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Opening extract from

Zom-B City

Written by

Darren Shan

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For:

Mrs Shan!!!

OBE (Order of the Bloody Entrails) to:
Elisa Offord – queen of the mutant babies

Edited in a swanky city apartment by:
Venetia Gosling
Kate Sullivan

Darren Shan is represented by
the urban ladies and gentlemen
of the Christopher Little Agency

In all honesty, it’s not much of a city to be queen of. I used to think that London was one of the most exciting places in the world, always buzzing, always something going on. Now it’s like walking through the world’s biggest graveyard, and an ugly, messy one at that.

The battle between the living and the dead must have been apocalyptic. There are signs of chaos everywhere, broken windows, crashed cars, corpses left to rot outdoors. Many houses and shops are burnt out and fires still smoulder in some of them. In other places pipes have burst and streets are flooded.

There are bloodstains everywhere and lots of dried pools of vomit. The reviveds might not be as mentally clued-up as I am, but it looks like they figured out the vomiting part easily enough. I guess even the mostly senseless dead get a shiver at the notion of playing host to a brood of worms, maggots and the like.

The stench isn’t as bad as I thought it would be, but it’s fairly gross all the same, especially since my nose is more sensitive than it once was.

Birds, rats and insects are feasting on the vomit, blood and rotting flesh. They’re enjoying the run of the city now that the zombies have withdrawn for the day. The more alert creatures scatter as soon as they spot me, the birds taking to the air, the rats vanishing down the nearest hole. Only the insects ignore me and go about their business uninterrupted.

The electricity supply varies from street to street. In some it’s been cut off and every house is dead. In others it’s as strong as ever, lights are on, static crackles from radios, TV sets flicker in shop windows. I consider checking the channels, to find out if anyone is alive and broadcasting, but I

can do that later. I want to continue exploring on foot first, not waste the tranquillity of the daylight. I can channel-surf tonight when the zombies come out in force and I hole up.

I come to a butcher's shop, pause and stick my head inside. Slabs of dried-out meat lie rotting everywhere. A few scavenging flies crawl across the withered cuts, searching for bits that are still edible, but I think they'll struggle.

A pig's carcass hangs upside down from a hook. Its head has been clawed open. I stare at it thoughtfully. I'm guessing that a zombie ripped out the brain, which maybe means we can thrive on animal brains too. I thought only human brains would keep us going, but it's good news if we can absorb nutrients from animals as well — I'd much rather scoop clean the inside of a pig's head than a human's.

This might be why I haven't seen any larger creatures. With humanity out of the way, wild dogs and cats should have the run of the streets. But so far I've seen nothing but rats, birds and smaller specimens. Maybe the zombies killed and ate the brains of larger animals, and all of London's pets have either been butchered or scared off.

I'll have to swing by London Zoo at some point. It's probably been cleaned out already – or the animals will most likely have died of starvation – but maybe I'll be able to gain access to areas off-limits to normal zombies. The good thing about having a working brain is that you can read maps and search for keys to unlock doors, simple tasks which are beyond most of the undead.

As I turn away from the pig, I notice a small red z painted on the

frame of the door, a tiny arrow just beneath it. I frown, trying to remember where I've seen something like that before. Then I recall Mr Dowling daubing my cheek with a mark just like this one.

I glance around nervously. Have the clown and his mutants been here? Might they be watching me now? Mr Dowling freaked me out big time, especially when he opened his lips and dropped a stream of living spiders over me. I don't want to hang around and risk another run-in with him.

Hurrying from the shop, I come to a set of traffic lights. The electricity is working here and the lights are operating as normal. The red man is illuminated and I automatically stop, waiting for the light to change to green.

After a few seconds, I squint at the light, look left, then right. Nothing moves.

'Of course not,' I grimace. 'There's no traffic because everyone's dead. You're a bloody moron, B.'

I chuckle at my stupidity. Stopping for a traffic light in a city of the dead! I'm glad none of my friends lived to see that. Ignoring the red light, I step out into the road. I'm not far from my old neighbourhood. Another hour, maybe a bit more, and I'll be back on –

An engine roars into life. My head snaps round and I spot a car tearing towards me. It had been parked nearby. I'd seen people moving around inside, but figured they were zombies sheltering from the sun.

I figured wrong.

Before I can withdraw to the safety of the pavement, the driver turns on his headlights and I'm momentarily blinded, even wearing the sunglasses.

Wincing, I turn my head away and shake it wildly, disoriented and in pain.

Then the car smashes into me and knocks me flying through the air, far down the middle of the road, which up until a few seconds ago seemed just as dead and unthreatening as any other in this ghost city of the damned.

I hit the ground hard and slide for a few metres before coming to a stunned stop. Shaking my head, I woozily get to my feet. No bones seem to be broken, but my elbows have been badly grazed and the back of my head is throbbing. I run a hand over my scalp. Lots of torn flesh but it doesn't feel too serious. The jacket and clothes I picked up earlier are ripped to shreds, but all things considered it could have been a lot worse.

Then the doors of the car open and as four men step out, I realise it's far too soon to be judging this a lucky escape.

