

ZOMBIE SEASON

DEAD IN THE WATER

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FOR CHELSEA SHEA ENNEN, TO WHOM I SAY OBAH

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1

STUXVILLE

Eleven-year-old Oliver Wachs and his nine-year-old sister, Kirby, stare at the all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet.

“I,” says Kirby, “could get used to this.”

“Dive in, kids,” says Oliver’s mom, handing them each a tray.

Oliver’s dad ties an apron on over his clothes. “Go ahead and eat, you two. Mom and I are going to help serve food awhile.”

After several weeks of eating emergency rations out of their go bags or sharing modest meals in zomb shelters, it’s a treat for the Wachs family to see food like this.

Waffles so fresh you could find them by smell alone. Eggs in any possible form, including cheesy breakfast burritos wrapped up with crispy potatoes. Tangy orange juice you can squeeze yourself. Impossibly creamy yogurt, like ice cream but without the danger of a brain freeze. Unlimited hot chocolate in pre-warmed mugs . . .

“Is this what it feels like, being a zombie?” Oliver asks, staring hungrily at the smorgasbord.

“Maybe,” says Kirby. “I always imagined it’d be like living in one of those online videos where everything is cake.”

The idea of becoming a zombie makes Oliver shiver, like there’s icing in his veins. He picks up a warm mug and fills it with hot chocolate, and for a moment he achieves perfect oneness with the universe. All his thoughts grow calm. He feels like he’s floating inside the mug, hugged by giant hands. It’s a nice change after everything he went through a few weeks ago: Getting caught in a huge Rogue Wave of zombies that decimated his hometown of Redwood. Encountering a new kind of foe that lurks in the water, immune to superchillers. Teaming up with his friend Regina to survive a surge of giant zombies and broadcast a message that warned the whole town . . .

This zombie season has been unlike anything Oliver has ever experienced, and it hasn’t even peaked yet.

After piling their trays high with food, Oliver and Kirby search for a place to sit among all the other people in the large cafeteria-like space capable of feeding hundreds of hungry ZDPs. “ZDP” is an abbreviation for Zombie-Displaced Person, of course—folks like the Wachs family, and everyone else from Redwood, and everyone from towns *like* Redwood that’ve been evacuated. They’re all taking shelter here in this building that’s normally used as a college dorm, with communal bathrooms and little, tiny apartments with no kitchens or privacy anywhere.

After a string of overcrowded motels, Oliver is relieved to be in a place

like this. And that relief multiplies as Oliver looks down a long row of tables and sees faces he recognizes.

People from Redwood, he realizes. Teachers from his school. Families from their neighborhood. Even this lady from the hardware store who always used to yell at him for touching the plants in the garden section when he was little.

At the sight of the familiar faces, Oliver feels a wave of homesickness.

Oliver is extremely eager to return to normal life. To be a regular kid again. To worry about balancing equations in math instead of multiplying zombies in the shadows. To ride his bike around town without always knowing his closest evacuation route. To eat one more slice of pizza at Cosmo's—even to have one more day at *school* . . .

Oliver feels a familiar wave of grief, and fights it off by thinking about the day when Redwood has finally been rebuilt exactly how it was—except this time totally zombieproof.

Lost in the daydream, his eyes wander and land on the woman from the hardware store.

“Our hero returns!” she says to Oliver as their eyes meet.

“Huh?” he says.

“Remarkable work, Ollie,” says the man next to her. “Way to save the day.”

Oliver awkwardly waves. He turns to Kirby. “Do we know him?”

“No idea,” Kirby whispers. “Everyone’s heard what you did, I guess.”

“Come on. I didn’t do *that* much.”

“Getting that message out? Battling zombies, saving lives?”

“I was just doing what anyone would,” Oliver insists, fighting to keep the embarrassment off his face.

He searches for a seat someplace out of the spotlight, and tries to ignore the eyes following him. The whispers making his ears prick up self-consciously. Oliver isn't *really* a hero. He's just as lucky to be alive as any other ZDP in Stuxville.

