

# **H1NZ**

## **3 chapter sample**

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## Doug

Gold is not a naturally occurring element on Earth, Doug Goldman knew. It did not link to any other known element on the planet and was impossible for humankind to create. Men had attempted in the past. Leonardo da Vinci had tried to turn lead into gold, as had many other alchemists. They had all failed. Gold could only be searched for and dug up from where it had been embedded in rock, many millions of years ago, while the Earth was forming. No one knew where it came from, but some believed it was jettisoned from stars as they went supernova. The precious, non-tarnishing metal would be carried many hundreds, if not thousands, of light years across the galaxy, finally crashing down onto Earth and becoming one with the planet.

Well, at least that was what Doug had read. He looked up from his laptop to see if any other hunters had arrived. None. He was alone, as far as he could tell. He turned back to the laptop, bringing up again the report of the impending meteor shower. This one was set to fall in northern Scotland, a rare event, apparently. Most meteorites seemed to land in the Americas, Antarctica or wherever landmasses were greatest. And how many, he wondered, would have simply crashed into the ocean, sinking down to the bottom, carrying their precious cargo with them?

How many tons of gold were resting in the depths, still waiting to be discovered? At some point in the future, a deep sea explorer might find the lot and retire very rich indeed. That man wouldn't be Doug, an old car being all that he could afford right now. He had driven all the way up from Coventry in a clapped-out banger for this. He held on tight to the thought of his fortune changing, as he waited for the show to begin.

The showers were a beautiful thing to witness. He had seen it happen many times before, sometimes with the naked eye, sometimes aided by a telescope, and at other times just on the TV, or on the internet. The meteors would streak across the sky like lightning, gone in the blink of an eye.

Tonight, however, Doug couldn't care less about the show. He was more interested in what the visitors from space might be bringing with them. If gold really had arrived on Earth millions of years ago on the back of asteroids and meteorites, then why not still today? A single nugget could be worth thousands, maybe even millions if it was sizeable enough. All he had to do was hunt the rocks where they fell and investigate them.

He looked again to the laptop he held as the daylight continued to fade, before shutting the lid. The screen wasn't easy on the eyes, and after a few hours of staring at it he could feel his vision starting to go a little funny. He knew he needed to rest his eyes, but also that if he did so he risked falling asleep and waking up after the meteor shower was over. He unscrewed the cap of his flask, filling it with piping hot coffee, and flexed open the financial paper he had brought with him.

He looked up the price of gold. It was doing well again, recovering from the sudden fall a few months ago. He tried not to picture himself hauling up one of the rocks, finding it studded with gold nuggets, and using his find to buy himself a nice big house, fast car and have dozens of women banging at his door, hoping to marry into his fortune. *Don't count your chickens*, he told himself. *Don't spend it before you've earned it*. He lowered the paper and continued to wait patiently for the appointed hour to arrive, consuming the coffee at steady intervals to keep himself awake.

He was rewarded a couple of hours later by the first streak across the star-speckled night sky. It was a fast-moving thing, easy to miss if you were to

blink, but a sign of the start of the shower. Very soon the sky was filled with the streaks, racing down towards the ground. As beautiful as ever they were. Doug, however, was quickly feeling despondent. He had thought it would be easy to discover where the rocks had fallen, their point of impact detectable by a bright flash and a puff of earth in the fields beyond. But now here, he realised that it could be anywhere within a ten mile radius. Maybe even further. His millionaire's shopping list began to evaporate as the reality of his task hit home. He would never find the rocks, or any gold that they might have been carrying. No doubt someone would stumble upon them in a few decades and blow the lot in a casino. Bastards. He could make better use of it.

He started his car nonetheless, keeping the lights off so that he could more easily track the path of the meteors as they fell to the ground, and started across the field. Maybe he would get lucky and stumble across one in the woodland up ahead.

There then came a *whoosh!* and a loud *thump!* - a puff of dirt and soil leaping up on his right-hand side. The seatbelt caught him as he braked hard and turned the car towards the eruption, bringing his headlights up. A chuckle escaped him. There, embedded halfway into the ground, was a chunk of rock. It could only be a meteorite. Where else would something like that have come from? Flushed from the toilet of a passing plane?

Doug immediately leapt from the car, snatching up his equipment from the passenger seat as he went. His heart was thumping hard in anticipation. Gold. Gold. Gold. He tried to tell himself that it likely *didn't* contain any, the odds of it doing so being astronomical. But then again so were the odds of matching the five main numbers and the lucky stars in the Euromillions. And someone almost always did, eventually.

