screaming stopped and awareness started to return, she saw that the blue light, coming from her, was holding the falling wall of zombies at an impossible angle.

She wasn't sure how long she lay there battling with her body to keep the magic coming, she just remembered it draining her. She also recalled Elizabeth and Sonny coming in behind her to drag Ms Simmons to safety. She remembered rising to her feet and backing out of the lane – keeping her violin bow aimed at the zombie wall the whole time. Then she remembered nothing.

“Zhang!”

An exhaustion so deep dreams weren't possible.

“Zhang!”

It was only now she started coming to.

“Zhang!”

She looked up to see Vihaan standing over her gently slapping her cheeks.

She was nowhere, she was everywhere, she was a whirl of thoughts and emotions. Where was she? Was it Sunday at home? Had she slept in? Could she smell the distant deliciousness of pancakes?

No, that smell definitely wasn't pancakes.

“Grrrrrr. Where am I?”

Vihaan looked at the others. “She’s awake.”

With the gang hovering over her Zhang tried to get to her feet but her body refused to cooperate. She breathed in again, the smell of pancakes long since gone - replaced by the smell of death.

“We made it, Zhang! You saved us!” said Ms Simmons.

“We’re in the maintenance shed by the oval,” added Sonny, “we’ve been here for hours.”

“Here, have some water,” said Vihaan as he put his arm behind her neck and gently lifted her high enough to drink.

She took a small sip before spluttering away the excess and coughing. She went to sit up again, impossible under her own steam, but with the help of the others she managed. She looked around the room and tried to focus. “Did I...” she held out her bow in her right hand.

“...Open a can of whoop-ass?” said Vihaan. “Yes, yes you did.”

There was a pounding at the door, followed by a series of grunts, gurgles and groans.

It gave Zhang enough of an adrenalin jolt to have a good look around the room. “Grunts! How many?”

“Relax, Zhang,” said Ms Simmons, “there’s only a handful of them. Besides, we’re secure enough in here to last the night.”

“Night?” It was only then Zhang realised the group was breaking one of its biggest rules – never be outside at night.

\*

### **The thing about night**

Surviving the zombie apocalypse is hard enough on a pleasant autumn day, but the odds are much worse at night. Let’s get the obvious problem out of the way first – it’s dark. Your vision is limited to what you can see by street light and torch. Hiding places are everywhere. Advantage: zombie.

On top of that, zombies appear to thrive when the sun goes down. Sure, you’ll find your fair share wandering around during daylight hours, but when the lights go out the zombies come out to play. Advantage: zombie.

Then there's sound. Of course this varies from night to night, but there is less ambient noise at night. Less background to distract the grunts, which heightens their senses – they become far more effective at locating food through even smaller sounds. Advantage: zombie.

The only positive to a person going out at night is that no other person would be insane (or alive) enough to do it, so you can go anywhere without the fear of bumping into larger, more heavily armed human groups\*.

\* It's not really much of an advantage.

\* It's probably safer to hide in bed.

\* It's definitely safer to hide in bed.

\*

## Chapter 10

Vihaan and Sonny stood in front of the bounty they'd collected for the group.

“Two pitchforks, two shovels – we sharpened the edges too – some secateurs, Stanley knives,” said Vihaan, presenting the cache to the group.

“Oh, and we found a couple of pairs of hedge trimmers, which we've broken in two and attached to rake poles,” he said, holding one aloft. “As you can see, they're sharp as anything and the pole gives you a fairly good range.”

“In the sports shed next door,” continued Sonny, “we found some javelins, two sets of cricket stumps – very sharp on the bottom, some cricket bats—”

“There you go,” interrupted Ms Simmons, turning to Vihaan, “you can replace yours already.”

He glared at her before speaking very slowly: “It's not a Gray Nicholls.”

There was an awkward pause before Sonny resumed. “Oh, and the cricket gear had a lot of very handy protection too – helmets, pads, gloves, forearm protectors, chest protectors, thigh pads, pill guards—”

“What's a pill guard?” asked Zhang.

Sonny pondered how he should best respond. “It's a protector for your... erm...”

“Delicates,” said Ms Simmons.

The response left Zhang as confused as before.

“Balls,” said Vihaan, “we also have plenty of cricket balls – good for medium-range attack.”

“So basically,” added Sonny, “we have enough equipment here to protect our bodies from attack and to fight back at short and medium range – even further if we can get good with these javelins.”

“Nice work,” said Ms Simmons, “so what’s the plan now?”

Elizabeth peeked through the blinds to the zombies outside. “We can either bunker down here for the night or make a break for it. We’ve probably got a dozen grunts out there now, but if they don’t shut up who knows how many we’ll be dealing with by dawn. I say we go.”

“Out there?” squealed Sonny. “In the dark? No thanks.”

“Besides, we’re still recovering.” Abby and Zhang are exhausted and the rest of us are battered and bruised,” said Ms Simmons.

“Good call, let’s give it a couple of hours, at least,” added Vihaan.

Elizabeth looked at the rest of the group, astounded. “Really?”

“Look, I know you’re scared,” she added, “I am too. I’m really scared, I have been since it all started.”

“You’re not scared,” said Vihaan, “you kick ass.”

“I kick ass because we don’t have a choice. Like now, we really don’t have a choice. It would be easy to stay here now and hope the problem goes away by morning, but you know it won’t. And it won’t be 12 grunts we’re dealing with, they’ll bring their buddies. It could be 100, it could be 1000 – I sure don’t want to hang around and find out.”

Elizabeth looked at the group. She saw her own thoughts and fears echoed in their expressions. It made the way forward clearer than ever before.

“Don’t you see? This is our moment, this is our line in the sand. We cannot sneak around forever. At some point we have to learn how to stand up and fight for ourselves.”

“Look at us,” said Sonny. “What hope do we have?”

There was a loud rumbling outside – low and distant. Sonny jumped in fright. Elizabeth increased her volume to compensate.

“Is this the same Sonny who pushed Abby over a pile of grunts while we were surrounded on all sides? And Abby – the girl with the kickass boom power. What about Zhang? Holding back a wall of zombies with... I don’t even know what that power was... but it was unbelievable.

The rumbling increased. Elizabeth had to lift her voice with each word just to be heard.

“And Vihaan – sure his aim’s not the best, but he’s there at the front of the action every time. And no one knows how to pick a zombie dance tune like him.”

Elizabeth realised she was almost yelling now; the zombies started thumping on the door with renewed urgency. “As for Ms Simmons, she may not be able to use magic yet, but she understands it, she sees it in us. She can help us learn to control it. She—”

There was a large explosion outside. Seconds later the maintenance shed was showered by debris. The group moved to the windows to take a look. A crater had formed in the middle of the football oval, several metres across. Red light beamed out from its centre. From the edge, zombies climbed over the lip and started across the oval in their direction.

“Oh. My. God,” said Ms Simmons.

“I’ve changed my mind,” said Vihaan, “let’s go now.”

Elizabeth threw two cricket kit bags into the middle of the group. “Suit up now – pads, gloves, helmets – everything you can lay your hands on.”

There was a roar outside, a sound no human, or zombie, was capable of making. Vihaan, still looking out the window, yelled without breaking his view. “Hurry up!”

“What is it?” asked Zhang as she joined him.

Something – alive – a creature, a giant, several metres high, lifted itself out of the crater, slapped its fists on its chest and roared again. Behind it another giant appeared.



Sonny fumbled with the velcro on his cricket pads. Elizabeth stopped working on Abby's helmet strap. "What's happening over there, Vihaan?"

"You really don't want to know."

"I really do."

"Well, first the zombies came out – and they don't seem like normal zombies – then we got giants, and now there are these flying things with horns."

"What?" screamed Elizabeth as she ran over to the window.

Hovering over the crater, flying way above the four giants now in view, were several flying human-like beings. They appeared to glow with a red hue, but that could've been the light from the crater reflecting off their large muscular physiques.

"This is the end," said Ms Simmons.

"I really need to go to the toilet," said Sonny.

"Everyone padded up?" asked Elizabeth.

The group nodded their approval.

"OK, grab your weapons. We're going to hit the grunts at the door and head straight back to base. We don't stop, we don't look back. Got it?"

"Got it," came the collective response.

She gathered everyone into a huddle. "We can do this. Think about how far we've come. We're a kickass fighting machine.

"Elizabeth, should we..."

"I'm not Elizabeth anymore. That was my scared name. I'm Beth, but not the normal spelling. I'm B E A T H – like death, but a better option. I am a zombie killing machine, like you."

There was a pause as the group let the idea of Beath wash over them.

"I'm Slingshot," said Vihaan, "no, VJ Slingshot."

"Nice one," said Beath as she passed out the stick-mounted hedge cutters.

"I'm Z-hang – I have magic that leaves zombies hanging in mid-air," said Zhang.

"What about us?" asked Sonny as he gaffer taped a javelin to Abby's wheelchair.

"Abby's got to be Boom," said VJ Slingshot.

"And what about... Rock for you, Sonny," said Beath.

"Rock! Yeah I like it."

Abby pressed the Boom button on the choices app.

“I’m Ms Magic,” said Ms Simmons.

There was a pause.

“Yeah... maybe,” said Beath. “Why don’t we workshop that when we get back to base?”

“They’re moving,” said VJ Slingshot, “and some are coming this way.”

“Everyone in position by the door,” said Beath.

The helmeted, padded and armed group got their weapons ready and complied. There was a screaming, piercing noise from the oval, something they hadn’t heard before. It was followed by a series of roars from the giants. The zombies hammered on the door of the maintenance shed again. The ground rumbled, the night sky was lit up in red.

“Boom, Z-Hang, Slings—”

“VJ Slingshot.”

“VJ Slingshot,” corrected Beath, “Rock and, erm, Ms Magic.”

“Yes Beath,” they responded in unison like an army platoon taking orders from their drill sergeant.

“Are you part of a lean, mean, fighting machine?”

“Yes Beath.”

“Are you ready to kick some serious apocalyptic ass?”

“Yes Beath.”

“OK. On the count of three I open this door. When I do, unleash hell.”

“One, Two, THREE!!!”

THE END

\*\*\*\*

...To be continued



Zombie RiZing 2

## Previously on **Zombie RiZing**:

In book one, *Scared to Beath*, the action picks up several weeks into the *Zombie RiZing*, which has seen the dead return from their graves in a never-ending hunt for fresh flesh. Society has fallen apart, and Elizabeth Baker and her friends have seen out the initial onslaught by hiding out in the teachers' area at their school. But food supplies are getting desperate, and they know they must soon venture outside to restock at a nearby shopping centre.

First, they need to stock up on weapons, which leads them to plan a raid on a science room and the maintenance shed. But, when they get pinned down in the corridors en route they discover another type of weapon – magic. From out of nowhere, Abby Carter – Elizabeth's wheelchair-bound best friend – unleashes a Boom magic attack that sends their zombie attackers flying.

It was just like Ms Simmons – the only surviving teacher – has been saying all along – magic is real and its power is growing.

What the six survivors have also learned they have at least one other weapon at their disposal – music! It turns out when you play music a zombie (grunt) liked when it was alive it will stop and dance to it when it was undead, bringing danger to a temporary halt. It's an instinctive act and survivor Vihaan Pawar considers himself a master of reading a zombie crowd to pick just the right beats.

The gang gathers chemicals from the science room and heads outside – where the zombie numbers are ever greater. What an odd bunch of survivors they must look; Elizabeth leading the way, Zhang Jing optimistically armed with her violin bow, Sonny Winterbottom with a bag of rocks and the accuracy of a leaky sprinkler, Vihaan with a cricket bat, slingshot and a worse aim than Sonny, Ms Simmons the magicless white witch science teacher and Abby the magic-maker, silent and unable to walk under her own steam. How have they survived this long?

They're passing the library when they're spotted by a group of zombies, then another and another. Soon they are trapped between the library and resource centre and then a wall collapses and dozens of zombies pour on to them.

It's at that moment Zhang discovers her own magic ability as she holds back a wall of falling grunts in mid-air. This allows the gang to escape to the maintenance shed, and Abby and Zhang recover from the exhaustion of unleashing magic. Their strength doesn't return until

after night falls. It's a dangerous time to be outside, even more so when the centre of the nearby oval turns into a giant crater and dozens more zombies crawl out. But it gets worse; there are also flying creatures and, gulp, giants.

Elizabeth looked at her team and realises they can't go on like this – hiding in the shadows. The only way they are going to make it is to become a powerful fighting outfit. As she prepares to lead them out of the shed to face whatever battle awaits, she tells the others she's changing her name. No longer Elizabeth, she's now Beath – rhymes with death, but with a B, as it's a better option.

Vihaan becomes VJ Slingshot on account of his skills on the iPod and his skills with the slingshot (well, the fact he has a slingshot). Abby becomes Boom for her magic attack and Zhang becomes Z-Hang for the same reason – her power leaves Zombies Hanging in the air. Sonny becomes Rock for his weapon of choice and Ms Simmons becomes Ms Magic, well, kind of, the jury is still out on her supposed magic ability.

Now it's time to open the door and find out what faces them in *Zombie RiZing 2: A Fate Worse Than Beath*. Drumroll...

## Chapter 1

The muggy night air was rich with the sounds of crickets, stray animals... and zombies. It was the sort of night when sound seemed to travel forever. Not that Beath and her crew could tell. They were stuck in the maintenance shed in the school grounds and the only sounds they could hear were the gurgling growls of the undead outside the very door they soon had to pass through.

Beath looked at the team of survivors around her, covered in cricket pads for protection and armed to the hilt with anything sharp they could find – javelins, stumps, even pitchforks – a motley crew if ever she did see. She could barely believe the six of them had been in science class together just a few short weeks ago; it was amazing how a zombie apocalypse could harden a person for battle. She remembered her recent speech where she had cast off the name Elizabeth to become Beath and the others had followed suit. They weren't a helpless rabble, they were an elite zombie fighting force.

Now her gaze fell on them one by one – the people she'd known for years and the zombie fighters they'd become – complete with new nicknames. Abby, the first to discover her magic – powerful enough to blast zombie grunts off their feet – was called Boom. Zhang, with her ability to freeze time and levitate grunts in thin air, was now Z-Hang. Vihaan was VJ Slingshot in honour of his weapon of choice and Sonny was Rock for the same reason. Ms Simmons was hoping to be Ms Magic, but the others thought signs of actual magic might be needed to make that credible.

Beath had worked them into a frenzy of positivity. They stood around the door, waiting to take on the world... or was it the underworld?

Her thoughts then turned to the other member of the gang, waiting for them at base – overnight, alone. Jacques – she needed to get back to Jacques.

She positioned the chinstrap on her helmet and secured her gloves before looking to her posse.

“Alright, ready?”

VJ Slingshot slapped his gloved hand on his helmet a few times. “Ready.”

Beath looked at Z-Hang and Boom – both weary from their earlier magical exploits. “We've got some tired people here so I don't think we can count on magic to help us out. Looks

like we're going old-school," she said, spinning a cricket bat in her hands, mindful of the sharp nails hammered into the surface.

"Old school!" said Rock as he jumped up and down in anticipation. "Wait, do you mean East Primary?"

"What? No. Old-school skills, not our old school."

"Oh, OK, like times tables?"

"Seriously?" said Beath, giving Rock the kind of blinkless glare a white pointer would envy. "Old-school skills – no magic."

"Ohh!" said Rock. "Cool, I understand."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Erm... yeah," he said, suddenly aware Beath wasn't the only doubter in the room as more eyes were glaring at him.

"Because I'm about to open this door..."

"Yeah."

"And, when I do, there won't be anything separating us from the zombies out there."

Rock nodded overeagerly. "I know that."

The conversation dissipated, turning into a staring contest, which Rock tapped-out of before the end of the first round.

VJ Slingshot started flicking through his music collection. "Any guesses as to the age of the grunts out there?"

\*

### **The thing about grunting**

To the untrained ear, a grunt uttered by a grunt is a grunt. For the seasoned zombie campaigner, however, many, many details can be gleaned from their dulcet, gurgling tones. Toddlers, rugrats, kids, tweens and teens – they all have different qualities of pitch and timbre, as do adults, old people and really old people, such as the middle-aged. Likewise, males and females have unique identifying vocal features.

It's also worth noting that, as a general rule, the younger the zombie, the more vocal they'll be. As an example, the grunt per minute ratio between a tween and an adult may be five to one.

Again, it may not seem like an important detail to newbs, but being able to tell the age makeup of a grunting crowd goes a long way towards accurately predicting their number. For example five tweens will usually make a similar number of grunts to about 25 adults. So putting your ear to the door and deciphering the difference in tone is gold in the post-riZing world.

It will also help you plan the most effective music attack to nullify your enemy. As we all know, play the right music to a zombie and it will stop attacking and start dancing. So, if you can match your grunts per minute to your beats per minute, your groans to your grunge and your rasps to your rap – you’ll give yourself a far better chance at survival.

Rock on!

\*

“I can hear one adult, two, tops. Plus a handful of teens,” said Z-Hang.

“Sounds about right to me,” added Beath.

“That’s manageable,” said Ms Simmons.

After listening and agreeing with the assessment, VJ Slingshot paused momentarily over his songlist before firing up *The Lazy Song* by Bruno Mars. “Alright, people... and zombies... who’s with me?” he said as he bopped his head to the beat.

Z-Hang rolled her eyes.

Beath held back a smile and reached for the door. “You lot ready? On my count – three, two, one—”

As she pulled the door back, an adult and two smaller grunts fell through the opening, landing at their feet. A series of gushing javelin jabs followed, ensuring the enemy would never get back up. Seconds later, another teen grunt entered the shed – then another – both tripping over their fallen comrades. They soon joined their downed cohorts – freed from their zombification. Permanently.