“Great stuff, Ollie! Can't wait to see what you pull off next!” says his old gym teacher, Mr. Stroman. It makes Oliver cringe to think about what's “next.” They're not expecting him to, like, save the entire world, are they? Because Oliver doesn't have the first clue how to do that. He just wants to get back home again. To be a kid again, to draw his maps for fun and bother his aunt Carrie at work.

Amidst Oliver's distraction, he hears his name:

“Ollie Wachs!”

Oliver recognizes the voice instantly. The weight on his shoulders lifts as he turns to see his best friend, Del Shorter, standing up at a table.

Before Oliver can decide whether to hug his friend in excitement or just act cool, Kirby ditches her tray in Oliver's arms and rushes toward Del, going in for a hug.

The last day Oliver saw Del in person, Del was curled up in a ball on the floor of the Wachs family minivan. He'd gotten separated from his parents and was terrified that they'd been lost in the Rogue Wave.

Yet here he is smiling and laughing and eating with a bunch of kids

Oliver doesn't recognize. Is he okay now? Are his parents? Del's texts have all been really short, in both length and in details, so Oliver really doesn't know what's going on with his best friend.

Before Oliver has time to ask any questions, Del starts making rapid-fire introductions to everyone at the table. "This is the guy I told you about! He saved everyone in our neighborhood during the Rogue Wave. Everyone in the *city*, almost."

"It's no big deal," says Oliver, silently pleading with Del to stop.

"*You're* the guy Del keeps talking about, who made the maps?" says a slightly older kid with the build of a football player, who Del introduced as Milo. He shakes Oliver's hand and nearly crushes it with his strength. "Nice going, Wachs."

"Uh. Thanks, Milo."

"Did you really race the whole way to the zombie brigade headquarters without shoes on?" asks a younger kid, eyes wide with wonder. Oliver doesn't even know how to answer that. Of course he was wearing shoes; how do people get these ideas?

"*I* think you just got really lucky," says a weedy boy, Conrad.

Oliver feels himself shrink away from Conrad, as this accusation echoes Oliver's own silent fear: Oliver *did* get really lucky.

"You weren't there, Conrad," Kirby pipes up, bristling.

She defends her brother, telling everyone all about Oliver's bravery and resourcefulness as he made the dangerous trek through mudslides and the ruins of the town. How he snuck past a zombie giant in order to alert

everyone before it was too late. But even as Oliver listens to her, he has this sinking feeling:

What if Conrad's right?

Deep down, Oliver is pretty sure that he's not the person they expect him to be. He's just like everyone else, nothing special. But now apparently people expect him to repeat his heroics. To do it again.

Oliver eats his breakfast quietly, deflecting attempts to make him talk about what happened in Redwood. And as the conversation moves on, Oliver silently thinks about Regina Herrera . . .

Regina, who is the *real* hero of Redwood. Who recruited Oliver to help her save the city. Who figured out how to get past the zombies between them and their goal. Who actually saved Oliver's life by risking her own to come back for him when he fell behind.

If not for her, Oliver wouldn't even be alive right now.

Ever since they parted ways, she's been texting him about "something new" she's working on, "something big." More than once, she's asked him if he wants to help her. But Oliver keeps coming up with excuses.

She's not taking Oliver's no for an answer, though. She keeps asking "Why not?" . . . just keeps pushing and pushing. He's running out of ways to say no that aren't the truth, which is: "I'm afraid of letting you down."

He's ashamed of this. To be afraid, despite all the cheers he just received? Seriously? It makes Oliver feel like a jerk. Doubly so since it's Regina—who saved his life—who needs *him*.

And so, before he gets distracted again, Oliver summons the nerve to

take out his phone and text Regina. Despite his fears and doubts, he has to *try*.

Hey, he writes. Do you still need any help?

The moment he hits send, he jumps at the sound of two screeching girls rushing toward him and the other ZDP kids.

“Ollie!” Chanda Cortez plunks down her tray, squeezing in on the bench, which is way too crowded already.

“Kirby!” says Chanda’s best friend Darlene Reiner, joining the group as well.

“Del!” they both say simultaneously.

As Del introduces Chanda and Darlene to the whole group of his new friends, Kirby nudges Oliver.