He saw as he approached that the rock was smaller than he had at first

expected, no larger than a football. It was about the same shape, too. He thought it would be more knobby and irregular than that - more like a potato. He tugged on a thick pair of industrial-strength rubber gloves as he bent down, not to protect his hands from the heat, but the cold. It was a misconception that the outer space rock would be red-hot to the touch following its fall to Earth. The surface might be slightly warm, but it was more likely to be freezing cold following the hundreds of thousands of years it had spent tumbling through space, far out of reach of the warmth of a star.

He shone a torch on it. Its appearance wasn't anything out of the ordinary - it looked like a rock. Holding the torch in his mouth, he gingerly picked it up. It was heavy. Very heavy. That was a good sign, he thought. He turned it over, nothing on the surface catching his eye. Even so, something told him that this visitor was carrying something very special. Any goodies would be within, beneath its hard outer skin.

He set the rock back down, extracting a small hammer and chisel from his tool bag, and, after selecting a spot, began to tap carefully away at it. He really should be doing this later and elsewhere, having stored his find safely away in the boot of his car. But his urge to search for gold and other precious metals or stones was too much.

He worked diligently and carefully, but after a few minutes had discovered nothing. It was just a rock. He felt his enthusiasm draining away. Why had he imagined he would encounter a huge lump of gold on his very first attempt? Idiot. If it was that easy, everyone would be doing it.

He prepared to down tools and carry the meteorite back to his car when something caught his eye where he had been cutting. A trace of something green. Grass, perhaps? No, it was gleaming in the light from his torch. It looked solid, the light glancing off it. He peered closer. Definitely something

solid. Emerald? He took up the hammer and chisel again, tapping away at the rock around it and working to free whatever was embedded.

The chisel slipped as he tapped it, sliding off the surrounding rock and slicing easily into the mineral he was working to free. There was an instantaneous puff of something, a noxious stink, and Doug was forced to drop the torch and his tools as he began sneezing. It was like having pepper thrown in his face. As his eyes began to sting and weep, his breathing coming hard, he was compelled to take a few moments to collect himself.

He must have freed some compressed air pocket or something, causing a load of dust to spray up into his face. The space dust could have been anything and his lungs clearly didn't like it. He certainly didn't need that to keep happening. He would stop working at it for now, and give his body the chance to flush the irritants from his system. He would take the rock back to his car and investigate later, when he had proper eye and face protection.

Doug began packing away his tools, tapping his torch to try to find out why the power was fading. He discovered a few moments later that it wasn't, everything about him dimmer and more blurry than before. His vision had been affected by the dust discharge. If this lasted, then driving back home could prove difficult. A noise grabbed his attention, the sound of tyres on soft soil, followed by the sound of an engine shutting off.

"Oi, what's going on here?" an angry-sounding voice called. A light was shone on him, from what Doug guessed was a torch. Doug turned towards it, seeing a shape approaching.

"Who's that?" he asked, his voice rasping in his throat.

"Who's that?" the gruff voice repeated Doug's question. "The bloke who owns this bloody field, that's who."

The farmer. He had probably seen the headlights from Doug's car and come

to investigate who was invading his property. So focused on investigating his find, Doug had been totally unaware of the man's approach. The farmer probably had a shotgun, too, in case he had to respond to someone trying to steal his livestock.

"I'm sorry. I'm not trying to steal any of your property," Doug said. Damn, his eyes were weeping like crazy. He was still sneezing, too. Barking came from within the car. The farmer had brought a dog with him.

"You're trespassing, my friend," the farmer said. "What are you doing? Are you a camper?"

"No," Doug said, "I came to watch the meteor shower."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," Doug said.

"Well, that's an original one, I suppose, but still no excuse. You're not supposed to be here without my permission, so pack up your chemistry set and get off my land."

"I'm just leaving," Doug said, getting to his feet and stumbling along in the general direction of his car.

"Hey, what's that you got there?" the farmer called.

"This? It's just a lump of rock: a meteorite."

"Give me a look-see." The farmer came over, snatching it roughly from Doug before he could protest. He didn't hold onto it long, however, quickly dropping it with a yelp. "Damn! It's like holding a sodding block of ice!"

"I could have warned you that it would be cold," Doug said, sneezing once more. "It's from space; it gets like that." He bent to retrieve the rock once more, holding it in his gloved hands.