The group took a step back, aimed their weapons and prepared for another batch of attackers to wander in. They waited and waited, but nothing. Eventually, Beath stepped around the zombie corpses littering the ground and took a peek out the door. She relaxed her weapon and looked back at the others. “Three left... all grooving away to Slingshot’s music.”

“Of course they are,” said VJ Slingshot. “I got the phat beats.”



“You’re an idiot,” said Z-Hang.

“Better an idiot than a... than a... just shut-up.”

\*

## Chapter 2

After a couple of minutes spent moving zombie remains so Boom's wheelchair could get through the door, the group was on their way back to their home base in the school's teachers lounge. They kept low and quiet. The ease at which they'd overcome the grunts was soon a distant memory, as the real risks of being out at night hit home. It was scary.

The feeling was heightened by what they'd seen at the oval earlier. While biding time in the maintenance shed as Boom and Z-Hang recovered, they saw a giant crater form in the oval from which poured a parade of monsters, disappearing in all directions. Now they were no longer just avoiding grunts, they were dodging giants, flying enemies and who knew what else.

The stillness in the air amplified every sound they made. Every cracked twig, heavy breath or scuffed shoe sole on bitumen was a glaring mistake for all to hear. The need for perfect silence was a nervous obsession. An uneasy quiet swallowed them.

Beath led the way from one corner of the school to the next. After her footsteps stopped the crew allowed five seconds to hear a sound – if no noise came, it was safe and they headed towards the new location. Before long, they had reached the shelter shed and were halfway home. This time Beath waited for the crew to catch up.

“All good?” she whispered as everyone huddled in close.

“Yeah,” said Ms Simmons.

“Cool. Let's keep it tight. We're getting clos—”

A bellow ripped through the night air – loud and pained. They looked across the quadrangle in time to see a light flash near the canteen, then another. Seconds later a flare lit up and someone shouted “back off!”. There were multiple screams – clearly a rival group of students had based themselves in the canteen were in trouble.

In front of the flare a giant was silhouetted among many other creatures. As the flame landed on the bitumen, it ignited a fuel of some kind adding to the smoke and terror.

“What the?” said Rock. “What's going on?”

Even as he spoke, the answer became obvious. A wall of fire fanned out from the flare. It formed a barricade between the humans and monsters. As the flames leapt up and out, dozens and dozens of zombies were framed for the crew to see.

“Oh my... how many are there?” said Ms Simmons as she struggled to focus at that distance.

“Way, way too many,” said VJ Slingshot.

“We need to do something,” said Beath.

VJ Slingshot instinctively started moving away from the commotion. “There’s no way we can help them.”

“C’mon, VJ Slingshot, be fair.”

“I am being fair. There’s no way to get to them. We’re separated by fire, a shipload of zombies, oh, and did I mention the giant? Nope. This is our lucky break – we use the commotion to our advantage and run.”

“We’ve got to do something!” said Beath.

The giant roared once more, this time in pain, as it learned the hard way that fire was not something to be touched.

“You’re crazy – I’m heading back to base. Who’s coming with me?” said VJ Slingshot.

Ms Simmons studied Beath and VJ Slingshot. “As much as it would be great to help, there is little we can do that wouldn’t put us at more risk.”

Beath paused and thought about her next move.

“Think about Abby,” added Ms Simmons.

“I always think about Abby,” said Beath.

“I’m with Beath,” said Z-Hang. “We need to help them.”

“Help,” came the voice from Boom’s Choices app.

More screams could be heard from across the quadrangle. Rock started hyperventilating.

“C’mon,” said VJ Slingshot, “we haven’t got all day.”

“Agreed, it’s not safe here,” added Ms Simmons.

“OK. You guys go. When you’re out of sight around the main building I’m going to make some noise over here to drag the monsters’ attention this way, then run. Got it?” said Beath.

“That is a really bad idea,” said VJ. “Have none of you ever seen a horror film? Rule No.1 – stick together.”

“I wasn’t asking for advice.”

Again Ms Simmons studied the pair. They were at an impasse – VJ Slingshot determined to go, Beath destined to stay. “Very well. We will be home and ready for you when you get there.”

“What?” said VJ Slingshot.

“I’m staying too,” said Z-Hang.

“Me too,” said Boom through her Choices app.

“Well, that’s just great,” said VJ Slingshot.

“No! Abby, I mean Boom, you have to go with them,” said Beath. “I need you alive.”

“Yes,” added Ms Simmons. “We may need your magic.”

Boom fixed her gaze on Beath – who knew it was a signal she wanted to stay, regardless of the danger.

Beath leaned in to her closest friend. “Ms Simmons is right. They’ll need your help more than I will. Z-Hang and I won’t be far behind you, I promise.”

With that, Boom looked at Rock as he grabbed her wheelchair, careful to avoid the two pitchforks tied together in a cross at its back, and the two groups began to separate.

“We’ll be at the front entrance, waiting to let you in,” said Ms Simmons.

“Go,” said Beath.

VJ Slingshot was the first to turn, heading for the main building. Ms Simmons waited for Rock to turn Boom around and the three of them followed, leaving Beath and Z-Hang in the dark with a quadrangle full of hunting zombies.

And a giant.

\*

## Chapter 3

Beath watched most of her crew retreat into the blackness of the night before she looked at Z-Hang. She felt a tear well up in her eye, not sure if it was through fright, loneliness or her gratitude to Z-Hang. “Thanks, you know, for staying and all. You ready to make some noise?”

There was another giant-sized bellow from near the canteen, followed by a series of zombie groans.

“I’m ready to run.”

Beath let out a small, nervous laugh then used the distraction to wipe away any evidence of the tear. “Yeah, me too.”

Without words they went about the task of finding something that would make a noise loud enough to distract the monsters. Both gravitated to a green wheelie bin at the side of the shelter shed. They looked at each other, then at their weapons before deciding Beath’s cricket bat had the greatest decibel potential. She lifted it over her shoulder and swung down hard.

There was a medium-sized thud. They turned to face the canteen and prepared to run but their noise hadn’t bothered the horde. They looked at each other again – more volume was clearly required. Beath turned her attention back to her batting skills and lined up one of the stormwater downpipes coming from the roof of the shed. She swung hard again. A satisfying wood on metal tnnkking resonated around them. Once again, they turned to face the canteen. A couple of the grunts closest to them paused momentarily, but were soon consumed again by the task of trying to pass the firewall to eat canteen students.

Beath struck the downpipe a second time with similar results. They searched their end of the quadrangle for something with the potential to make even more noise. Z-Hang’s eyes were drawn to the library – more precisely, its large windows reflecting the heavy night air.

She gestured to Beath, who nodded her approval.

As they neared the building they became increasingly wary. Their last visit had involved a wall falling down and dozens of grunts spewing out to attack them – not a moment you forget in a hurry. Beath peeked in the window; it was dark inside and she couldn’t make out any zombies. She could, however, see through to the gaping hole in the building’s side and portions of the roof that had collapsed.

She took a step back to give herself swinging room. “Cover your eyes,” she said.

Z-Hang heeded Beath's advice just before the latter swung hard and fast. Glass exploded into the library and a loud noise resonated across the quadrangle. The girls turned to the canteen melee – a dozen grunts, maybe more, had stopped to analyse the noise. Beath ran to the adjoining window and gave it similar treatment. They looked back at the canteen. One, now two, zombies turned in their direction.

“Over here!” yelled Z-Hang.

They watched as the two outliers considered leaving the herd in search of another meal, but then turned once more to re-join the pack.

“C'mon!” screamed Beath as she raced to a third window and put her bat through it in frustration.

The wall of the library creaked with uncertainty seconds before two zombies reached out from within the carnage. They groaned and drooled. Beath screamed and jumped back. Z-Hang immediately switched her focus back from the canteen to matters at hand. Beath stepped forward once again and struck at one of the grunts with her bat. Z-Hang prodded the other with her javelin so successfully it got caught in the eye socket. She leaned back with all her might in an unsuccessful attempt to pull the weapon free.

Beath took another swing – this time with everything she had. Her bat glanced the skull of the target zombie before skimming into the window's frame. The protruding nails sunk into the frame and she had to use all her might to pull it free. At that moment a crack lightning-bolted into existence from the window's top corner to the roof and the sound of tortured wood rang around the quadrangle. The girls instinctively backed away as another crack echoed from within the roof.

“Erm... Beath,” said Z-Hang, her words loaded with impending dread.

“I know, I think the roof's coming down!”

“Not that. I think we've got company.”

Beath turned to where Z-Hang had gestured – the canteen. A group of four zombies had split from the pack and were heading their way.

“We need more than that,” said Beath.

She turned back to the library. The two grunts were trying to climb through the window but the javelin sticking out of one of their heads made the move impossible. Beath headed to the last unbroken window to their right.

“Beath! We have to go,” yelled Z-Hang.

She needn’t have bothered. Before Beath could even raise her bat, a long, loud crack rang out. Several cracks, to be precise, their sounds overlapping into a wall of noise as the building started to collapse.

“Run!” yelled Beath as she sprinted for safety.

Z-Hang joined her. They reached what they considered a safe distance and turned to see the library implode, sending dust and debris outwards in all directions. They ducked and covered their faces. Then there was the noise – loud, epically loud, jet engine loud.

When the wall of jettisoned library pieces ceased pounding their backs, they stood up and opened their eyes. Beath’s felt gritty; she could barely keep them open. She blinked repeatedly to no effect. “Eww... gross.”

“Um... Beath.”

“Yeah,” said Beath as she shook her head, only to deposit another wave of dust on her face.

“We’ve got a problem.”

“Talk to me Z... I can’t see a thing.”

“Well, I think we got their atten—”

A roar – deep and dark with anger – echoed around the quadrangle (and probably miles beyond).

“...tion,” concluded Z-Hang.

“Yeah, I heard!”

“Move!” said Z-Hang as she grabbed Beath with one hand and her bat with the other.

Beath felt herself being pulled by the arm as she started into a jog and soon a run just to keep pace. She could feel the ground moving beneath her in a strange way.

“The giant’s after us,” said Z-Hang. “And it’s quick.”

\*

**The thing about giants**

Firstly, they're big. Sure, it seems obvious, but it's so important it needs highlighting, then circling, then repeating 100 times in various fonts and sizes for effect. Giants. Are. Big.

There are two types of big in this world – the big you read about on paper then imagine in your mind's eye, and the real life, standing in front of you big. You see, big is just a word until you see something that truly fits the description, then the word takes on a truer meaning. When big relates to a giant and you see its hulking frame, hear and smell its foul breath, and feel the warmth of its skin near yours – that's the moment you know fear. That's the moment you understand big.

Giants are all shoulders and arms too. In fact, their knuckles would literally drag on the ground if they let them. The strength those shoulders and arms can unleash is frightening. Although their legs are smaller, proportionally, than a human's, they are deceptively fast. Way faster than humans. As Beath and Z-Hang were about to discover, you don't want to be caught out in the open too close to one.

On a brighter note, they are not clever. They rely on instinct, smell and movement to catch their prey. Beyond that, their thought process is limited. If their bodies were described as big, their brains could be described as small. Tiny even. Actually, miniscule is a word that fits nicely too.

\*

“OK, tell me what to do,” said Beath.

“Keep running! We're about to pass the main school block then we'll turn right.”

“Ok.”

There was a large crash behind them.

“It smashed into the shelter shed,” said Z-Hang. “I'm scared, Beath.”

“Me too. But I need you to get me back to base.”

Z-Hang refocused then picked up speed. “OK. Another right in three, two, one.”

They turned the corner into the teachers' car park. They'd put two corners between themselves and the giant. In the distance they could hear it bellow again.

“Nearly there,” panted Z-Hang.

“The staff entrance?” said Beath. “No, we need to go around to the reception entrance. They're waiting there remember.”



“But that’s going to take longer.”

“If he comes around the corner and sees us going in the staff door, our hideout is gone.”

They could feel the tremors in the ground intensifying; the beast was closing in. They reached the teachers’ area and the corner beckoned – a few more steps and they’d be two corners ahead again.

“We’re about to pass the staff room entrance. Right turn in three, two—”

The giant roared behind them.

“He saw us!” said Z-Hang.

“Any chance we can catch a break?” said Beath into the night sky.

“Sharp right now!”

They rounded the last corner towards the school’s main entrance. Rock stood at the door urging them on. “Hurry up!”

Z-Hang reached Rock and turned through the door. The move took Beath by surprise and her forward momentum propelled her into Sonny. He grabbed her and the pair rolled over each other and through the entrance.

There was a crash outside, followed by a roar.

Beath’s leg screamed in pain from where Rock’s ample frame had landed on it. She grimaced, then whispered, “Stay quiet. Let’s get behind the reception desk.”

There was a series of noises and sniffs from the giant outside – it was clear the beast had lost them.

Rock and Z-Hang followed Beath to the reception desk. They were almost there when the main door, which had been slowly closing on hydraulics since the three of them rolled through, finally shut with a click.

They ducked behind the desk as the beast swooped in to investigate. Z-Hang spied on it through a gap as she lay next to Rock. Sonny wedged himself in behind her.

The creature crawled towards the main entrance on all fours in order to fit under the veranda. It looked even bigger at close range than it did from a distance. Its facial features were strong and angular, its skin a warty brown texture. It investigated further as its fingers pincered the door handle. It gave a little pull and the glass

rattled. The creature made a curious sound then rattled the door again, pausing to plan its next move.

Beath still couldn't see a thing but she felt the tension. She found herself holding hands with Z-Hang whose heartbeat was pounding through her wrist. Behind them, Rock's body burned with heat. Then, awkwardly and inappropriately, he farted.

The beast's ears pricked up, Z-Hang gasped and Beath held her breath. The creature settled again.

There was a long pause and then the creature's ears pricked up again. It turned its head then rushed off to investigate another, more distant, noise.

Z-Hang let out a deep sigh. Beath, who's lungs were screaming for air, drew in a deep breath before regretting it immediately. "Sonny, that's gross."

"Get off me!" added Z-Hang as she kicked at him with her feet.

"Sorry," said Rock as he rolled backwards then rose to his feet. "It was an accident. I was trying to hold it in."

"Disgusting," said Z-Hang.

Beath ran her hands under the table to avoid hitting her head as she exited her hiding spot. "Could you have picked a worse time?"

"It happens when I get stressed sometimes," said Rock, before releasing the rest of his tension in a similarly gross manner. "And when I relax."

"Eww," said Z-Hang.

"Sorry," said Rock again. "I think that's it."

"Please stop talking now," said Beath.

Ms Simmons entered the reception area. "Oh, thank god you're still alive."

She went to give the trio a hug before noticing an aura that was definitely not magic. She stayed put and beckoned the girls.

"Was it ever in doubt?" said Beath with a smile.

Rock moved in to join the bonding.

"Stay there," said the other three in unison.

"Aww," he whined.

Ms Simmons pulled back from the girls. “We’ve got a problem.”

\*

## Chapter 4

“Broken,” came the voice from Abby’s Choices app as she surveyed the damage to the ceiling and wall in one corner of the teachers’ room.

There was a crack large enough to see the cloudy night sky beyond the room – a result of the giant clipping the wall while chasing the girls. Vihaan moved in closer and prodded some of the less stable areas with his replacement cricket bat (his Gray Nicolls was still buried in the head of a zombie somewhere).

“Careful,” said Ms Simmons.

“Doesn’t seem too bad to me,” said Vihaan, moments before a brick fell next to him and a plume of dust coated his hair.

Ms Simmons shook her head and Vihaan wiped the dust from his eyes just as rain started pouring outside – fat summer rain. The mild angle of the heavy shower was ideal for breaching the room and striking Vihaan in the head.

“But, then again, it doesn’t seem too good either,” he added through dented pride.

Abby laughed before selecting another word from her app. “Fail.”

Beath was otherwise occupied. “Jacques! Jacques!” she called in a soothing voice before turning to the others. “Has anyone seen Jacques?”

“Probably did a runner when he heard the giant,” said Sonny. “That thing was scary.”

“At least he ran and didn’t do a...” said Zhang as she struggled to find a way to politely finish the sentence. “Smelly.”

Vihaan laughed. “A smelly. Wow, just... wow!”

“Jacques!” called Beath again, searching under all the furniture.

“He wouldn’t have gone outside, would he?” said Zhang, pleased with the change in subject.

“Not without his mum,” said Beath.

They heard a noise by the kitchen door. As Beath went to investigate, a white ferret scurried out to greet her. She bent down and placed her palm on the ground. Jacques climbed on to her shoulder. “There you are little buddy. I was worried about you.”

She rubbed him under the chin. “Shall we go say hi to Abby?”

“Is anyone else hungry?” said Sonny as he moved past her towards the kitchen.

“Really? Can’t you hold on until morning like everyone else?” said Vihaan. “We’ve hardly got anything left as it is.”

“What about this pile of stuff on the table?” yelled Sonny, now at his destination.

“No way,” said Zhang. “That’s for the trip.”

“There’s some stuff in the pantry too.”

“That’s breakfast. Just have some water or something.”

“Aww,” said Sonny in his tantrum voice.

“Grow up Sonny, or Rock... or whatever,” said Zhang.

He re-entered the room with a sports bottle full of drinking water and joined the others by the hole. “So, can we fix it?”

“There’s some gaffer tape in that cupboard by the toilets. Maybe we could tape a couple of cricket pads up there. At least it’ll keep the weather out,” said Vihaan.

“Sounds a bit dodgy to me,” said Beath, as she sat next to Abby.