“It’s a Redwood reunion!” says Kirby.

“Maybe we’re finally getting back to normal,” Oliver suggests, hopeful as he can be.

“This is just the beginning,” Kirby reminds him. “One foot in front of the other, right?”

“What?” he asks her. The words are familiar, but it doesn’t sound like something Kirby would say.

“That’s what your notebook said on the cover, isn’t it?”

His beloved green notebook, filled with detailed maps and notes he made of all the secret things he discovered exploring his hometown.

“It totally did,” Oliver says, surprised that he could’ve forgotten the words on the notebook he looked at every day. The notebook that helped

Oliver and his family escape a zombie wave . . . but the notebook itself didn't fare as well. It's now blotchy with faded ink and caked with mud, and every time he opens it another page crumbles to dust. It's in a Ziploc bag in his suitcase. He can't bear to touch it for fear of it falling apart completely.

But his sister's right.

He reaches into his back pocket, taking out a new green notebook. It's blank and empty, because he hasn't been in one place long enough to start exploring and recording his findings in it.

But this moment feels right to start again. Here, at breakfast, surrounded by friends from Redwood, he feels a little more alive, finally. He uncaps a marker and inks on the cover *One Foot in Front of the Other*.

"That's more like it," says Oliver.

"It's a fresh start," says Kirby with a grin. But just as he starts to feel like maybe things are truly going in the right direction, Del has a surprise for Oliver.

"Ready, Ollie?" says Del.

"For what?"

Suddenly, Del's new friends all rise in a group.

Del stands, too, with a gleam in his eye. "Manhunt!"

"Manhunt?" says Oliver.

"Yeah," says Del. "You remember . . . that game we've played our whole lives, to train for escaping the zombies? One kid's a 'human' and the rest of us are 'zombies' chasing them?"

Del grins at his joke. They both know that Oliver isn't confused about

what the game is. What Oliver finds surprising is that they're playing it at the height of actual zombie season.

"Come on, we can't be late—these guys take it very seriously. Like you always wanted Coach to do, remember?" Del says as Milo and Conrad and Del's other new friends take their unfinished food and dump it in the trash. Oliver frowns at this, and stays planted in front of his meal.

"Come on, Del!" Milo calls. "Zombies don't take breaks and neither do we!"

"Aye aye, Captain," says Del. "You coming, Ollie?"

He and the others head toward the doors leading to the perfectly mowed grass in the center of the Stuxville University campus.

"Can't we just hang out? I haven't seen you in weeks."

"Ollie, we can hang out whenever," says Del. "This is important."

Oliver hesitates, stung by Del's clear desire to be with his new friends.

"You *really* want to play Manhunt?" Oliver asks. "You were never that interested back home."

"That's the whole problem, Ollie," says Del. "You of all people remember how much of a loser I was in Redwood. How I was too scared to stand up for my friends. My family. That can't happen next time. I gotta practice as much as I can."

"You're not a loser, Del," says Oliver.

Del looks upset for a moment, but then he nods. "That's right," he says. "Not anymore."

"You're a good guy, Del. When we get you back to Redwood—"

"*If* we get back to Redwood, you mean."

Oliver feels the ground under his feet shift. Or it's his legs that get a little wobbly, maybe. "What do you mean, *if* we get home?"

Del blinks. "Ollie. Come on. You don't seriously think we'll just go back to the way things were, do you? Our houses are gone. Half of Redwood is wreckage. Plus, there are zombies in the water now? And that's not mentioning any of the other towns that need help even more than Redwood. Like where the other guys are from."

Oliver looks at Del, seeing how serious he is. How certain. "And also? I don't really *want* things to go back to the way they were, Ollie."

With that, Del heads outside, leaving it up to Oliver whether to join him or not.

Oliver's phone buzzes. It's a photo from Regina—a picture from a hilltop overlooking Redwood. It's littered with wrecked buildings and washed-out roads. There are still husks of extinguished zombies on the ground.

Greetings from Redwood, another text follows. *Wish you were here.*

Before he can respond, a third text appears.

I need your help more than ever.

His phone rings.

It's Regina.