The men are dressed in combats and black boots. Each totes a rifle and I spot smaller guns and hunting knives strapped to their legs and chests. They're smiling and laughing, not looking in the least afraid.

'She's up,' one of the men says. 'You must be losing your touch, Coley.'

'I'm not losing anything,' the man called Coley snaps. 'I was only doing about thirty when I hit her. Didn't want to finish her off too soon. Essex, you want first shot?'

'Don't mind if I do,' the man on my far left says and raises his rifle.

I dive for cover behind a nearby car as he fires. He curses and fires again, but only hits one of the wheels.

'You missed,' Coley hoots.

'No fair!' Essex shouts. 'They're not supposed to hide.'

‘Not all of them stand still,’ one of the other men says, and this guy speaks in a thick American accent. ‘The survival instinct is still alive in some. Looks like we might have a real hunt on our hands, gentlemen.’

‘You want to deal with her, Barnes?’ Coley asks.

‘No,’ the American says. ‘Let’s give Tag a shot first. This is what we brought them along for.’

‘What do I do?’ the fourth man asks. He sounds nervous.

‘Edge over to your right,’ Barnes says, and I hear him creeping around to my left. ‘I’ll flush her out. As soon as she –’

I don’t wait for him to give more orders. Keeping low, I race back towards the butcher’s shop, catching the men by surprise. A couple yell with alarm and fire wildly. Bullets scream past but I keep going.

I’m close to the shop when one of the men hits the window with a bullet and it shatters. As glass sprays everywhere, I fling myself through the hole and roll across the counter before dropping to the floor and taking cover.

‘Hellfire!’ Essex shouts. ‘Did you see that?’

‘Careful, boys,’ Barnes drawls. ‘We’ve got a live one here.’ He chuckles. ‘Relatively speaking.’

‘How do you want to play this?’ Coley asks. He sounds excited.

‘That depends on these two,’ the American says. ‘Do you want to go in after her and risk the thrill of a close encounter, or would you rather we smoked her out?’

As they discuss tactics, I raise my head, get a fix on them, then scout around and pick up a hefty butcher’s knife. This is why I came back here

rather than fleeing down the road. I was a target out there, the tools I picked up earlier no use against a group of guys with guns. I hate being trapped like this, but at least I have a decent weapon now.

Shuffling backwards, I search for another way out. There's a door at the rear of the shop, but it's locked and I can't find the key. I hurl myself at the door, hoping to smash through, but it's made of metal and it holds. I only bounce off it, bruising my arm in the process.

'What's she doing?' I hear Tag cry.

'Maybe she's lost her head and is thrashing around,' Barnes says calmly. 'Or she might be trying to find another way out. Coley, swing round the back and make sure she doesn't sneak away.'

'She wouldn't be smart enough to think of that,' Coley says.

'You'd be surprised,' Barnes grunts. 'Some are almost as cunning as they were in life.'

As Coley circles round, the American addresses the other pair. 'This is unusual but not unheard of. Some of these beasts are smarter than others. They recall routines and procedures in some dim corner of their foul, undead brain and act like they did when they were alive.'

'How dangerous are they?' Tag asks.

'All zombies are dangerous,' Barnes huffs.

'But if this one's more of a threat than most, shouldn't we back off and leave her be?'

'We're hunters,' Barnes says stiffly. 'We don't withdraw once we've engaged our prey. We have to see this through to the end. If you prefer, you can return to the car and wait for us there, but my advice is to stick

together. Never forget that this is a city of the undead. There's safety in numbers. I can't protect you if you cut yourself off from the rest of us.'

'I didn't know it was going to be like this,' Tag grumbles.

'Quit whining,' Essex snarls. 'They told us it could turn nasty. We knew the risks coming in. This is all part of the fun, right, Barnes?'

'Sure,' Barnes says drily. '*Fun*. That's what we promised you guys and we won't let you down. Coley, you in place yet?'

'Got it covered,' Coley shouts.

'Then if you boys will give me a minute…'

There's a long pause. I peer over the counter, trying to see what they're up to, but Tag and Essex start firing as soon as they spot my head. Ducking again, I curse and grab another knife, determined not to go down without a fight and maybe take one or two of these bastards with me.

'Come on,' I whisper, gripping the knife tightly. 'Meet me on my own turf. Let's see how useful your rifles are up close.'

But the American is obviously thinking the same way I am, because even as I'm willing them to advance, he yells a warning to the others, 'Clear!'

A couple of seconds later a bottle comes flying through the window. There's a burning rag sticking out of the top of it. I don't know much about weapons, but I know a Molotov cocktail when I see one.

The bottle smashes into the wall and flames billow from it, scorching the shop, roasting the flies, blackening the scraps of meat. I don't wait to be engulfed by the fire. I started moving the instant I caught sight of the bottle flying over my head. As the glass explodes and flames roar around me, I

launch myself over the counter and shoot through the window like a human bullet propelled from the heated chamber of the store.

Crashing back to earth, pain flares in my feet and I realise my socks are on fire. Yelping, I toss the knife aside and slap out the flames, then tear off the smouldering socks. I’m so concerned about my feet that I blank out everything else. It’s only when I hear a soft clicking noise that I pause, look up and realise that the barrels of three rifles are pointed directly at my head…