“There’s a hardware store in the shopping centre,” said Ms Simmons. “Maybe we can pick up some supplies while we’re on the food run.”

“Good call,” said Sonny, before chugging a large amount of water.

“Maybe, but what about long term?” said Beath.

Vihaan sized up the hole. “Well, I’m no maintenance expert—”

“Not just the hole. Everything,” said Beath. “Is this even the right place to try to... survive?”

“It’s worked for us thus far,” said Vihaan.

“Yeah, and now we’ve nearly eaten through all the food,” said Zhang as she looked at Sonny.

“What?” defended Sonny.

“It’s just... I don’t know,” said Beath. “Maybe our destiny lies somewhere else or something. Maybe the thing with the wall was a sign. Maybe it’s fate.”

“Why can’t signs be in the form of peaceful zombie-free accommodation?” said Vihaan.

“Or food,” added Sonny.

“Or an actual bed,” said Zhang as she looked at the area of carpet designated for sleeping. Her eyes wandered over a few couch cushions and the odd rug that served as a mattress.

“That’s what I’m saying. I mean, this place has been good but, well, surely we can find somewhere better.”

Ms Simmons went to the cupboard to get the gaffer tape. “We don’t even know what’s out there, outside the school, I mean. This place isn’t much but we know it and it’s served us well.”

“It’s gonna be scary, isn’t it?” said Sonny. “Tomorrow.”

“Give me a hand, someone?” said Vihaan as he prepared to move a desk over to the hole in the wall.

Ms Simmons put the gaffer tape down to lend a hand. “We’ll be fine,” she said, looking at Sonny.

Sonny nodded but didn’t look convinced. The gang turned their attention to patching the hole in the wall and their conversation to plans for the next day when they would embark on their journey. They spoke with the confidence a group brings, but behind the bravado they all felt like Sonny.

\*

## Chapter 5

Ms Simmons sealed a sandwich bag and slid the contents across the kitchen floor. Vihaan watched as the liquid within slowly seeped into a folded hand towel. As the bag came to rest, the powder within the towel started to react with the liquid. A gas formed and the bag rapidly expanded before exploding with a loud pop.

There was a moment's silence as Ms Simmons turned to Vihaan expectantly.

He screwed up his nose. "Was that it?"

"Yes. Did you not think that was amazing?"

"Unmazing. That's not going to hurt a fly."

"It's not meant to hurt a fly," said Ms Simmons.

"So, what's the point?"

"It's a distraction."

Vihaan screwed up his nose again. "Distraction?"

"That's right. If we're pinned down and want to get some zombies off our trail we just need to throw one or two of these and it should buy us some time."

"What? So we went to all the trouble of going to the science room for that?"

"This is just vinegar and bicarb. I haven't even started with the good stuff yet."

Vihaan remained unconvinced but nodded his head at the possibility there may be better explosions ahead.

"Hey, check this out," yelled Sonny from the other room.

Ms Simmons and Vihaan dashed from the kitchen to join the others in the main room. Everyone was gathered around Zhang, who had her arm outstretched, hand extended, with her palm facing upwards. Several centimetres above it one of Sonny's rocks levitated in the air.

"How are you doing that?" said Vihaan.

"Magic, I think," replied Zhang, without looking up from her task. "Ms Simmons gave me some concentration exercises."

"Cool. Can you do it with anything bigger?"

Zhang looked up as the rock dropped into her hand. "Not sure."

Ms Simmons patted Z-Hang on the shoulder. "It's more about control than size right now, but who knows how big the potential is."

“And Abby? Can she, like, boom on demand?” said Vihaan.

“Not yet, but she’s working on it,” said Beath.

Ms Simmons winked at Abby. “Ms Magic’s got a few tricks up her sleeve yet,” she said in an attempt to get everyone on board with her nickname.

The unimpressed audience responded with silence.

\*

### **The thing about nicknames**

Some stick, some don’t, some take time and some are for use in a certain moment or context. Most importantly, nobody owns a nickname – not the utterer or the recipient. Their existence is as predictable as fire and as easy to grasp as smoke. Don’t try to understand the whys of a nickname, don’t try to force one, just go with the flow.

Through the prism of battle, the names the group had created for fighting seemed apt – except for Ms Magic of course. Now they weren’t in the heat of battle, things were different. Each member of the group had two names – their actual name and their battle name. A kind of group-think took over as to which felt right to use when and where. Battle names would be used, then actual names; group-think would happen and smoke and fire did their thing.

Once all was said and done, this was the result.

Beath was definitely Beath and only Beath – she had changed and her new name just seemed, well, right. Besides, Elizabeth had never seemed to suit her anyway.

Abby’s name went the other way. She was too cute to be Boom all the time. However, it felt like Boom would return whenever her magic was needed.

Zhang or Z-Hang was only a tweak of pronunciation and both seemed interchangeable and equally right in any situation.

Sonny’s gaseous ways made it very difficult for a cool nickname like Rock to stick. He would remain Sonny until further notice.

Vihaan and VJ Slingshot, or VJ for short, well, both names suited him, hence both were used.



Then there was Ms Simmons. Group-think had already decided the fate of her nickname, Ms Magic. It was destined to remain unused, an ember that only glowed briefly, if at all.

\*

## Chapter 6

“Everyone ready?” said Beath as she slung her backpack into position, running her eyes over the group and around the room to make sure nothing was amiss.

“Ready,” came the collective response.

Except Sonny. “Hang on, I need the toilet.”

Beath rolled her eyes. “Really?”

Everyone watched as Sonny’s awkward running motion propelled him from the exit door to the toilet door. “I might be a while.”

Beath looked at the others with her mouth agape before removing her backpack and finding a comfortable place to sit.

“He’s known we’re leaving at exactly 10am all morning,” said Z-Hang. “Could he have chosen a more annoying moment to go?”

“It’s Sonny, that’s what he does,” said Vihaan. “If he had middle names they’d be Inappropriately, Timed and Relief.”

“Eww,” said Z-Hang.

“Saved his life, though.”

“What?”

“True story,” said Vihaan as he removed his own backpack and settled into his tell-a-long-anecdote pose. “So, the morning of the riZing, when things at school started going crazy, I was outta here. Just grabbed my bag and headed home. That’s when I saw what had happened to Mum, Dad and my sisters.”

He paused, as if saying the words brought all the memories back to the surface. He sniffed. “Anyway, I grabbed my slingshot and cricket bat and headed back to school. I don’t know why really, just didn’t have anywhere else to go, I guess.

“I remember being angry, real angry, and swinging at any grunt that got close. It was so risky when I think back on it – risky and stupid. I don’t think I really cared at the time, I thought it was going to be my last day anyway.

“As soon as I got back to school I regretted it. I was only gone for an hour or so but everything had changed. There were grunts everywhere, I mean everywhere. Not a student in sight – everyone had either left the school, was in hiding or... you know.

“All of a sudden, it dawned on me how alone I was. I freaked out. I knew it wasn’t safe to be outside anymore. I just ran through the first door I could find.”

Looking up, he could see the captive audience staring back at him. “It was the guys toilets, east side of the quadrangle. I took a few steps in, realised it was a dead end then turned to leave. That’s when I heard Sonny, in one of the cubicles.”

“Wow, what did he say?” said Z-Hang.

Vihaan paused for effect. “Excuse me. Can you pass me some toilet paper?”

“Eww,” came the voice from Abby’s Choices app.

“He did not!” said Z-Hang.

“I swear,” replied Vihaan.

“So,” said Ms Simmons, “what did you do?”

“Held my breath, obviously, went into another cubicle, grabbed a roll and chucked it to him. Then I just waited by the entrance for him. You should’ve seen the look on his face when he came out!”

“What do you mean?” said Beath.

Vihaan leaned in closer to the others and lowered his voice. “The riZing, I don’t think he had any idea.”

“No way.”

“To be fair, I’ve never really discussed it with him. I mean, it’s a bit... awkward, but I still remember the look on his face and, well, I would not be surprised if he went in thinking it was any other day and came out in the middle of a zombie apocalypse.”

“That is just... wow,” said Z-Hang.

“I’m gonna ask him,” Beath said through a smile.

“No way!” said Vihaan. “Seriously, don’t! He’d know I’d said something.”

“I can’t not know!”

“Please don’t, I’m begging you,” pleaded Vihaan.

They hushed as a flush sounded through the walls. Beath looked at Vihaan, smiled and raised her eyebrows in a teasing manner. Vihaan put on his unimpressed face and shook his head.

The toilet door sprang into life and Sonny stepped through. “Alright then, let’s go.”



## Chapter 7

### The thing about location

In a zombie apocalypse, much like the real estate market, location is everything. Survival prospects can be dramatically increased purely based on where people are when things go grunt-sized pear-shaped.

Isolation can be a real winner. A stretch of farmland, some crops, running water and weapons - well, that's an A-grade set-up. By the same token, it could be a curse. If you don't have the means or manpower to protect your assets, then zombies may not be the only thing you have to watch out for. Spoiler alert – humans don't always behave humanely. But, the writer digresses; that's a subject of another 'the thing about' on another day. It certainly doesn't help a handful of kids and a magically challenged science teacher in the middle of suburbia.

When you're talking suburbia, a school, like most community locations, has its benefits and problems. It's close enough to housing estates and far enough from community hubs that zombie numbers can be kept under control. Very handy conditions, until you need food. That's when a survivor needs a supply rich area – a shopping centre, high street, plaza or mall. The problem is they may be food rich, but they're also zombie rich.

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As they prepared to venture into the wider world, the path to the shopping centre took the group on a familiar route, past the shelter shed, the library... erm... the site of the collapsed library, and the maintenance shed. From there they could cross the oval and exit the school. It was then about 15 blocks to the Black Oak shopping centre so the group decided they'd be best served finding a vehicle.

Last night's rain was a distant memory as a still calm filled the air. The group neared the shelter shed once more, in quiet, single-file formation. The building represented the halfway mark to the oval. The large structure used to be a popular play area in the pre-riZing world. A giant roofed space, supported by walls on the side and back, its front an open view on to the quadrangle and beyond.

Sonny studied the building and quadrangle – it was quiet; very, very quiet. “I don’t like this.”

Beath shushed him as quietly as she could while getting her message across.

“Does anyone else get the feeling we’re being watched?” added Sonny.

“Shhh,” Beath repeated at similar volume, but with a large increase of irritation in the tone.

She stopped at the shelter shed side wall and waited for everyone to catch up. She gave Sonny a death stare before peering around the corner. She withdrew her head immediately and took in some heavy breaths. The rest of the group stood tense, waiting for details.

Vihaan mouthed ‘What?’ to her.

“Three hu—”

Beath was interrupted by a noise, low and rumbling. It grew in pitch and intensity until the full force of a Sonny special unleashed itself on the world for several awkward seconds.

“...mans,” continued Beath, once the noise ceased.

They all glared at Sonny. His face displayed an ‘it’s not my fault’ expression.

“Who’s there?” came a voice from within the shelter shed. It was a female, she sounded older.

Beath gave Sonny one more expression of displeasure then looked at the others to get some insight into what they should do. They were all unsure, looking back at her for answers. When no plan came to mind she spoke. “Hello.”

She took Jacques from her pocket and put him in Abby’s lap, then stepped around the corner to reveal herself to the unknown humans.

“Help!” said the female again. “He’s hurt.”

Beath processed the scene before acting; she had little trust for other students. There were two girls, kneeling over a male. They were all older students – probably final year and presumably from the canteen gang. She looked across the quadrangle – no sign of more students or zombies. When she felt the situation was not a threat she turned and signalled the others to her side.

“Come quick!” said the girl again through tears.

“Who are you?” asked Beath.

“Kelly. Hurry!”

The group rushed to investigate the condition of the downed teen.

“Thank you,” said Kelly to Beath. “You’re a lifesaver.”

Beath introduced herself, nodded to the girl and her friend, who gave her name as Carly. She then turned her attention to the injured boy.

“That’s Mike,” said Kelly.

When Beath got within arm’s length, Mike swooped. He grabbed her by the shoulder, pulled her to the ground and pinned her down with his knees. Her head hit the cement with a thwack,

temporarily stunning her. The gang stood in disbelief for a second or two before they instinctively jumped back and drew their weapons.

“Let her go!” screamed Z-Hang.

“What are you doing?” said Ms Simmons.

Mike laughed then let out a small whistle. A group of 15-20 older students, brandishing makeshift weapons of all description, came around the far corner of the shelter shed. They started towards the gang, who backed away.

“Ms Simmons, isn’t it? Well, I’m glad you asked. You see, we have a little problem and we need your help.”

Beath struggled to free her arms from beneath Mike’s knees. He turned his attention back from Ms Simmons, flicking her in the nose.

Pain surged and tears welled in her eyes. “Get off me!”

He flicked her again in exactly the same spot. She lay back, fought the pain and planned her next move.

When Mike was happy the interruptions had stopped he turned his focus back to Ms Simmons. “As I was saying, we need your help. Well, when I say help, I mean accommodation.”

Behind Mike, some of his slowly advancing cronies sniggered.

He looked across the quadrangle to the canteen, the entry door off its hinge and the front windows smashed. “You see, ours has had a few problems. So we thought we’d give you the chance to help us find a new home. Well, when I say find a new home, I mean take your home.”

There were laughs from many of the others. “Nice one, Mikey!” said one.

Mike high-fived Kelly and Carly.

“Don’t worry, if you help us, we’ll look after you. In fact, we’ll give you a choice. We’ll either let you upgrade to our larger accommodation...”

Mike paused to the hoots of others and let the sound settle before continuing. “Or, you could come with us. We’re looking for a few front-liners to man the nightshift, scrounge for food and take the front spot in battle for us.”

There were more laughs and some ‘woots’ from the crowd.

“Could be dangerous for you... but that’s a gamble I’m willing to take.”

“Bad,” came the voice from Abby’s app.

Mike looked up at the gang, focusing his stare on Abby in her wheelchair. “What was that, Wheels?”

“Hey!” shouted Beath.

Mike flicked her again in the nose then looked back at Abby. “Bad? Yeah, I’m bad. Tell you what I’m gonna do...”

He turned back to one of his team. “These are the little freaks from the teachers’ room, right?”

“Spot on, Mikey,” said someone.

“Cool. I’m gonna give your friends to the count of five to find the keys to the teachers’ room. If not, your little freaky looking friend here is gonna find out what a bad, bad person I can be.”

\*



## Chapter 8

“Five,” said Mike as he hovered menacingly above Beath.

“No,” came the voice from Abby’s app.

Vihaan moved forward, cricket bat in hand but was closed down by several larger students. They held tight as he struggled to break free.

“Four.”

Three of the larger boys wrestled Vihaan to the ground with ruthless ease. One of them pressed their foot on his wrist until he released his grip on the bat. Another boy swiped it for his own.

“Really?” said Vihaan as he cursed the loss of yet another cricket bat.

“Three.”

The countdown continued, but it was never destined to reach one. In all the chaos, too many survival rules had been broken. There was too much noise and nowhere near enough vigilance paid to the surroundings. It took a zombie lunging at the throat of one of the taller girls, then another at her friend, for the danger to become apparent. One of the girls shrugged away, the other was not so lucky, falling to her injuries. Someone screamed, everyone turned.

“Janine!” yelled one of the older students, drawing everyone’s attention to the dozens of grunts either getting in line to gnaw on the girl’s body or closing in on the larger group of humans.

Mike and his group swung into action. They drew into a tight circle, raised their weapons and swung. Beath and Vihaan took the chance to get to their feet and join the others. In the distance, more zombies could be heard, before a larger chest-penetrating roar bellowed out – the giant had been alerted.

Mike’s gang made short work of the closest grunts.

“Let’s get outta here,” he yelled before dashing towards the main building.

Beath and her crew watched on as the larger and louder gang tore off in the direction of their hideout. Vihaan made a move to chase after them but Beath grabbed him by the arm, holding him back. She mimed a “shh” noise to him and the others.

They watched as the grunts focused their attention on the older group and hobbled after them. Just before the last of the

students was out of sight, the giant leapt on to the wreck of the toppled library. The beast roared again as its eyes fell on the movement of fleeing humans.

It chased after them.

Beath could feel her heart pounding as the giant ran past the shed in front of them, knocking down grunts in its eagerness to catch the teen-sized meals trying to get away. She was sure each beat was loud enough to attract the attention of the passing zombies, but they seemed content to follow the giant after Mike's crew. By her side the others sat in hushed fear – too scared to move, too scared to speak.

Just as the grunt numbers appeared to be thinning, another wave started filtering into the quadrangle near the library. The new wave was huge, at least a hundred.

Beath looked at the others in turn, using her eyes to communicate the need to be strong and stay silent. When she focused on Sonny she realised there was a problem. His face was red, his forehead sweating and his eyes pleading with her to forgive him. His expression confused her right up until he, once again, released his built-up fear with a rumbling, flapping, audibly wet, long-winded rupture of gas.

The others stared at him in disbelief.

“So sorry, it's got a mind of its own today,” Sonny whispered. “I think it's because I'm so hungry.”

“Did he just say that?” whispered Z-Hang.

“Shh,” pleaded Ms Simmons.

Metres away, from the floor of the shelter shed, the partially eaten body of the fallen female student started to reanimate. The process from life ending as a human and unlife beginning as a zombie was nearly complete. The creature hissed long and hard, its focus on the gang.

Sonny looked back at the newly zombified corpse, pleading with it to stop through the international shh symbol. But the grommet grunt continued hissing – clearly, members of the underworld were not given the hand signal memo.

“Please stop,” he whispered.

