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Opening extract from
ZOM-B Gladiator

Written by
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THEN . . .

Zombies ripped Becky Smith's heart from her chest and turned her into an undead, brain-munching beast. But several months later she recovered her senses and became a revitalised, a rare member of the undead who could think and control her cannibalistic urges.

Death was far harder for B than life had ever been. First she was held prisoner in an underground complex with a pack of teenaged revitaliseds. With the exception of B and one other, Rage, they were all fried by soldiers with flame-throwers when a killer clown invaded the complex and started a riot.

B broke free of the underground lair and found a London she barely recognised. Zombies had taken over. The few humans she crossed paths with all seemed as vicious as their undead foes—a hunter called Barnes and his posse slaughtered zombies for fun, a rifle-packing group on HMS *Belfast* opened fire on anything that came within range, while the deranged clown and his mutant army spread terror and carnage wherever they set foot.

She finally found refuge in County Hall, a massive building behind the London Eye. A century-old zombie, Dr Oystein, had set up base there and was offering sanctuary to any revitalised who asked it of him. He had also recruited a few humans, such as Billy Burke, B's former teacher, and Reilly, a soldier and one of her captors in the underground complex.

Dr Oystein believed he was on a mission from God. He said that the clown B had encountered, the chilling and crazy Mr Dowling, worked for the Devil. If Dr Oystein and his zombie Angels didn't defeat Mr Dowling and his mutants, the last remaining

survivors in the world would fall and Satan would claim their souls.

B thought the doctor was insane. Although she feared being alone, and was worried about what would happen next, she turned her back on County Hall and left to find somewhere else in the city to call home.

She ended up in the studio of Timothy Jackson, an artist who spent his days painting what he saw on the streets of zombie-infected London. Timothy took her to meet a strange baby which he had found. It was sexless and monstrous. A spike was sticking out of its head and it hadn't eaten in weeks, yet it was still somehow alive.

When B removed the spike, the baby screamed for help and dozens of zombies responded to its call. They flocked to the studio, broke in, killed Timothy and made off with the baby, but not before it had asked B to accompany them. It called her its mummy and said she was one of them.

B refused to go with the inhuman baby and its undead coterie. But her world was changed, as was

her opinion of Dr Oystein and his claim to be in contact with God. Because B had dreamt of babies like this one when she was alive. In her dreams they had looked exactly like this child, behaved the same way, said the same things. And, despite her scepticism, B had to conclude that a higher power must have sent her the dreams as a warning, to prepare her for this day and provide her with the evidence she'd need in order to accept Dr Oystein's far-fetched claims.

B returned to County Hall, pledged herself to Dr Oystein then hopped into one of his body-reviving Groove Tubes to restore her sharpness and strength, so that she would be fresh and ready for the war with Mr Dowling which was to come.

NOW . . .

ONE

There's a tunnel beneath Waterloo Station that used to be a haven for graffiti artists. Anyone was allowed to paint whatever they wanted on the walls, floor or ceiling.

The zombies put a stop to the artists with their stencils and spray paint, but the art remains, bright, bold and colourful. It covers every inch of the tunnel. If humans ever eliminate the undead and take control of the world again, I bet a lot of people will come to this place to admire the paintings.

But I'm not here today for the graffiti.

I'm here for the zombies.

We usually keep this tunnel clear of the living dead. It's easily done. Zombies have sensitive ears. High-pitched noises cut through our skulls and make our teeth shake. When Dr Oystein moved into County Hall, he placed speakers in hidden places around the area and played a loop of sharp noises through them, guaranteed to send any zombie within range running for cover. It keeps the drooling, brain-hungry riff-raff from our door.

But we haven't been playing the loop in the tunnel for the last few nights. We wanted company and figured the dark, quiet space would draw a crowd once we cut the power to the speakers.

We figured right. There are twenty-five or thirty zombies in residence, a mix of men, women and kids, some in suits or nice dresses, others in more casual wear, a few naked or as good as. Blank expressions, long, sharp teeth, bones sticking out of their fingers and toes, wisps of green moss wherever they were bitten or cut when they were alive.

I study the zombies with a touch of nerves, but no

disgust, revulsion or pity. They're my own kind. Except for the fact that my brain works, I'm no different to them.

I'm part of a group of six. The others are the same as me, revitalised Angels, soldiers in Dr Oystein's undead army. Carl Clay stands to my left, looking impeccable in his top-of-the-range, designer gear. Ashtat Kiarostami is to my right, dressed in a blue, loose-fitting suit, with a white headscarf. The bulky Rage is on the other side of Carl, wearing the leathers that he's favoured since his time as a zom head. Shane Fitz and Jakob Pegg are next to Ashtat, Shane looking as yobbish as ever in a tracksuit and with a gold chain dangling from his neck, Jakob pale and sickly in a pair of jeans and a shirt that sags on his bony frame.

We're all unarmed.

'Do you think there are enough of them?' Carl asks, frowning as he counts the zombies.

'Five to one,' Shane sniffs. 'Those are long enough odds for me. How many more do you want to face?'

'There aren't many men among them,' Carl notes.

‘Are you suggesting that women are inferior?’ Ashtat asks coldly.

Carl winces. ‘No. But generally speaking they’re not as strong as men. It’s the way of the world. You can’t argue with that.’

‘In life, no,’ Ashtat says. ‘But death levels the playing field. I have noticed no real difference between the sexes in our battles so far. Muscles are not the factor they once were, not in revivals. Or revitalised,’ she adds pointedly.

Carl makes a sighing sound, which isn’t easy when you don’t have functioning lungs. ‘All right. I don’t want an argument. Are we all happy to press ahead? We don’t want to wait another day in case more of them come to seek shelter here?’ He looks around and everyone shrugs or nods. ‘Fair enough. We’ll crack on. How about you, Reilly? Are you ready?’

The soldier is standing behind us. He’s not a happy bunny.

‘I can’t believe I let Zhang talk me into this,’ he mutters. He’s sweating. That’s something no revitalised could ever mimic. The walking dead don’t sweat.

‘Don’t be a baby,’ Rage grins. ‘We’ve all got to be prepared to make sacrifices for the cause.’

‘Yeah?’ Reilly snarls. ‘What have *you* sacrificed lately?’

‘My sense of compassion,’ Rage snaps. ‘Now quit moaning or we’ll leave you here by yourself. Are you ready or not?’

‘I suppose,’ Reilly mutters miserably. He’s really not enjoying this. I don’t blame him. It can’t be easy, placing your life in the hands of a surly shower of teenage zombies.

Ashtat and I nudge apart and Reilly steps through the gap. He’s covered himself from the neck down in thick leathers and he’s wearing a helmet with a tough glass visor. The gear won’t protect him for long if a zombie gets hold of him and rips in, but it should guard him against casual swipes, spit and flying blood.

Reilly moves a couple of metres ahead of us, gulps, then calls out loudly, ‘I don’t suppose any of you creeps have seen Banksy?’

The zombies didn’t pay much attention to us when

we filed in. They could tell from our moss-covered wounds and the bones jutting out of our fingertips that we were in the same boat as them.

Reilly is a whole different kettle of fish. When he shouts, they jerk to attention and lock their sights on him. They note his covered form, his shaky grin behind the visor. They clock his heartbeat. They smell his blood, fresh and pure, his sweat, the scent of the food he ate that morning on his lips and tongue, his juicy brain.

The zombies howl with glee and hunger, a penetrating, fearsome sound. Then they move as one and surge towards us, fingers flexing, teeth gnashing, primed, deadly assassins whose only purpose in this world is to attack and tear asunder.

It's killing time!