The gang started looking at the zombies further adrift, acutely aware any more attention in their direction could quickly escalate the entire situation.

“Pretty please,” said Sonny.

Vihaan nudged him in the ribs and gestured to his javelin.

Sonny gave him the ‘what?’ look.

“Give her a prod in the head... to shut her up.”

Sonny looked at his javelin and then back at the grunt. Then he remembered the girl that minutes earlier owned the body the grunt now possessed. He gave the javelin another look before shaking his head at Vihaan.

Vihaan shook his head, grabbed the javelin from Sonny, approached the grunt and drew it over his shoulder. He paused, looked at the girl, or grunt – looked deep in her/its eyes and realised he, too, couldn’t seal the deal.

\*

### **The thing about eyes**

Eyes can tell you a million things, if you know what to look for. Funny things, eyes – round gooey balls of matter eager to spill the secrets of the mind. The subtlest twitch, dilation of pupil or look to the side can betray secrets the mind wishes to keep.

Like any powerful tool, there’s a catch. To truly look into eyes – to take advantage of the naked truth, you must first strip back all the prejudices you bring to your observation. If you’re not careful, the biggest lie you’ll see in someone else’s eyes is the one you put there yourself. For Sonny and Vihaan, that lie was seeing a person instead of a monster, of seeing what they wanted, not what there was, seeing life where there was death.

In the RiZing, those mistakes can cost lives.

\*

The grunt in the guise of a girl grabbed Vihaan around the ankle, latching on to the hem of his pants. It hissed and tried to bring his foot to its mouth. Vihaan instinctively backed away, but soon lost his balance, falling backwards, the javelin sliding from his reach.

Sonny screamed. Beath quickly jabbed him in the ribs, but it was too late. Several members of the larger zombie herd shuffling past were distracted enough by the commotion to change course.

Beath looked at the gang in turn, a look so singular in focus it could not be mistaken – we need to quietly neutralise each grunt that enters the shelter shed. They took up arms and moved in front of Vihaan to protect him from further threat. On his way past Sonny picked up his javelin and finished the task he couldn't bring himself to do moments earlier. The grunt closed its dead eyes and released its grip on Vihaan. Sonny felt that feeling again – his focused changed – he was no longer Sonny, he was Rock.

Vihaan, inspired by his friend's heroics, rose to standing height, whipping his slingshot from his pocket and aiming it. He became VJ Slingshot. They stood five across – with Rock protecting Abby – awaiting the arrival of eight grunts.

Beath walked across to meet the first, defeating it with a short javelin burst. She then intercepted a second, repeating the result. VJ Slingshot let fly with a round from his slingshot, it clipped a grunt before ricocheting into the passing horde. In the commotion that followed another handful of zombies turned in the gang's direction. VJ Slingshot looked around to see if anyone had noticed his escalation of the threat. Ms Simmons was shaking her head.

Beath downed another attacker then moved to another. The first started groaning from the ground – undead but not un-undead. Z-Hang used a cricket bat to finish the job but, between the grunt's noise, the impact noise and the slushing noise, further zombies became aware of their proximity.

Rock called Ms Simmons in to guard Abby then removed several large stones from his pocket and lobbed them at the growing number of grunts. Some shots hit, others missed, but as each hit the cement floor of the shelter shed, or the asphalt of the quadrangle, the noise lured more enemies into the fray.

Soon the collective mind of the zombie pack was no longer on the fleeing older students, it was on Beath and her friends. The gang were outnumbered, hopelessly outnumbered. Worse still, they were trapped. Silence could no longer save them.

“Fall back!” yelled Beath as she took down another zombie breaching the shelter shed.

Ms Simmons moved first, wheeling Abby to the rear wall of the shed. As she did she noticed Abby's aura radiate. “Get behind us!” she screamed. “I think it's Boom time.”

The others rushed to safety, falling in behind. They waited.

Zombies stepped into the shelter shed from all sides – too many to count. In the distance, at the far end of the quadrangle, the giant emerged, holding a student in his hand. He saw the chaos, roared and headed over to investigate. Closer to home the nearest zombies picked up pace – sensing a meal was near.

Everyone looked at Abby and prayed.

“Abby go boom?” said Sonny.

A humming noise built within her, low and dull at first but increasing in pitch and intensity until it released itself as a Boom attack. A wave of sonic force sent zombies flying backwards in all directions. In the aftermath, as ear drums zinged, zombie bodies lay strewn across the shelter shed and quadrangle, writhing on the ground, struggling back to their feet (a surprisingly difficult task for a grunt).

In the middle of it all – surprisingly unfatigued by her magic attack – Abby laughed and one very confused ferret climb on to her shoulder and stared at Beath with eyes wider than she’d ever seen.

Beath and company looked at the scene – in one part comical as the grunts tried to regain their footing, in one part daunting as there was still no zombie-free path from the shed and in one part scary – the giant threw his human plaything aside and picked up his pace towards the shed.

“What do we do now?” screamed Rock as he looked for the most zombie free exit point.

Beath searched her mind for a solution – none presented themselves. She forced her mind to think magic – hoping her ability would choose this time to appear – it didn’t. “OK, gather together, we can—”

Suddenly, zombie bodies started rising from the ground to her left – they fought against the sensation without luck. She looked to see Z-Hang living up to her name with her hands in the air summoning magic to control the grunts. Ahead she saw the giant approaching – so close now.

“Awesome Z-Hang,” she said, “but we’ve got to go.

Z-hang moved her hands left, then right – the grunts floated in the same direction accordingly.

“Hurry up!” screamed VJ Slingshot as he fixated on the giant.

Rock lifted his javelin, moved in front of Abby and the others, then crouched into a defensive position.

“Hurry Z-Hang!” said Beath.

Z-Hang gestured left again, then with all her might threw her hands to the right as she ceased her zombie hang move. The grunts that had been dancing at her will were released from her grip. They went flying to the right, clearing a path for the gang to escape.

But it was too late.

The giant breached the shelter shed, cannoning through one of the support beams on its way. Impact was inevitable. Z-Hang fell in a heap behind Beath. To their side Ms Simmons and VJ Slingshot surrounded Abby and Jacques. In front of them Rock was in the vanguard, curled into a ball with a javelin aimed at the giant. He braced for impact and screamed; they all screamed.

To work out what happened next would require world-class sports coverage, complete with frame-by-frame replays. Frame one of the collision between Rock and the giant would see the head of the javelin pressing against the giant’s chest. By frame four the spear would have bowed and shattered into a million fragments. Three frames on and the boy and the creature were about to collide. But if you were watching that you’d missed the most important element. Rock – or Sonny – had become, well, rock. Magic secreted from his being and surrounded his body. It changed the texture of his skin, hair and even his clothes, to a rock covering as hard as time.

To demonstrate how hard that was, the giant made for an excellent crash test dummy. His weight and momentum would challenge the densest, toughest materials. Skipping to the next frame in our play-by-play, the giant’s face pressed against Rock’s – but it was already clear the giant was in trouble as his mouth and nose started to cave inwards from the contact. Each frame thereafter would reveal another level of disfigurement for the giant as its body wrapped around Rock’s, which never budged an inch.

The creature’s progress halted in an instant, the dust, debris and droplets of sweat on its body kept travelling at high speed, showering the rest of the gang. Flicking on a few frames more, the creature’s body lay wrapped around Rock’s, twisted

in ways that were not natural. Several frames down the track it slowly recoiled, before sliding from its bizarre embrace with Rock to form a giant pile of goop on the ground.

It's at this moment our sports broadcast team would switch to the 'at speed replay'. We would see what the gang would've seen – a bone-jarring collision, a thud so loud it could be felt vibrating in your chest, a mangled pile of flesh, an explosion of dust and a jellying of giant flopping to the floor. Then stunned silence.

They were alive and uninjured – how was that possible?

Beath was the first to move, wiping the debris from her eyes so she could see what she feared would be... actually, she had no idea. She was expecting to be wiped out by a giant but, as her vision returned, she saw Rock, still braced for impact, granite fleshed and looking over the vanquished ogre. "Sonny? Rock? Are you OK?"

The others started to stir back to life as Sonny's body returned to its normal pasty fleshy state. He turned to face her. "I think so," he said before staggering with exhaustion.

VJ Slingshot was the next to recover and clear his eyes. "What the?"

Behind Beath the sounds of zombie gurgled out again. "I'll explain later, but for now we need to get out of here."

Ms Simmons wiped her eyes and surveyed the scene – three of the six exhausted from magic. "Any ideas?"

\*

## Chapter 9

After lifting the now sleeping Sonny and placing him across the armrests of Abby's wheelchair, the group headed off. Vihaan pushed Abby, while Beath made sure Rock didn't slide off. Jacques darted back and forth on his back and Ms Simmons carried the tired Z-Hang in her arms.

They exited the shelter shed via the path Z-Hang had created, Vihaan taking a few photos on his phone along the way. There was a short stopover in the maintenance shed to let the magic makers recover. Vihaan also took the opportunity to find another cricket bat.

Soon they were across the oval and on their way out of the school.

"Anyone got any last goodbyes?" said Vihaan as he turned to face the school.

"We'll be back," said Z-Hang.

"Maybe," said Beath as she passed through the gates. Her focus was on the path ahead, the supermarket, the world beyond and, well, fate.

The noon sky was heavy with smoke from fires near and far. As each person passed through the gates the significance of leaving their safety net hit them in one way or another, though nobody made their feelings known. This was something that had to be done.

"What's Dec?" said Sonny, conscious again after his nap.

The others looked to see him gesturing to a sign on the fence that read East High. Someone had spray painted 'Dec' in front of the words.

"No idea," said Vihaan.

"Ahhh... DecEast," said Z-Hang. "As in deceased."

"Which is exactly what I thought we were all going to be back in the shelter shed," said Vihaan.

"Until Rock saved us," added Beath.

Sonny, or Rock, smiled. He smiled at saving his friends, he smiled at his magic but most of all he smiled at his nickname – accepted by the group. Just like he felt at that moment.

#

The End





Zombie RiZing 3

### **Previously on Zombie RiZing:**

After surviving the initial Zombie RiZing, Beath and her fellow survivors have bunkered down at their school, content to forage for rations and hide out. But eventually they realise the new world order is less ‘live and let be’ and more ‘live and zombie’.

And if they’re going to make it long-term, they need food, they need weapons and they need them fast. With a plan in place they make for the outside world – well, the school grounds, at least – but things quickly go pear shaped. They’re ambushed by rival survivors, targeted by zombies and then play witness to a calamity beyond belief when the earth literally opens up to spew forth a new wave of monsters. There’s only one word for it: Yikes. But after all his terrible farting, it seems that for once, Sonny might actually be the solution to the problem, not the stink behind it.

\*

## Chapter 1

Zhang stepped out from the sidewalk and on to the street – no sign of her dad’s taxi anywhere. She looked back at her phone. It was almost 11am; he was nearly half an hour late. He was never late. Ever.

Had she misunderstood their discussion? She thought back through the conversation from the previous night – she was to excuse herself after maths class and head to the front entrance at 10.30am, where her dad would take her to the dentist appointment on his way home from his shift. But here she was, 25 minutes later, with no car, no dad, no dentist.

She texted him again. ‘Everything OK? :)’

That was when she heard screams coming from the school. Something wasn’t right. Zhang started to feel uneasy. She heard the screech of tyres and turned to see her dad’s cab slide sideways into the street at high speed before skidding to a halt in front of her. Smoke wafted up from the wheels as the passenger window lowered.

“Get in, now!” her dad said.

That’s when she noticed the damage to the front of the car – crumpled and steaming, it didn’t look good.

“What’s going on?” said Zhang as she threw her violin and bag into the backseat before climbing in next to her father.

“I... I’m not sure. Seatbelt on and hold on tight.”

\*

Beath and the gang stared at the scene that confronted them – transfixed. The street was filled with broken cars, rubbish and debris. The air and everything it touched was a sickly yellow hue, as if viewed through an Instagram filter. Along the road and down the hill they could make out the roof of the enormous Black Oaks Shopping Centre, while further ahead the city could be made out through the foul, soupy air.

They sat on, or around, the (Dec) East High sign and pondered the road ahead while they recovered from the exhaustion that follows battle – with or without magic.

Zombies roamed along the streets and into the distance. Their numbers were not concentrated enough to be of concern, and the gang’s position gave them plenty of room to see an approaching threat from any direction. This was a good place to rest.

“Anyone else hungry?” said Sonny.

Zhang went to roll her eyes and give Sonny a lecture about conserving supplies until they knew where their next meal was coming from, but hunger gnawed at her too. She nodded agreement, opened her supply bag and fished out the last remaining muesli bars – the really healthy brand no one would touch until the sweeter ones were gone. She passed them around.

Ms Simmons took hers and looked at Sonny. “With some food in your belly, I trust you will be able to show more... intestinal discipline.”

Sonny stared at her blankly while chewing a little too loudly.

“She means hopefully you won’t fart every time we’re trying to stay quiet,” said Vihaan.

“Ohh, hopefully,” said Sonny, with a chirpy dismissiveness that annoyed the others.

No one responded – the thought of discussing the matter further seemed all too exhausting. They just sat, thought about life and ate. Beath broke off a small portion of her bar and presented in it her palm to Jacques. The ferret scurried from her satchel to her shoulder and nibbled on the meal.

Suddenly Vihaan jumped to his feet. “Hey! My bat!”

The others looked up to see a zombie in the distance, walking away from them with a Gray-Nicolls cricket bat wedged into its head. Vihaan grabbed his backpack and reached in, looking for his slingshot.

“What are you doing?” said Beath.

“Getting my bat back, that’s what,” said Vihaan.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” said Beath. “We’re not heading down Carlisle St. That’s too far out of our way.”

They watched as a giant walked up to the cricket bat grunt, curious at its unusual head shape. It analysed, sniffed and prodded.

Vihaan let out a sigh of annoyance, the giant crushing any thoughts of retrieving his piece of willow today. “But that’s my bat, I need my bat.”

“There are a couple of sports stores at the shopping centre,” said Ms Simmons. “They’ll definitely have some Gray-Nicolls bats there.”

Vihaan laughed, but the others could sense the sadness hidden within the tone. “You don’t understand. My dad gave me that bat. It’s the only thing I have left that my parents gave me.”

His words trailed off into the mid-morning air as everyone cast their mind towards their families and all the things the Zombie RiZing had stolen from them. Zhang moved in towards Vihaan and gave him a hug. The gesture was enough to coax out the tears welling up in his eyes. He buried his face in Zhang's shoulder so as not to show the others. She felt the moisture through her uniform but didn't say anything, just squeezed him a little tighter for a second.

"We'll get your bat soon," said Beath. "I promise."

Vihaan sniffed away the tears and looked up as the zombie and the curious giant shuffled out of sight. He looked at Beath and nodded his approval.

\*

## Chapter 2

Beath stood in front of the gang as they prepared to depart, a piece of chalk in one hand and a map of the plan drawn on the footpath at their feet. “Alright, it’s about four clicks to the shopping centre—”

“What’s a click?” said Sonny.

“Kilometre,” said Abby, via her Choices app.

“Oh.”

“Anyway,” continued Beath, “our best bet is to find some sort of transport. So, we’re going to hit the train station at the bottom of Smith St. It’s slightly out of the way but there are plenty of cars there and Ms Simmons reckons there’s usually a couple of transit vans as well.”

Beath looked over at Abby. “That’ll be perfect for your wheels if we can find one.”

She then looked around at the others. “So, Smith St to the train station overpass, grab a vehicle – a van hopefully – then drive to the shopping centre.”

“Sounds pretty straightforward to me,” said Zhang.

“Except for the whole zombie thing,” added Sonny.

“And giants and flying things,” said Vihaan.

“Right,” said Beath. “Stay together, be alert and keep your voices down. You know the drill by now. How are you magic users feeling?”

“Ready,” said Zhang. “Strong, surprisingly.”

Abby toggled through her Choices app. “I am good.”

“I’m still pretty tired,” said Sonny. “Nothing a good feed won’t cure.”

“Which reminds me,” said Beath, as she made a couple of circles on the pavement map. “There’s an all-night supermarket here, a deli here and two convenience stores near the overpass to the train station, here. If we see a chance to stock up, we take it.”

“Whoo-hoo!” said Sonny.

Beath rolled her eyes. “You non-magic folk got your weapons ready?”

“Affirmative,” said Vihaan. “My slingshot doesn’t get tired.”

Zhang shook her head in disbelief and started wishing she hadn’t been so nice to him a minute earlier. “Or accurate.”

“Good, let’s roll!” said Beath.

Sonny scratched his head. “What do you mean let’s roll?”

\*

The team approached the Newbridge Ave intersection on Smith St.

Vihaan cast his mind back to the recent struggle at the school. “I still can’t believe we downed a giant. I mean, those things are epic!”

“Keep it down,” said Beath, as she stuck her head around the corner to spy any possible threats.

The avenue looked clear and she signalled everyone across. With two lanes of traffic each way, a median strip and footpaths on both sides, they had 20 metres of exposed ground to cover. They stayed low, quiet and wary.

Once they reached the other side Zhang looked at Vihaan. “What do you mean, ‘we’? It was Sonny.”

“Sure, he did the bulk of it—”

“All of it, while you were cowering on the ground.”

“I was not!” defended Vihaan, before looking for some middle ground. “Look, Sonny smashed it, I admit, but it takes all of us doing our bit to make something like that happen.”

Zhang made a noise of frustration.

“Let’s just call it a team effort.”

Zhang breathed heavily. She spotted a small pebble on the sidewalk ahead and used her Z-Hang power to levitate it above her hand. She then flicked her fingers and sent the pebble on a collision course with Vihaan’s forehead.

“Ouch!”

Ms Simmons looked at Zhang. “That was impressive. You’re gaining some fine control over your power already.”

“What??” said Vihaan. “She attacks me and gets praised for it?”

“I felt it in the shelter shed,” said Zhang. “If I use my hands, I can will things to go where I want them.”

Vihaan examined his head. “I can feel a lump.”

“And you’re not tired?” said Ms Simmons to Zhang.

“Hello, in pain over here,” said Vihaan.

“With something small like that, not at all. And I’m fully recovered from the shelter shed magic, which was the biggest so far.”

“Does anyone care that I’m in agony?” said Vihaan, looking around the crew in disbelief.  
“Beath? Abby?”

Beath missed his words, her focus on detecting potential threats. Abby was listening and searched her app for the right response. “Soft.”

Everyone laughed, except Vihaan, who stood in front of them with hunched shoulders. “Where’s the respect?” he said, before trying his last option for sympathy. “Sonny?”

As soon as he looked at the redhead he knew something was wrong.

“Sonny?”

His friend’s eyes were glazed and he barely seemed capable of intelligent thought. Like normal, really, but worse.

“Sonny?”

Sonny collapsed to the ground.

\*



## Chapter 3

“Sonny?” said Beath, lightly slapping his cheek. “Sonny?”

The crew stood over the fallen boy mountain, exhausted after dragging him to the shelter of a nearby deli.

“Sonny, please!”

Slowly he started to open his eyes.

“Sonny! Are you OK?”

He looked at the six faces watching him – five humans and a ferret. For some reason his focus moved from Beath, who was speaking, to Jacques, who sat on her shoulder, and then to what lay behind him.

“Chips!” said Sonny as he tried to regain his feet.

He reached for a packet of salt and vinegar and hoed in.

“Slow down Sonny, you’re not well,” said Ms Simmons.

“Ifink I sungry,” said Sonny between chews.

“What?” said Ms Simmons.

“And close your mouth when you chew,” added Zhang. “It’s foul.”

Sonny nodded, chewed some more, then swallowed. “I think I was hungry, that’s why I fainted,” he said, before stuffing another ample handful of chips into his mouth.

“Was it the magic?” said Ms Simmons.

Sonny went to respond but saw Zhang glaring at him. He pointed to his overloaded mouth, indicating he’d talk when he’d finished chewing.

The others shared a round of eye rolls and sighs before Zhang snatched the chip packet from Sonny so there wouldn’t be any further delays.

Sonny gulped down what seemed like an uncomfortably large amount of masticated chip.

“I think so. I felt fine for a little while and then exhausted.”

Beath looked around the deli. “Well, I say we eat up and stock up.”

\*

### **The thing about chocolate and the French Navy**

On the surface, looting for food would seem like a child’s dream in the Zombie RiZing world. Enough time has passed that all the fresh fruit and vegetables have rotted beyond edible,

but all the chocolate, chips and sugary snacks that were vacuum sealed remain as fresh as the day they were mass produced on the factory floor.

Bliss, right?

Well, nothing is ever as it seems on the other side of the end of the world. While living the chocoholic dream might seem like paradise for a week or two, it wouldn't last. You see, when you're exposed to such foods for long enough, something quite remarkable will start to happen. A need will develop within you, an unfamiliar yearning. You, and your body, will start craving the nutrients it needs to function at capacity. You will salivate over, wait for it, healthy food!

That's right. In this topsy turvy world that is the apocalypse, it won't take long for you to long for veggies, and you won't be far from fancying fruit.

Fortunately, there is a solution and you can thank the French Navy. You see, a couple of centuries ago, those shrewd sailors invented a method of preserving food in jars to last well beyond its usual lifespan. The process was refined and expanded over the years – jars became cans and they appeared on the shelves of almost every food store in the world.

So, when you're in the apocalypse, thinking of chocolate and the French Navy as you are bound to be at some point, remember to pack a can opener and have a good day.

\*

Beath zipped her backpack shut and hooked it around the handles of Abby's wheelchair. Some of the cans within clinked as the heavy bag collided with the frame. "That should keep us going for a while."

"One bag full?" said Vihaan. "That's nowhere near enough."

"There are two supermarkets at the shopping centre – I'm only bringing this lot as insurance."

Vihaan finished his peaches in natural juice and threw the can on the pile created by the others. "And what if the shopping centre's got nothing left?"

"We just swing via this place on the way back to school – there should be enough here to last a while."

Sonny put a large bag of chips down his shirt then filled his pockets with chocolate bars. "Sounds like a plan to me."

"Feeling better?" said Ms Simmons before indicating he had half eaten-food on the side of his mouth.

Sonny wiped the area clean. “Good as new.”

Jacques scurried from Beath’s shoulder to Sonny’s, then licked the food from his hand. Zhang looked at the scene and the tell-tale brown substance. She looked at Sonny. “Did you just eat chocolate and chips the entire time?”

Sonny looked around the room – no words were required for everyone to know he was guilty as charged.

“What were you thinking?” said Beath. “Isn’t your body screaming out for something decent to eat, some variety?”

“It gets variety; that block of chocolate had six different flavours.”

“No wonder you’re so exhausted,” said Ms Simmons.

“No wonder you do so many... pop-offs,” said Zhang.

Sonny’s tummy rumbled and Jacques scurried back to Beath, curling up in her satchel.

“Not again,” said Zhang.

Sonny took a deep breath, held it for some time, then slowly exhaled. “No, false alarm.”

Zhang looked at Sonny disapprovingly. “See, this is the problem.”

“What?”

“Exactly,” added Vihaan. “It wasn’t so long ago your farts nearly got us killed.”

“That was a one-off.”

“It happened twice!” said Vihaan in disbelief.

“It was a small stain on my otherwise good record!”

Zhang scrunched up her nose. “Stain? Really?”

“OK,” said Beath. “I think you’ve all made your point.”

The conversation petered out as everyone collected their things and prepared to leave. Just as they stood in a circle ready for Beath’s orders, a low rumbling noise could be heard.

“Sonny!” said Vihaan.

“It wasn’t me!” replied Sonny with the steely conviction of a wet lettuce leaf.

“I seriously don’t believe it,” said Zhang.

“OK, maybe it was me, but you guys made me nervous.”

Vihaan walked to the back of the store, selected a can of air-freshener, returned to Sonny and sprayed the lower half of his body for several seconds before packing the can for later use.

“Perhaps some dietary modifications are in order,” said Ms Simmons.

“My diet’s fine! It’s my nerves.”

“Fine?” said Vihaan. “Your food pyramid looks like a counter display at a convenience store!”

“Focus,” came the voice from Abby’s Choices app. “Focus.”

They all turned to her. She gave them a look, pleading for tensions to ease.

“She’s right,” said Beath. “This isn’t getting us anywhere.”

They stood in front of her like busted students facing the headmaster, including Ms Simmons. No one spoke.

Beath walked over to Abby and held her hand before turning her attention to the rest of the gang. “Right, back on mission. End of the street, overpass, car park, van, shopping centre. Got it?”

“Yes, Beath,” they replied.

“Stay alert,” she continued, before looking at Sonny. “And quiet.”

“Yes Beath.”

“Right then, fall out!”

“What do you mean fall out?”

\*

## Chapter 4

Zhang screamed as her dad skidded the taxi around the corner, the back of the car sliding sideways as it started to drift. A small group of people watched as the car laid rubber on the asphalt; it shaved close by them. For some reason, amongst everything strange that was happening, they were what stood out to Zhang. They didn't flinch. A heavy chunk of metal was heading for them at high speed and they just watched it happen.

Even stranger was the look in their eyes – she couldn't explain it but it just wasn't right. “What's going on?”

“We're going home, packing our bags and going on a little holiday,” said her dad as he wrestled the car past a series of vehicles wedged together near an intersection.

“OK,” said Zhang. “I'm scared.”

“I know, Z, me too.”

Despite her dad's lead-foot driving, it took longer than normal to get home. Cars were strewn across roads, in some cases blocking access completely. They had to backtrack and detour through side streets on a number of occasions. Then there were the pedestrians, more of those people acting strangely, oblivious to the threat of a speeding taxi.

Zhang lived with her family in a cul-de-sac – a peaceful street with only a few houses and one way in or out. Her dad sped to their driveway and screeched to a halt. He looked up and down the street and told Zhang to stay in the cab while he headed inside.

She looked around. The street looked so serene. There was nobody about. She tried to process the last hour of her life. Everything was different. What did it all mean? It was not good, she knew that. Was her mum alright? Her brother? Where were they going? Were they coming back?

She sat still, resisting the urge to join her dad and gather some personal possessions. Sometimes, however, decisions are made for you, and when she looked back towards the end of the cul-de-sac she saw one of the crazy people standing there, staring at her. His eyes seemed to be glowing as brightly as his high visibility vest.

Zhang froze. Her heart galloped. She didn't know whether to run or fight or wait or jump into the driver's seat and hit the accelerator. She was so overwhelmed she just sat there staring at the strange man. Then he bellowed – a sickening, gurgling, roar.

He moved towards her.

Zhang's heart motored even faster than before. She fumbled around for her violin case without taking her eyes off the man. She grasped the handle and turned to exit the car just as—

Thud. A noise echoed through the car and she turned to see Mrs Matthews pressed against her door. But, it wasn't Mrs Matthews – she had a gash on her face surrounded by dried blood. Then Zhang saw her neighbour's eyes – lifeless, dull and glowing green.

She screamed.

\*

“Grunt – up ahead, near the hairdressers,” said Beath. “Let's cross the road—”

Vihaan pulled out his slingshot. “No go. It looks like our new friend has a few buddies in the alley over there. I like our chances better on this side of the street.”

Beath looked to where Vihaan referred and nodded. “OK, looks like we'll have to take this one out: nice and quietly.”

She signalled Vihaan and Zhang to her side and motioned the others to wait. They got to within a few metres of the creature before it noticed them. Zhang became Z-Hang; she held out her hand and let the magic flow through it. But this time was different – she found herself controlling the flow, releasing only enough magic to ensnare the grunt. She lifted the zombie off the ground, turned it on its stomach then lowered it to the footpath, pinning it down with her magic. The zombie couldn't move, its noises of hunger now muffled by the ground.

Beath held out her weapon – a hedge trimmer blade attached to a broom handle. She stepped closer to the creature, still just out of its reach. With a couple of quick jabs she liberated it from its undead state.

Beath looked through the window of the hairdressers, saw the coast was clear and signalled the others forward. Just as she did, her heel struck something and she fell backwards. She heard a roar, looked to see what had caused her fall and saw the torso and upper body of another grunt, hiding behind a bin.

The zombie fell forward towards Beath, reaching out to grab her leg. She rolled clear but, as she went to regain her feet, pain shot through her ankle. She rolled further away.

Across the road, the friends of the hairdresser grunt increased their volume. They had discovered the gang and six zombies started across the road to intercept them.

The ankle-grabbing half zombie had now moved on to the footpath between Beath and the rest of the gang. She rolled further back but her only escape was in the direction of the approaching enemy.

Z-Hang went to power up her magic, but wasn't yet fully recharged. Abby wanted to use her Boom power, but knew if she attacked now she would send Beath closer to the approaching grunts. Worse still, Sonny's Rock magic had no use here.

Ms Simmons assessed the situation and whipped out her wand. She started chanting. The gang watched as a dim light flickered at the end.

"Hurry up!" said Zhang.

Ms Simmons hunched further over her wand and focused all her will on her chant.

"Quickly," said Abby through her Choices app.

Sadly, the prayers of six humans were not enough to bring Ms Simmons' magic to life and the wand's light started to die out. "C'mon," said Ms Simmons.

"Weapons free!" screamed Beath as the noise of the grunts grew closer and closer.

"Weapons free?" said Sonny.

"Give them all you've got," said Vihaan as aimed his slingshot at the half zombie in front of him.

Behind him Sonny grabbed a rock from his bag and lobbed it at the enemy. He scored a direct hit. Unfortunately, it was on the back of Ms Simmons' head. She squealed.

Vihaan pulled back hard on his slingshot's elastic, took a deep breath and released his grip.

\*

### **The thing about breathing**

It's amazing how something so natural can be so influential. We don't need to think to breathe but, in moments of crisis it can make all the difference if you do.

A strategically timed inhale and exhale can steady your mind and body and make you far more focused and accurate. Expel all the air from your lungs slowly and steadily, stay calm and fire. It's a technique well known by elite sportspeople, yoga instructors and arms specialists alike.

Today, just as a certain inaccurate, slingshot-wielding member of the gang was about to discover the correct aiming and breathing technique, he was robbed of the chance by another equally inaccurate member of the team.





## Chapter 5

“Ouch!” said Vihaan as he held the back of his head.

“Sorry!” yelled Sonny from behind, instinctively dropping his next piece of ammo to hide the evidence.

There was a tinging noise as Vihaan’s shot fired harmlessly into the bin near the half zombie. No one would ever know that the shot would have been a direct hit had Sonny not nailed him with a rock.

Then, something extraordinary occurred. There was a solid thudding noise in the tree behind the bin as VJ Slingshot’s pebble ricocheted. A second later a large crack rang out from the tree and a heavy branch fell downward. It landed between the footpath and the road, where a twisted pile of cars now rested. It bounced and struck the mangle of motors with a deafening crash. A small car at the top of the pile, half resting on the hood of another, started rolling free from the mess. It gathered speed until it hit a severely damaged light pole only a metre behind Beath.

Although the collision was at moderate speed, it was enough to ensure the light pole could stand in one piece no more. Its top section fell harmlessly away from Beath, at least until the internal electricity cables stretched to capacity. This caused it to swing from the point it met the base. Beath felt it whoosh closely over her head, then she heard a large snapping sound. The top of the light pole, now completely separated from the base, missed itself through the air until it collided with the head of the ankle-grabbing half zombie. The grunt twitched a couple of times before moving no more.

There was a moment’s silence as the chaos settled.

“Boom!” said VJ Slingshot. “Did you see that?”

“Beath!” said Z-Hang, as she rushed to her aid.

“Stay away from that light,” said Ms Simmons. “It could be—”

There was a zipping of sparks and an ominous noise as one of the alley zombies brushed by the small car, touching the light pole. It was electrocuted in an instant. Z-Hang helped lift Beath to her feet and hobble clear of immediate danger. A second grunt joined its buddy in the electric boogaloo.

The rest of the gang squeezed between the two sections of the light pole. They looked back just as a third grunt joined his friends in sizzling away. They soon realised the rest of the

zombies were being drawn to the commotion of electrocution and it was only a matter of time before they all ended up with the same fate.

“Would you like fries with that?” said Sonny.

Even through their exhaustion, the gang laughed. Beath gave Zhang a hug before retrieving Jacques from her satchel. He was confused but fine.

“Oh, I see what you did there,” said Ms Simmons as the laughter continued. “You used the term fry to refer to the electrocu—”

“We got it,” said Vihaan. “Isn’t anyone going to mention my shot?”

“What shot?” said Beath, as she hobbled to Abby’s side.

“Oh nothing, only the miracle, precision shot that saved your life.”

Beath stared at him blankly, as did the others.

“I fired my slingshot. It zinged off the bin, hit the tree, snapped the branch, which bounced into the car, which rolled into the light pole, which triggered the collapse, which fragged legless and fried his buddies!”

More blank looks.

“Are you kidding me? No one saw that?”

“There’s no way that happened,” said Sonny, after the gang fired off more visual blanks.

“Seriously? This, I will have you know ladies, from the guy who hit me in the back of the head right as I was about to fire!”

“No I didn’t!”

“You’re unbelievable! Look, look,” said Vihaan as he marched back past the fizzing light pole and frying zombies to where he had stood to take the shot.

“Careful!” said Ms Simmons, helpfully offering her advice after the danger had passed.

Vihaan picked up a pebble. “This is what hit me in the head. Look familiar, Rock?”

Sonny did a little absent whistling while looking at his feet.

Vihaan looked at the others. “See? See! I probably would’ve hit mini zombie flush in the head if that didn’t happen.”

Sonny laughed and Zhang sniggered.

“What?”

Beath started laughing too. Soon, Abby and Ms Simmons joined in.

“What’s so funny?”

“You,” said Zhang. “Hitting a target you’re aiming for.”

The group laughed again.

“That’s funny is it?”

“Yes!” came the collective response.

“This is unbelievable. I have literally made a one-in-a-million shot, despite someone on my own side trying to knock me out, and you’re laughing at me.”

It was no use. The group was incapable of responding as another zombie joined in the zap dance.

“C’mon,” said Beath through tears of laughter as she tested her full weight on her ankle. “We need to keep moving.”

“I really felt I was going to nail that shot too,” said Vihaan to no one in particular, as he joined the others in heading towards the train station.

\*

### **The thing about laughter**

When Abby laughed it was infectious. The noise was hearty and complete – a vivid singular emotion. The pleasure it evoked was so intense, those in her presence could rarely help doing the same – except Vihaan on this occasion. She could cry, too, with equal intent, when she felt the need.

Abby loved nothing better than those moments where she could share a pure line of conscious thought with other people. She could be understood, at understanding’s simplest level. There were no filters, no translations, no Choices app to vocalise her thoughts.

She often wondered why she was perfectly capable of making such clear vocal noises, yet when it came to uttering words – which she knew and understood perfectly – the ability eluded her. Somewhere in the chemistry between her mind and her mouth, there was sabotage.

Communication had always been a struggle, but one she accepted. She had no choice. To Abby, communication meant freedom. Signals, eye movements, the Choices app – these were all keys to communicating her thoughts. Keys to understanding, keys to freedom.

But it was when she laughed, when she shared that joy with those around her, that she truly understood freedom.

\*



## Chapter 6

Sonny paused, wiped the sweat from his forehead and took a deep breath before pushing Abby's wheelchair up the fourth and final ramp to reach the overpass.

"C'mon," said Vihaan waiting at the top.

"He's joking, right?" said Sonny to Beath, who hobbled next to him.

Ms Simmons and Zhang waited for the others to catch up on the ramp and together they pushed Abby to the top, where they caught their breath.

Beath looked at Zhang, sensing something was not right. "You OK?"

Zhang looked at her hands. "It didn't work."

"What didn't work?"

"My power. When I pinned down that first grunt I felt it change. I knew I was controlling it, slowing the flow so it could do what I needed, but I'd have some in reserve. And I had some in reserve, I knew it, but when I went to use it again, well, I couldn't."

"Hey," said Beath. "You saved me."

"I know, it's just... I had more."

Ms Simmons looked at her wand. "At least you have a power, be grateful of that. And the control will come; you get better with it every day."

Zhang nodded, but in a way that suggested she was unsure of herself and her skill.

The gang started across the footbridge, Vihaan leading the way. As he reached the middle, he stopped and looked across the tracks and beyond. Before long the six of them were looking at the view along the railway and towards the city.

Further down the track – too far away to be of concern – two giants were rocking a shipping container on an abandoned cargo train. Soon the heavy red metal crate tipped over with an almighty thud. Its door ripped open on impact, spewing some sort of food packages on to the tracks. The giants swooped in to examine.

Beath leaned closer to the railing. "Can anyone see what that is?"

"Erm... hard to tell, biscuits maybe," said Ms Simmons.

Sonny tilted his head a little as he zeroed his vision in. "Oreos, original flavour – but it's the mini packets, you know, with the tiny ones you get for school."

Everyone looked his way. "What?"

"How can you even see that?"

“I know my food packaging.”

Nobody argued.

“Ugly, aren’t they,” said Beath.

“They’re like the opposite of B.F.G. in that Roald Dahl book,” said Zhang.

“Yeah, they’re like the big unfriendly giant – B.U.G,” said Vihaan. “Hey bug, that’d be a good nickname for them.”

The group stood and stared some more, giving just the right amount of silence for Vihaan to know his nickname was accepted. He repeated the word a few times with different emphasis until he found a pronunciation he liked.

“Bug,” repeated Sonny.

Beyond the Oreos-eating bugs stood the city. Fires billowed smoke skyward and the buildings stood like ghosts in the eerie ash clouds that remained. One of the skyscrapers was a gutted wreck; you could see right through its heart.

“Are they birds?” said Zhang as she noticed movement in the skies over the city.

“It’s those flying things I saw when we were at the maintenance shed,” said Vihaan. “If this is as close as I ever get to one of those again I’ll be a happy man.”

“They must be huge.”

“Huge and ugly.”

“Alright, I think we’d better keep moving,” said Beath. “Stay frosty.”

Sonny eyed Beath. “What’s fros—”

“Alert!” said Beath with more than a hint of annoyance. “Alert and ready but, you know, cool and calm – frosty.”

Sonny nodded, shrugged his shoulders and moved forward with the others. It was only when they neared the far end of the footbridge that they could see over the treetops and into the car park. There was good news... and bad. The good – there were three large vehicles that could potentially work for the crew. The bad – there were grunts everywhere.

Beath tutted in frustration then turned to see the others looking at her expectantly.

“Well?” said Vihaan unnecessarily.

“Give me a second to think,” said Beath, as she turned her view towards the shopping centre still some kilometres away. “OK, there’s too many grunts in the car park to risk taking on. Let’s fall back to the street, we’ll just have to find another way to the shopping centre—”

“You mean we’re travelling on foot,” said Vihaan.

“It’s really not that much further,” said Ms Simmons, sensing his apprehension. “Twenty blocks – tops.”

“It’s not the distance. The buildings get bigger every block closer to the city and everything gets a bit more cramped.” Vihaan looked out at the giants still chowing down on Oreos. “I wouldn’t want to run into one of those guys without a good exit plan.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that, we’ll still be on the lookout for a van,” said Ms Simmons.

Vihaan absently tucked his slingshot into his shorts and pulled his cricket bat from his backpack. “And if we don’t find one? What’s the plan then? We’ll be giant entrée, that’s what.”

“Guys,” said Sonny.

“Well I don’t see you coming up with any better ideas,” said Beath.

“Guys!” said Sonny again, this time with increasing volume.

“You want better ideas – go back to the convenience store, stock up and head home. That food will keep us going for weeks,” said Vihaan.

“Guys!”

“What about the hole in the roof – how are we going to fix—”

“Guys!” yelled Sonny.

The gang stopped and turned to him, their gazes shifting to where his hand pointed. At the start of the overpass several grunts now surrounded the lower steps.

“Trapped,” said Abby via her Choices app.

“That’s seriously not good,” said Zhang.

“Thanks, life!” said Vihaan. “Anything else you can do to make our day harder?”

In the distance a giant roared. They looked in the direction of the sound to see the beast heading their way, attracted by the grunts’ activity below them.

“Well played, life, well played.”

“I suggest we head for the car park after all,” said Ms Simmons.

“Agreed,” said Beath.

Vihaan gritted his teeth and practised his favourite cricket shots as he walked, swinging the bat to all sides, imagining zombie heads instead of cricket balls as the target. “The further away from that thing the better.”

“We need to hurry too,” said Beath, as she gave Sonny a hand with Abby’s wheelchair.  
“We’ll want to be on the other side of the tree line before that bug gets a good look at us.”

“Bug!” said Vihaan as he jogged along with the herd. “See, it so works, right?”

\*



## Chapter 7

A greenish drool oozed from Mrs Matthews' mouth and nose, joining forces on her chin before falling in big gloops to the ground. She pawed at the driver's side window, smearing it with more colourful grime. Zhang shuddered at the sight. She mustered all of her bravado, leaned over the driver's seat and locked the door. Zhang looked to the house but couldn't see any sign of activity. She beeped the horn.

Mrs Matthews – at least the thing that looked like Mrs Matthews – started going crazy when the car horn sounded. She started making gurgling noises and slapping her hand on the car window. Zhang turned to see the weird guy in the high-vis gear now heading towards her too. Behind him, several more men with fluorescent clothing started closing in. Then another roar echoed out and the grumpy old guy from No.11 exited his house, heading for the excitement. He was wearing his pyjamas, slippers and crazy eyes.

Zhang looked back towards her house just as the front door burst open and her dad came out, piggy-backing her mum. Then she realised he was not piggy-backing her, she was attacking him. The two fell to the driveway in a heap, her dad rolling to ensure her mum took the bulk of the impact. Behind them she saw her mum's friend Clara shuffling towards them from the doorway. Her dad stood up to make a run for it, only to have his knee betray him after a few metres. He screamed and fell. Her mum grabbed his ankle.

Zhang took a deep breath and jumped into the driver's seat. She looked up at Mrs Matthews and said "shoo". She beeped the horn again and turned to her dad. He looked up at her and yelled "go!"

Her mum fighting her dad; it was too much to comprehend. She couldn't think, she just needed to do something, to have a plan. There was no way she was getting out of the car now, but there was no way she was leaving her dad there. Then it came to her – drive the car over to her dad so he could jump in and drive them to safety. She screamed at the craziness of the world around her, the craziness of her plan and her complete lack of faith in her ability to execute it.

Zhang sprang into action, or at least she would've if she knew the first thing about driving. She'd seen her parents do it a million times, but now realised she hadn't really paid any attention. She grabbed the key from where her dad left them on the driver's seat and realised she didn't even know which key to put in the ignition.

She heard a scream – definitely her dad – and another roar. She tried the first key without luck. The second was so fat it didn't stand a chance, but the third glided into the slot so naturally it had to be the one. She turned it and the car's engine ticked over. She let go of the key but the car died.

She look up the street to see the workmen shuffling closer, then heard her dad scream. "Zhang, you've got to go now!"

She turned the key again and kept it pressed hard as far as it would go. A second later the engine made a friendlier noise. She released her grip on the key and the engine kept humming. She could hear more roars outside the vehicle but something told her it would be a bad idea to focus on anything other than getting the car moving. She dropped her head down and looked at the two pedals on the floor – she knew one was the brake and the other the accelerator. She dropped her bottom off the seat so she could lean forward far enough to press one with her foot. The car roared approvingly – accelerator found.

Zhang tried to work out how to move the seat forward. She pressed a couple of buttons down the side but nothing happened. She tried to find a comfortable position to maintain without using the seat but there were none. She grabbed her bag and violin case and fashioned a makeshift perch in front of the driver's seat – it was uncomfortable on her posterior but she could reach the pedal and see over the steering wheel.

She heard her dad scream again then heard a thud on the passenger side door – it was the first workman. He glared at her with his lifeless eyes then drooled.

Zhang screamed and turned her focus to the centre console. She tried to move the gearstick from P for park to R for reverse but it didn't budge. She screamed again and fiddled around with it until she realised if she squeezed the bottom end it would let her change gears. Success! She pressed the accelerator and the car moved backwards. She turned the wheel and got a feel for the controls as she went. It must not have been fast as the workman and Mrs Matthews shuffled alongside her, easily keeping pace.

As the car turned it opened up the view to her front yard. She could see her dad struggling to release himself from under her mum. Clara was closing in on them – she had the same dead eyes as the others. In an instant Zhang knew she had to act fast to save her father. She clicked the car into drive and pressed the accelerator. This time she was travelling forward, could see

where she was going and her target was clear. She pressed her foot down and the car gathered speed until it hit Clara.

An ear-piercing screech echoed around the cul-de-sac as she slammed on the brakes, narrowly avoiding the garage door. The same could not be said for Clara, or whatever Clara now was, as her body maintained its momentum, shooting right through the door before coming to rest in a pile of limbs by her dad's workbench. Zhang turned her head in horror – it was too much for her mind to digest.

She turned and looked back through the rear window – her dad was too low and close to the car to see. However, she did notice every other crazy in the cul-de-sac was now heading her way. Fear and confusion overwhelmed her and she started crying. She tried the side mirrors, then the main rear view – still nothing. Then she saw movement, but not from where she was expecting. Clara's body was somehow righting itself. Limbs were unmangling and Clara tried to rise to her feet.

Zhang screamed again. What was going on?

Then there was a thud on the back of the car. Zhang turned to see her father staring back at her. But it was not her father – the dull yellow glow in his eyes, the lifeless glare, the drooling... he had changed.

“Nooooo!” Zhang wailed.

She closed her eyes and waited for the end. Around the cabin of the car, the noises of groans and tapping on glass resounded. This was it – her family was gone and she would no doubt follow soon. Then a part of her mind changed gear – she wouldn't go out without a fight. She repositioned her bag and violin case in front of the driver's seat, then put the car into reverse. She watched as her dad and two other crazies were carried along for the ride. When she had arced around far enough to face the end of the street she put the car into forward gear and hammered the pedal. She ploughed through the workmen crazies and skidded on to Tesla Ave.

She didn't stop and she didn't know where to go. She just drove and drove through the tears of loss – avoiding crazies and searching for a... she didn't know what. Then the thought struck her – the school – East High – that's where she would head. She wasn't sure why, it just felt... right.

\*



## Chapter 8

“What are we looking at – 30, 40 tops?” said Vihaan.

“I count 53,” said Zhang. “Make that 54.”

The gang had hidden themselves from the view of the grunts and bug behind them. They were slightly exposed to the bigger group in the car park, but the trees and shrubs lining the footpath kept them safe enough.

“Alright, we’ve got two mini vans and a bus – any one of them could do the trick,” whispered Beath. “If we follow the path, stay quiet and keep close to the trees we can get within about 10 metres of the first van. Vihaan, Zhang – you guys can come with me. We need to find a set of keys.”

“Is that likely?” said Vihaan. He checked the direction and speed of the wind by licking his index finger and holding it aloft. After analysing the data he gripped his cricket bat before shaking his head and selecting the slingshot instead.

Zhang shook her head as well, but for different reasons.

“I have no idea, we’ve got three chances though. We’ll take one each. Check everywhere – under seats, consoles, behind sun visors – everywhere,” said Beath, before turning to Abby, Sonny and Ms Simmons. “The rest of you, keep an eye on the grunts and get ready to roll as soon as we find something. Got it?”

“Got it,” came the response from everyone except Vihaan.

“What if we can’t find any keys?”

Beath gave him the not-now look, but he ploughed on regardless.

“Because it’s grunt heavy out there, and who knows how many more are waiting across the footbridge for us by now. That’s not to mention the giant. I mean we’re pretty much trapped—”

“Try to focus on the positives, young Vihaan,” said Ms Simmons.

“And what are they? I’m wearing clean undies?”

“Where did you get clean undies?” said Sonny.

“Nasty,” came the voice from Abby’s Choices app.

“Look, we’re going to be fine. Worse-case scenario, we head up the vehicle access ramp on the far side of the car park,” said Beath.

“Wait a minute, doesn’t that exit by the two bugs near the cargo train?” said Vihaan.

“I think he might be right,” said Ms Simmons.

“Brilliant.”

“Look, it’s not like we have much choice in the matter right now,” said Zhang.

Beath eyed Vihaan as he thought through the options, then nodded a reluctant acceptance of his fate.

“Alright, on my mark, fall out,” said Beath.

\*

### **The thing about clusters**

It is the way of the Zombie RiZing world that where you find one grunt, you’ll find another and another. A smart zombie would increase his chances of a feed by finding a space to itself, but in case you’ve just start reading about the RiZing, remember – zombies are a long way from smart.

They are attracted by sound and, by the law of that rule alone, are attracted to each other. A grunt’s two favourite pastimes – moving and eating – make noise. The very act of existing – or not unexisting as it were – will attract other zombies. And a small group of zombies will make more noise than a single zombie\*, therefore attracting more zombies.

\*Unless that particular lone zombie has managed to turn on heavy machinery – say a mulcher.

\*\*Or got stuck in the heavy machinery while it’s turned on – say a mulcher.

Anyway, like the atoms in the early universe slowly combined to form large galaxies held together by gravity, so the zombies in the early RiZing are slowly forming larger and larger clusters, held together by sound.

\*

Beath signalled Zhang and Vihaan to be at the ready. She watched as the closest two grunts slowly hobbled behind a SUV. “OK, go!”

They crouched and ran to the side of the first van, pressing up against it and staying low. Beath nodded to the others then stood up slowly, peeking through a window to ensure the coast was clear. “All good. Vihaan – this one’s yours.”

Beath lead Zhang around the front of the van to the second people-mover. Again they sought cover, before Beath checked the coast was clear and headed to the mini bus – this time

by herself. She looked back to see Vihaan already inside his van searching for the keys and Zhang about to open the door of her v—

Beep! Beep! Beep!

\*

## Chapter 9

Zhang stepped away from the van as the alarm rang out loud and high pitched across the car park and beyond. The sound resonated off walls, cars, trees, embankments – every part of the surrounding environment. Zhang was frozen to the spot as Beath made her way back to the van, all the while patting Jacques and assuring him everything was alright. Vihaan slipped out of the driver's seat of his van and waited for the two to reach him again.

“They're going crazy,” yelled Sonny, as he eyed the grunts in the car park.

“You keep your eye on the team, I'll monitor the grunts,” said Ms Simmons.

Sonny, for once, was right. The volume and pitch of the alarm had sent the zombies into fever pitch. They were moving every which way in a confused cascade of corpses. The scale of the din caused by the alarm had shown a small benefit. The volume and echoing had layered the noise in such a way the zombies couldn't hone in on the source. They growled for food, yet were too overwhelmed by their senses to find it.

Beath and Zhang had now reached Vihaan. They had also noticed the grunts' behaviour.

“How do we shut the alarm off?” screamed Zhang over the noise.

“I'm not sure we should,” said Beath. “They don't know what's happening. It's probably a good time to break the window, if anything.”

“Don't forget our giant friends – they're bound to be heading this way now,” said Vihaan.

“Good point,” said Beath, as she lead Zhang back around to the other two vehicles.

\*

“Sonny, update?” said Ms Simmons.

“Zhang just smashed the van window with a brick, Beath's about to do the s—”

Awwwwaaaaaaahhhh, awwwwaaaaaaahhh, awwwwaaaaaaahhhhhh.

“...same,” screamed Sonny over the sound of the minibus alarm Beath had now triggered.

“Thanks. Abby, you got your Boom power on standby?” said Ms Simmons. “I've got a feeling we're going to need it.”

“Yes,” said Abby through her Choices app.

“Hey, who's that?” said Sonny, looking in the direction of the car park zombies.

“Who's who?” said Ms Simmons. “Anyway, I told you to keep an eye on the team. I've got the grunts.”



Ms Simmons studied the mystery figure. It was an undead, but it didn't move like the grunts. It moved into the centre of the large car park with purpose – a contrast to the zigzagging mayhem from the others. It looked around the space, as if analysing the environment and what to do next.

“Get back,” said Ms Simmons, ensuring the three of them were behind as much foliage as possible.

“What is it?” said Sonny.

“I... don't know.”

Ms Simmons moved in close behind a shrub without breaking her line of sight with the creature. It soon turned in her direction, scanning the line of trees and bushes she sat amongst. It was a male, well, it used to be a male, balding, with a police uniform on. Then she noticed its eyes – glowing a blue as rich as the shallow waters of a tropical beach. She froze to the spot while the creature continued to search for something, then it was distracted by a movement farther afield. Vihaan opening the van door had caught its eye.

Vihaan continued his sweep of the van but he felt a strange need to look in the other direction as if something was watching him. Then he saw blue eyes doing exactly that. His mouth dropped open as if the muscles in his face had forgotten they were required to lift it. The pair stood in silence and stared at each other, like two gun-toting cowboys preparing for a gunfight.

Vihaan thought about reaching for the slingshot stashed in his belt, but ignored the temptation, fearing a sudden move might also send blue eyes into action – whatever that action would be. “Beath!” he said as loudly as possible out of the corner of his mouth.

He didn't break eye contact with blue eyes. He did not get a response from Beath. “Zhang!”

He stood alone, fingers hovering over the slingshot, twitching in anticipation of a quick draw.

“What is it?” said Beath as the girls moved in behind him.

“Ahhh!” Vihaan shrieked in fright, not expecting someone so close to him. “Please. Never. Do. That. Again.”

Just as the girls were apologising, the creature started emitting a strange and high-pitched noise.

“What is that thing?” said Beath.

From within her satchel, Jacques popped his head up and hissed at the creature.

“And what’s it doing?” said Zhang.

“It’s...” said Vihaan. “I have no idea.”

Then something unexpected occurred. The grunts, who had been a confused mess since the alarms beeped into life, started to settle. Their attention turned to Beath, Vihaan and Zhang. From across the car park several dozen sets of green and yellow eyes, as well as one set of blue ones, stared at them, then started advancing.

\*

“Remarkable,” said Ms Simmons.

“What?” replied Sonny.

Ms Simmons stared at blue eyes. She could see its aura dance around and out, shooting connections to the grunts that surrounded it. “I think it’s... communicating with them.”

“What? How?”

“Magic,” said Ms Simmons. “Some form of magic.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I... I don’t know. Get prepared with your magic.”

\*

### **The thing about blue eyes**

Ms Simmons was right. Blue eyes could, and was, communicating with the other grunts – instructing them.

The blue eyes – this was not the only one – were not the most physically threatening of the monsters in the Zombie RiZing, but they were among the most dangerous because they could think. Not only that, they could order standard zombies to do their bidding, like foot soldiers of the undead. The presence of blue eyes could turn even a small group of grunts into something far more fearsome, coordinated and deadly.

The blue eyes were just as easy to down as regular grunts, easier in fact, as they had no need to develop individual attacking skills. The trick was finding a way through the foot soldiers to get to them.

\*

“What are we going to do?” said Vihaan.

“Fight,” said Beath as she drew her hedge-trimmer spear.

Vihaan went for his iPod to choose some music to distract the advancing grunts, before he realised it would be completely drowned out by the alarms. Instead, he drew his slingshot. At his side Zhang lifted her hands, confident and ready to deal her magic.

“Hey, check out that grunt,” said Vihaan.

“What grunt?” said Beath.

“The one near the red car – the old guy with the beer gut.”

“What about him.”

“He’s got a Southside Tours uniform on.”

“And?”

“And... check out my van.”

Beath and Zhang turned to see the same Southside Tours logo emblazoned on the side of the vehicle.

“You don’t think he—”

“Uh hu... best chance of finding the keys yet. Better still, the van’s got one of those wheelchair liftery things.”

“Nice one,” said Beath, as she sensed movement from the corner of her eye. She looked down to see Jacques climbing from her satchel. He scurried from her hip, down her leg and to the ground in a flash.

“Jacques, stay here! Jacques!”

But it was too late – her pet scurried across the car park towards the grunts. Seconds later there was a roar, distant but ferocious and audible over the alarms. On the hill leading down to the car park, the two Oreos giants stared at them before advancing.

“That is so, really, absolutely not good,” said Vihaan.

Then another roar echoed out from behind them on the left. They looked to see the other bug squishing its way along the walkway to their location.

“We really didn’t need that,” said Beath.

“Tell me about it,” said Vihaan. “Now I can’t even say I have clean undies.”

“Eww,” said Zhang with a shudder. “Just... eww.”

“Alright, on my mark, let’s give them hell,” said Beath.

\*

“Time to act,” said Ms Simmons as she reached for Abby’s wheelchair while looking at Sonny. “I’ll take Boom to free your hands.”

Sonny took out a small rock from his bag and lobbed it at the feet of the nearest grunt.

“Closer,” said Abby via her Choices app, before selecting. “Boom.”

Ms Simmons nodded. “Good call Boom, plus we’re better off joining forces with the others.”

She leaned into Abby’s wheelchair and set across the asphalt to meet the others. Sonny jogged in their wake, looping pebbles between targets with all the accuracy of a Star Wars stormtrooper.

“Front!” said Abby, again via her app.

Ms Simmons understood the intention and positioned Abby in front of Beath and co. Seconds later she sent a Boom blast into the advancing grunts. The wall of magic punched through the air, sending zombies flying backwards.

“Nice work, Boom,” said Beath before turning to Zhang. “Z-hang time?”

As Zhang stepped forward to attack, Vihaan jumped out in front of her. “Wait a minute, wait a minute. Where’s bus man?”

“There he is!” said Beath, pointing at the downed zombie in question.

“Sweet, Z-hang – clear the others from around him and I’ll search him for keys.”

Z-hang loaded up her hands, feeling the magic flow into them strong and hard. She pushed forward, forming a wall to the bus man’s left, then scooped her hands left, sending the already stunned grunts flying. Even blue eyes was not immune to the attack, spinning several metres sideways. She then reloaded and sent another wall of Z-hang to the right of the bus man before flinging those zombies out of the picture.

Five zombies remained in the middle ground between the two attacks, including the bus man.

“Cover me,” said VJ Slingshot as he ran towards the bus man and, hopefully, the keys.

Beath ran after him.

There was another roar, followed by a large crashing noise as the two giants jumped on to a car at the far end of the car park.

“Hurry!” came the sounds from Abby’s Choices app.

\*



## Chapter 10

VJ Slingshot frisked the downed bus man zombie, searching for keys. He heard the clink of tinny metal and knew he was on target.

There was another colossal roar as the two giants started heading in their direction.

“Hurry!” screamed Beath, as she jabbed her spear at the bus man, ensuring he wouldn’t pose threat again.

“That was the plan,” said VJ as he unzipped the man’s jacket.

A full key ring fell out. Slingshot scooped it up, spotting the remote car lock. He studied the buttons, pressed open and the van clicked into life. “Oh, I am on a roll!”

The rest of the gang moved to the van. Ms Simmons wheeled Boom to the rear doors, opened them and saw the wheelchair lifter. “Wonderful!”

She searched around, saw the operating panel and pressed the down button. A metal tray rose clear of the floor and angled up and out, before starting the slow descent to the ground.

“Hurry up!” yelled Zhang as she jumped into the driver’s seat. The giants were nearing and blue eyes and several other zombies were recovering from the Boom and Z-Hang attacks.

Ms Simmons studied the buttons. “I’m not sure hurry is an option.”

Beath and Slingshot skidded to a halt near Ms Simmons.

“What’s taking so long?” said Beath before seeing the speed of the lifter in action. “Oh.”

“Can’t we just carry her to the van and chuck the chair in the back?” said VJ Slingshot between heavy breaths as he chucked the keys to Zhang.

Ms Simmons turned to him with a don’t-mess-with-me face. “We could’ve, but now the machine is nearly down it will be just as quick to—”

“Hurry up!” said Zhang, her eyes fixed on the approaching giants. “They’re nearly on us.”

“Just get ready to drive,” said Beath.

She turned to Rock and Slingshot. “Wait, does she even know how to drive?”

The van engine turned over and roared to life.

“I guess so,” said Beath, before focusing on the boys. “Want to help me with our little bug problem?”

“Do we have a choice?” said Slingshot.

“No.”

“Then... yes.”

“I’ve got this,” said Rock as he took several steps in front of the others. “Spread out. If one of them gets past me just...”

But he didn’t know how to finish the sentence as no one else knew how to take down a giant. If they were to get past him, well, everyone knew it would be bad.

To their left, a rancid scream pierced the wail of the alarms – it was blue eyes, back on his feet and a long way from happy. He started calling the grunts to attack again. Fortunately, most were still stumbling around trying to achieve the feat of standing.

Beath kept half an eye on the threat, but her true focus was the galloping giants on a collision course with Rock. She turned briefly to see Boom’s lift reach the ground and Ms Simmons loaded her on. Then she turned to Rock, watching his body transform from flesh and bone to hard granite.

The first giant leapt on to the bonnet of the closest row of cars, then hit full speed as it ran towards Rock. Grunts were thrown left and right in the beast’s eagerness to crush its target. Behind it the second beast picked up speed in the wake of the first.

Beath found herself screaming as she watched the gap between Rock and giant close to nothing. Her cry of fear and adrenalin continued on through the bone-jarring impact as the two objects crunched together. The speed and violence of the collision was sickening. Beath found it hard to imagine little old Sonny was in there somewhere. But, as the dust settled and the giant fell to the floor defeated, Sonny – Rock – stood next to it, unharmed.

The second giant saw its friend fall and skidded to a halt, metres short of the body. It studied the scene, its friend and the little human who stood over it in victory. It made a quizzical noise, switching its attention between the two combatants. Then it made an angry noise and jumped closer to Rock. It stopped again, clearly reconsidering its plan of attack.

Behind Rock, Beath had her spear at the ready and Slingshot had his namesake weapon loaded and aimed. The beast now studied the two of them as it entertained its next move. Its eyes darted between the three humans, then back and forth between Beath and Slingshot before settling on Beath.

It breathed deeply through its nose, the sound pulsating out over the alarms. Then it started to move slowly and cautiously towards her.

Beath started backing away, inching her way to the trees, hoping she'd find protection among them when it attacked. Slingshot controlled his breathing, exhaled and fired. A pebbled ripped through the air and collected the bug on the temple.

"Two from two," said Vihaan.

The beast roared in irritated pain and turned all of its attention to the source of the annoyance, then started running at Slingshot.

"Oh no."

Slingshot fumbled for another pebble to load, but his nervous hands betrayed him. In a panic he reached for his cricket bat and gave it a yank. It was caught in his bag – no go. He backed away but knew there was no cover he could reach in time to save him. He screamed – the sort of noise that was summoned from the depths of a soul – then focused that energy into his right hand. He punched it forward at the bug. As his hand extended out a shock of cool blue energy surrounded it. As he reached full stretch the blue energy left his hand and shot out at the giant. It ripped through the car park and met the beast in the chest.

In an instant the creature ceased all activity – its arms didn't work, its legs didn't work. It fell face-first into the ground, sliding several metres from its running momentum, stopping as a broken, motionless wreck at Slingshot's feet.

Slingshot looked at the creature, then at his hands. He had done it – he had made magic.

Beath rushed to VJ Slingshot's side. Rock returned to flesh and bone and joined them a few seconds later.

VJ Slingshot looked at the pair. "Three from three – I'm on fire!"

"You saved me," said Beath to Slingshot. "Thank you."

She turned to Rock. "Both of you."

The Southside Tours van beeped and Beath turned to see Boom nearly loaded and ready to go.

"You guys got the energy to move?"

"I think so," said Rock.

"Hang on a second," said VJ Slingshot as he pulled out his phone.

"What are you doing?" said Beath.

VJ Slingshot turned the phone towards himself and played with the angle before pressing the button. "Selfie."



“Really?” said Beath. “Now?”

“It’s not every day you down a giant,” said VJ Slingshot, while looking at the picture he’d taken. “Oh, that’s a keeper.”

He moved towards the van, then realised how faint he was feeling. He staggered before Beath and Rock took his weight at either side. They hobbled back to the van just as the third giant roared out again – it had cleared the footbridge and was making its way down to the tree-lined path.

As they reached the van, Ms Simmons was closing the doors. They threw VJ Slingshot in the seat nearest the sliding door and jumped over him to find their own. In the back Ms Simmons was attaching Boom’s seatbelts

“Hit it!” said Beath to Z-Hang.

Z-Hang put the van into reverse and backed up until she hit one of the giants. “Whoops!”

“You sure you can drive this thing?” said Beath.

“Watch this,” said Z-Hang as she put the van into drive and arched it around 180 degrees, heading for the exit. The path was dotted with zombies regaining their feet, driven forward by blue eyes. Z-Hang scanned as she drove, searching for the easiest way out.

“Wait a minute – Jacques, where’s Jacques?” said Beath as she scanned the car park.

She undid her seatbelt. “Stop the van.”

“What are you doing?” said Ms Simmons.

“I’m not leaving without Jacques.”

“I can’t let you, it’s too big a risk. Keep moving Z-Hang.”

Outside blue eyes screamed again. This cry was different than the others – pained, annoyed.

“That’s him!” said Rock. “He’s attacking blue eyes.”

Beath focused her vision on blue eyes; it was writhing, hands at its face, wrestling with—

“Jacques!” said Beath before turning to Z-Hang. “Can you get us close?”

The third giant roared again.

“And quick?”

Z-Hang pressed her foot to the accelerator and aimed the van at blue eyes. She zigged left and zagged right as she tried to avoid zombies along the way – not always successfully. One bounced off the hood, another hit the bumper bar. Soon she slammed on the brakes and the van skidded to a halt, knocking blue eyes in the hip as it did.

The zombie roared in pain as it hit the ground. Beath ripped open the sliding side door, aimed her spear at blue eyes and prodded it forward repeatedly.

She stopped and nudged blue eyes with her weapon. It didn't move. "Jacques"

The ferret scratched blue eyes' face – not for the first time judging by the marks – then ran down his body, up Beath's spear and into the van.

"Jacques!" said Beath again as she shut the sliding door and cuddled her pet close.

Z-Hang hit the gas.

The last giant stepped into the car park but it was too late. The van was at the exit and moving away with speed. It gave chase for a few seconds before realising it was a losing battle and punching one of the remaining grunts to release its frustration.

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## Chapter 11

As Zhang guided the van into the more urban streets on the way to the Black Oaks Shopping centre, all went quiet in the cabin. They had survived today. It was the biggest test they had ever faced and they were here to tell the tale. Yet, no one wanted to tell it.

There was so much to process - a new van, new magic and new possibilities ahead. But there was also the unknown. They'd all seen how quickly the Zombie RiZing could surprise them and, despite their victory, none of them felt a sense of security. There was just relief. And hope that what they'd mastered today would see them through whatever they still had to face.

For each of them, in their own way, knew the RiZing had more to deliver. They just hoped they'd be ready for whatever that was when it happened.

As Zhang worked the van Ms Simmons offered instruction. Beath rested her head on Abby's shoulder, while Jacques curled up in her lap. Vihaan flicked through the vehicle's manual as he recovered from his first magic moment, while Sonny hummed to himself as he looked out the window in wonder at the city skyline, slowly growing closer in the distance.

They were victors who didn't feel victorious, but they were also survivors who knew how to survive.

Each other's quiet company, and the collective safety that delivered, was as much as anyone could hope for right. Together, alive.

The future unknown - the thing they couldn't process - was probably wise to avoid in this moment. If they truly knew what the RiZing was about to deliver, they wouldn't have even been able to enjoy the triumph of victory.

Things were about to go to an entirely new level. Those who could do so would look back on this moment as far simpler times. It would be known, simply, as the beginning.

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The End

## Chapter 1

Zhang steered the van on to Agile St, keeping an easy pace, her eyes darting left and right. As they neared the shopping centre, the density and height of the buildings increased. They seemed to lean over the van, making the gang feel claustrophobic and on edge with every passing second.

It didn't help that the streets, so busy in the pre Zombie RiZing world, were so eerily quiet now. Sure, it was no different than the school in that regard, but here, at the high point of Agile St, well, that made it seem all the more real. It was as if no other human lived here anymore.

"Two more coming up on the left," said Beath.

"I see them," replied Zhang, before she steered the car to the side.

She'd only been driving for a few city blocks but had found a nice little technique that served her well. She simply eased her foot off the brake pedal and let the car roll forward in drive. By not using the accelerator the car stayed fairly quiet, so as to not attract too many grunts, yet the speed was enough to outrun any who saw them. This combination of noise and speed also dramatically reduced the odds of an encounter with something more fearsome.

It was a slow motion game of dodge the undead.

The creepy vibe wasn't helped by the piles of cars and rubbish strewn across the roads and the more frequent appearance of grunts. There was also another, more subtle, change in the environment. With all the build-up of dust and debris and no one to clean it, things had gotten dirtier and dirtier. The result was a sickly yellow colour palette everywhere they looked. Along with the people and noise, this part of Agile St used to be a symphony of colour – shops, cafes, signage and lights. Not anymore.

There was an uneasy silence in the van as they took in the chaos and destruction while staying alert for the signs of grunts. All except for Vihaan, who was sleeping off his first use of magic.

Zhang spotted another small group of grunts ahead – five in all. She put her focus back on the street, knowing each metre she could gain without advertising their position would make it easier to move past them when they were closer. If she were to hit an object now, the noise would—

Bang!

A large sound ripped through the streets, echoing off abandoned shopfronts. In unison, the grunts raised their heads and spotted the van.

“What was that?” said Beath scanning the street.

“Wasn’t me,” said Zhang.

The zombies headed towards the van, closing the escape route ahead as they moved in on a mess of cars covering half the street.

“This is not good,” said Sonny.

“Problem,” said Abby via her Choices app as she peered out of the rear window.

The rest of the gang turned to look and saw a giant standing on a pile of cars, staring at them. Then it roared.

“I think you found what caused the bang,” said Beath to Abby, before turning to Zhang. “You think you can squeeze us through that gap?”

Zhang looked at the grunts, the pile of cars and the diminishing space between them. “Maybe.”

Behind them the giant, or bug as Vihaan had named them, started into a gallop in pursuit.

“This is so absolutely not good,” said Beath.

“Hold on,” screamed Zhang as she pumped the gas.

The gang jolted around in their seats as she accelerated at speed. Behind them the giant picked up speed in response.

As they raced along the street, Zhang, Beath and Sonny watched the narrowing gap between grunt and car; Abby and Ms Simmons watched the giant approaching; Vihaan, well he watched himself flying through the night sky, his cape billowing in the wind, safe and sound in the land of dreams.

Zhang realised it was getting too close for comfort and pressed the pedal down harder.

“C’mon, c’mon,” said Beath, willing the car through the gap.

But it quickly became clear they weren't going to sail through the space as planned. Zhang screamed, they all did. It was enough to wake Vihaan, who prised his eyes open, realised everyone was in a state of panic and started screaming himself, not knowing why.

The giant reached full speed and was almost close enough to take a swipe at the van. It lifted its arm backwards in anticipation just as Zhang reached the gap, well, what used to be the gap. Instead the left corner of the van collided with a grunt, sending the creature flying and a shudder through the vehicle. Zhang instinctively hit the brakes and turned the van to the right. Meanwhile the zombie flew through the air, colliding with two others before it landed – grunt bits went everywhere.

As they rounded the cars a second pile presented itself. They slid straight towards it, Zhang screamed again, then moved her foot back to the accelerator and reeved the wheel right to avoid impact. Again it was too late. Again the front left side of the van took the impact, clipping a car at the base to send another two tumbling down from above.

In their wake the giant skidded around the corner and leapt over zombie pieces before pulverising the two final grunts. After dodging the obstacles, it again fixed its eye on the van, which suddenly made a sharp turn – caused partly by the collision. In an instant the secondary pile of cars was revealed. The bug tried to slow its momentum, knowing impact with the shiny metal objects was close, but it was too late.

The beast hit one of the falling cars flush-on. The sound of the impact could be felt by everyone. Beath turned to see the giant stumble forward in shock and pain. It tried to stand straight up, briefly, before passing out and falling face first on to the bitumen. The vision was followed by another bone jarring noise that could be felt in the van.

Zhang still had her foot on the gas, trying to put as much distance as she could between the van and the carnage. Beth turned and put her hand over Zhang's in a comforting way, letting her know it was safe to slow down. She was too wired to acknowledge the gesture.

“He's gone, it's safe,” said Beath. “Ease down, ease down.”

Eventually Zhang got the message and gently backed off the gas. The engine noise abated and the car returned to its pre-giant-showdown speed. She took in a few gaping breaths as she moved the van around the corner and out of sight from the ordeal, then slumped her head on the steering wheel in mental exhaustion.

Beath patted her shoulder. “Nice job.”

In turn the others offered their tributes. As Zhang looked up she realised she'd done more than evade the grunts and bug, she'd delivered them to their destination. In front of them a gigantic sign beamed out in huge red letters, Black Oaks Shopping Centre.

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## Chapter 2

Everything had been affected by the ruin of the post-riZing world and the Black Oaks Shopping Centre was no exception. Its gleaming bright exterior was now a dowdy murky yellow, litter piled up against the walls. Even the larger-than-life sign wasn't immune. The large red letters, each the size of a car, that used to read Black Oaks Shopping Centre now technically read 'lack O s hopping Cent'.

Between the sign and the grime, the majestic multi-storied mega mall stood tall and defiant, offering promises of food, clothes and all matter of marvellous merchandise. Each of the crew looked on in wonder dreaming of the possibilities potentially within.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said a now fully awake Vihaan. "Spare no expense, it's time to go shopping."

There were giggles of excitement in the cabin of the van. This was quite possibly the coolest thing they had ever done. Zhang put the van into drive and headed for the car park.

"Before we do," said Beath. "We should really do a lap of the place, see what we can see."

"An excellent suggestion," said Ms Simmons.

Zhang steered the van to the right and they began their lap of the mega mall.

Vihaan did some stretches as he tried to coax the tired out of his system. "Good call. We can even check out what's playing at the cinema," he joked.

"You're not really thinking of watching a movie, are you?" said Sonny. "We should wait for cheapie Tuesday."

Vihaan shared glances with the others, then studied Sonny at length. "I was going to suggest we waited for the staff to be less zombified, but yeah, sure, we'll wait for cheapie Tuesday instead."

Sonny smiled. "We'll have more to spend at the lolly counter."

Vihaan stared. "Can you not talk to me right now?"

Sonny gave Vihaan a puzzled look while everyone else looked at the cinema as they drove past. There was no telling what movies were playing when the zombie riZing struck, someone had removed all the letters from the 'now playing' sign and replaced them with the words 'help me'. It became apparent the industrious survivor may not have got their wish as a human arm dangled from the sign at the end of the word 'me'.

"Eww!" said Zhang.



“Oh, that’s nasty,” said Vihaan.

“Seriously,” agreed Sonny. “Has anyone even heard of Help Me? Probably some boring drama... or a rom-com. Typical! Only one film’s playing and no one’s even heard of it.”

Vihaan stared at Sonny in jaw-dropping disbelief. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“Leave it alone,” said Beath.

“But he—”

“Just leave it.”

They drove in silence for the next little while, past the fashion precinct, then one of the department stores, then a ramp heading downward into the bowels of the building.

“Um, what’s that?” said Vihaan.

“That goes down to the loading dock,” said Zhang.

“How do you know that?”

“My dad used to load stock for Warner and Mitchell before he was a cabbie. I’d almost totally forgotten about this. It’s totally a better place to go in than the public car park – we’d have access to all the major stores – right into their loading bays and warehouses.”

“Nice work Zhang,” said Beath. “If we don’t find anything better that’s our way in.”

They passed the bowling lanes and a strip of restaurants before reaching the halfway mark of their circumnavigation of the shopping centre. Something caught Beath’s attention in the sky. She scanned the area, but the midday sun was making it difficult to pinpoint what had distracted her. She returned her focus to the shopping centre but kept half an eye trained on the skies above.

As they turned another corner they were greeted by a series of bus stops. Behind them stood a mix of coffee shops, fruit stalls, newsagents and flower stands.

“Is it just me,” said Vihaan. “Or is it weird that there are no zombies, like anywhere?”

“That is most definitely weird,” said Beath as she scanned the skies again.

“They’ve probably gone to Village Central because they’ve got a better range of movies,” said Sonny.

There was a long pause as nobody wanted to encourage further words from Sonny. All the while Vihaan’s observation raised everyone’s suspicions a degree – things became noticeably tense. Where were the grunts?

“There,” came the voice from Abby’s Choices app.

Everyone turned to the rear of the van to see two grunts hobbling across the street to the shopping centre.

“There’s another one,” added Ms Simmons, pointing across the street.

The tension in the van eased, as if seeing a few scattered zombies meant there was nothing more sinister lurking nearby. How wrong they were.

\*

## Chapter 3

“Five minutes, Elizabeth!” said her mother, Prue, as she popped her head down the corridor to the family room.

“I want to stay and play with Abby!” replied Elizabeth with a fair dose of whine.

“Well, Abby is expected home and you have ballet.”

It was several years before the RiZing, in a land where the biggest problem a girl (well, Elizabeth) could have was being forced to put on a ridiculous pink outfit and frolic at Ms Berry’s Ballet Academy.

But it’s what her mum wanted, it was what her mum did when she was growing up. It just wasn’t Elizabeth though; she wore her clothes like a burden of pink.

“Alright Abby, we’ve got time for another game,” said Elizabeth, as she played around with her friend’s blindfold.

Once Elizabeth was satisfied it was tight enough she picked up the stereo remote control and pressed play. One of her parents’ old OutKast CDs burst into life. In the distance she could barely hear her mum yelling at her to turn it down... but she couldn’t. Beath needed the music loud, at least for now. She moved to the far end of the family room and turned the music off.

There was no way Abby could know her location now.

Game. On.

Beath started towards her blindfolded bestie, as she turned her head left and right, searching for the right noise, searching for Beath.

When the moment was right and Abby was between movements and facing away, Beath slid forward. Her ballet shoes met the floorboards in a beautiful union of silent movement. Beath knew exactly the right combination of body weight and forward momentum to get herself moving forward with stealth.

She glided forward again when the moment was right and saw an opening for a third advance before Abby snapped her head around, suspicions directed at Beath’s location. Beath balanced in the most uncomfortable position in between strides. Her ballet training sustaining her balance and her determination holding her focus, she held her breath and watched her friend. Abby’s face toggled through an array of emotions before she turned to investigate another sound.

Beath let out a slow breath, then slid forward again while Abby was distracted. She had to strike when the opportunity presented, because Abby had the ears of an elephant – she was sharp, alert and completely unforgiving.

It made Abby the perfect nemesis for Beath – drawing the best of her out. It meant Beath couldn't get away with being average. She couldn't just be Beath the talented eight year old ballet dancer, no, she had to be Beath, the ninja warrior, travelling under the cover of night and the guise of stealth to surprise the evil grand master. Or Abby in a blindfold.

She danced across the floorboards, knowing where to step and where to avoid for fear of letting out a creak. She drew closer to Grand Master Abby. So close she had to control her breathing, or risk giving away her position and the game. The thing was, though, the closer she got, the higher the stakes, the more adrenaline flowed through her, the more her heart raced and the more she had to breath. It took all of her ninja strength to keep it under control.

Once more Abby was looking in her direction, sensing her presence. There was only one plan of attack now, maintain her good position, lay in wait and, when the moment was right, strike.

Abby turned away momentarily, but Beath had seen this trick before. It was a fake, she was luring her out. Beath held her ground and watched Abby snap back around, her face smiling with evil delight.

Beath stayed strong, in the zone, breathing in control, waiting... waiting... until it happened. Abby turned and this time it was different, this time it was her chance. This time victory would be her—

“Elizabeth, time to go!” yelled her mum from the kitchen.

Elizabeth groaned and tutted. “Mum!”

She stood upright, stomped over to Abby and removed her blindfold. Abby laughed.

“No way, that does not mean you won.”

“Hurry up, we're not being late again,” said her mum as she fussed into the family room and grabbed Abby's wheelchair. “C'mon sweetie, your mum is waiting.”

Abby laughed again.

“No way,” said Elizabeth. “It's a draw.”

\*

The crew continued their lap of the shopping centre, nearing the point they'd started at – the lac O s hopping Cent sign. Beath's eyes were still on high alert – darting around, trying to find that movement again. It was when she looked up at the sign, towering over the van, that she spotted something... bad. She gasped, her heart missing a beat. Sitting atop the entry archway stood two creatures, watching the van amble past like two living, breathing gargoyles.

“What is it?” said Zhang.

“Oh nothing!” said Beath, not wanting to alarm her friend at the wheel. “Keep driving. Stay calm. Drive calm.”

“What do you mean, drive calm?”

“Just keep doing what you've been doing.”

Vihaan pressed his face up against the side window to try to glimpse what Beath was looking at through the front windscreen. “Umm... what are they?”

Sonny moved in next to get a look himself.

“I'm sure it's nothing,” said Beath.

“Nothing? Nothing! They're huge!”

Zhang started to accelerate but Beath whispered for her to drive calm again.

The creatures watched the car speed up then slow down. One of them stood and fanned its wings out, ready to react if necessary.

“We are so going to die,” said Vihaan.

“Keep it down,” rage-whispered Beath.

“What on Earth is that?” said Ms Simmons as she joined Vihaan and Sonny with faces pressed up against the window.

Vihaan responded with eyes fixed on the creature. “Not sure. A large, ugly, half human, half bat flying thing with flame-red flesh and a socially uncomfortable staring habit?”

“Dave?” responded Sonny with an air of hopeful daydreamer.

“Dave?”

“Yeah, it just sort of looks like a dave.”

Vihaan finally broke his view of the creature and turned to study Sonny. “It's like the grunts have bitten him but nobody's told his mouth.”

They all turned their focus back to the flying things that looked somewhat like a dave as they slowly disappeared from view.

Beath looked at Zhang. “Almost there.”

“C’mon, c’mon,” said Vihaan, hoping the soon-to-be-out-of-sight creature would stay disappeared once out of eye-shot.

It wasn’t to be. Just before their line of sight was broken, first one, then the other, erm dave, flapped gracefully upwards. The movement was all too much for the sign and the lack O s hopping Cent was renamed the lack O s hoping Cent, as one of the Ps plummeted to the ground.

“At least we still have hope,” said Ms Simmons, before sniggering to herself.

“Really?” said Zhang.

“Indeed! Because the creature removed one of the Ps from the word hopping in the sign, making the—”

“We got it,” said Vihaan. “Just... never do funny again.”

“Well, maybe it’s a sign. Hope.”

There was a flash of black as the creatures flew over the van, temporarily casting shadows on the windows, before they found another vantage point ahead of the gang. They settled on to comfortable perches and recommenced their socially uncomfortable staring habit.

“I really don’t like those guys,” said Vihaan.

“Me either,” added Beath.

“Bad,” said Abby via her Choices app.

Ms Simmons sensed the tension in the van. She figured talking would distract their focus while they passed close by the monsters again. “I really think that was a sign to us back there. Hoping – hope – it’s a powerful weapon. Hope can help beat disease, you know. Hope can will the body to do things it never imagined. The power of hope can help make stronger magic. The more I think about it, the more I realise the sign is actually a sign for us, someone is telling us that everything is going to be OK. A sign—”

There was another crash behind them as the letter o joined the letter p in a fall to the street below. Again they studied the sign – lack O hoping Cent. There was a long pause.

“Oh dear,” said Ms Simmons, before returning to the silent gaze of the flying things.

After another extended silence Vihaan spoke. “There appears to be a real lack O conversation in here.”

Ms Simmons let out a dramatic wail.

Beath again found herself locking eyes with the flyer – the one with the claw marks on its cheek. “How far to the loading bay ramp?”

“It’s just up here,” said Zhang, pointing.

“Good. The sooner we’re out of here the better.”

The van inched under the flyers’ perch, and turned left down the ramp. The crew soon found themselves out of view of the creatures for the first time since they’d seen them. There was a collective sigh of relief within the cabin as the six seemed capable of their first deep breath since the incident began.

“That was a little close for comfort,” said Ms Simmons.

Zhang guided the van down the ramp. She steered it around an abandoned car then noticed the bodies on the ground.

\*

### **The thing about bodies**

In the world of zombie riZing, where the undead outnumber the living in the vicinity of thousands to one, it’s a surprising quirk to know bodies are a rare sight indeed.

Something to be noticed.

You see, a body is a sign that a soul has passed from this life to the other side – a perfectly natural and everyday occurrence, just not in the riZing. You see, the riZing breaks a system that had been successful for eons. It removes the souls from this world but does not send them to the next. Bodies roam aimlessly, driven by the base urges of their zombified minds. As for their souls, well, they are lost, neither here nor there, victims of the bureaucratic red tape of the undead and magic.

I’m sure we’ve got a lot more to learn about souls, their place in the riZing and the afterlife later but, for right now, it’s only important to know one thing – bodies aren’t normal.

Why? Because zombies don’t kill zombies. A body means someone – a live someone – has returned the body of a person to the husk of a soul it once was and sent the soul to where it now belongs.

If you see a body, it means a lot of things. Most importantly, it means actual live humans have been in that location. Not long ago.

Whether they are good or bad people is another story.

\*

“Umm, we’ve got a problem,” said Zhang, as she brought the van to a halt.

Beath looked up from the bodies on the ramp to what lay ahead – a roller door, down and completely blocking the path forward.

“Awesome,” said Sonny.

“I totally forgot,” said Zhang. “You need one of those swipe cards to get in.”

“Bad,” said Abby via her app as she looked out the back window. The two flyers had landed at the top of the ramp and started heading towards them.

“She’s spot on,” said Vihaan, looking at the scene at the bottom of the ramp. “I say we cut our losses and head to the car park.”

“Bad,” repeated Abby. Then again as the daves inched closer.

Ms Simmons, too, cast her eye over the scene near the door. “I must say, I agree with young Abby and Vihaan, let’s not take any unnecessary risks here.”

“Bad. Bad. Bad.”

Beath was the first to turn towards Abby – knowing something was wrong. It was only then she realised her bestie wasn’t talking about the door or the bodies. She had cottoned on to the far more pressing problem. “Oh no!”

As if on queue, Scarface Dave belted out an ear-crushing and raspy roar and started down the ramp, followed by his sidekick.

“We’re trapped!” said Ms Simmons.

“You know, it’s really not necessary to say that,” said Vihaan. “I think everyone here appreciates the gravity of the situation without you—”

“Shut up and help,” said Beath, as she opened her door and jumped from the car.

“I’m too weak for magic,” said Vihaan.

A second later Beath appeared at the side door of the van, rolling it open. “You strong enough to lift an access pass?”

“I guess—”

“Then help.”

Vihaan looked up at the flyers. They were still 40-50m away and looked a lot less graceful moving on their claws than they did through the air. Then he looked at Beath rifling through the pockets of one of the bodies on the ramp. “Brilliant!”



\*

[You can read on here!!](#)

## Zombie RiZing so far

### **The Beginning**

1. Scared to Beath
2. A Fate Worse Than Beath
3. Life and Beath

### **Dreeks' Horde**

4. Creeping Beath
5. Beath Becomes Her
6. Beath Defying

### **Dragon's Wrath**

7. Kiss of Beath
8. Beath Trap
9. Beath Metal

### **Death's Door**

10. Dice with Beath
11. Jaws of Beath
12. Beath Wish

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Visit: [ZombieRiZing.com](http://ZombieRiZing.com)

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