"What's wrong with you?" the farmer asked, peering at Doug. "You got hay fever or something?"

“Got some dust in my eyes when I was examining the meteor,” Doug wheezed. “It’ll pass in a bit. Just need to rest a few minutes.”

The farmer shone his torch on Doug’s face. “Your eyes always been that way?”

“What way?”

“All puffed up like you’ve been in a fight. You look like you’ve gone ten rounds with Tyson and then taken a swim in a vat of hot oil.”

Doug felt at his face with one hand, and discovered the man was right. The area around his eyes was swollen, and he could feel his nose increasing in volume as well. Now that he thought about it, he was sure he could feel his ears beginning to burn, too. Had the freezing air and dust from the rock caused that to happen?

“Look at me,” the farmer said. “Christ, boy, you look like you’ve got major conjunctivitis. You on drugs?”

“N ... no,” Doug said, his voice starting to shake a little. He was worried now.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” the farmer wanted to know.

“Um ... three?” Doug asked.

“Right, I think we should get you checked out. I’m taking you to hospital.”

“Let me put this in my car,” Doug said, making to return to his vehicle.

“I think you’d best leave that here,” the farmer said. “If it’s done that to you, then you shouldn’t be carrying it around. I’ll come back and dispose of it later.”

“But it’s my find,” Doug whined. “I was going to sell it.” But even as he said it, he could feel his grip on the rock loosening and it slipping from his hands, landing with a small *dumff!* on the ground. Doug groped around for it for a time, without success. His vision had faded almost to the point of being pitch

black.

“Tell you what,” the farmer said, putting a hand on Doug and leading him away. “I’ll keep it for you for one week. If you’re well enough then, come get it and it’s yours. Otherwise, I’m getting rid of it.”

“But—” Doug tried to swallow. That was hard work. “It could be valuable. I don’t want to lose it.” That sentence was even harder to get out.

“One thing at a time. Let’s get you to a doctor and make sure there’s nothing seriously wrong with you. Whatever you think that lump of rock’s worth will be no good to you if you’re dead, eh?”

Doug conceded that the farmer was right. His rock would be safe with the man for now. Even if there was anything of value to be found in the rock, he doubted the farmer would take the trouble to find out for himself. Doug would get checked out, grab some rest and antihistamines, and come back for it tomorrow. The farmer helped Doug get into the passenger side of the car, telling the dog to quieten down. Doug continued to sneeze and wheeze as he struggled to put his seatbelt on.

“Oh, do me a favour, eh?” the farmer said, as he began to drive the two of them from the field. “Cover your mouth when you sneeze. I don’t want to catch anything you might have.”

## Becky

**B**ecky Sharp lowered her binoculars. The streets around the Clock Tower appeared a little clearer today. Maybe she and Abby would be able to get along Western Road or North Street without too much trouble. Churchill Square could still be quite risky, and the mall would likely remain the death trap it had been the previous month.

In fact, it may have even got worse – a jungle of limbs and vines, with nails and sharp thorns trying to scratch you, teeth trying to bite you, sticky skin-like nets, and those dangerous pits of acid. The wails of animals, cats and dogs which, seeking food, had wandered in would have been enough to drive her from the place. The twisted moans of deformed people and those unfortunate enough to have become trapped in the remains of the mall would remain nightmare-inducing. No, she would keep well away from there from now on.

She moved to the edge of the roof, leaning over very carefully, preparing to pull back if a hand, vine or something else were to lunge for her. Nothing. She glanced about, seeing that the vegetation remained at ground level. The plants either did not know they were up there or were playing a waiting game, knowing that she and Abby would eventually run too low on supplies to remain inside much longer. She still wasn't sure just how intelligent the plants were. She had seen them creeping purposefully up other buildings from time to time, so they must have possessed a small amount of intellect.

Her mobile phone had packed up a few days before. A simple model, one that could do little more than place calls, send texts and play the odd game of *Snake*, it had outlasted the smartphones by months. A shame there had never been anyone to answer the numbers she had dialled. She no longer had any

means of charging it, wind-up or otherwise, and in any case the device could not now receive a signal. Perhaps the mast had been taken down, the same way that the landlines had started failing. Whatever the reason, the radio was her only way of searching for life outside the confines of their flats off West Street.

Her parents had been amongst the first to go, like a number of others who had pets. The family dog had savaged both her parents very badly one day, before her father had managed to seal it in the kitchen, hoping it would calm down. It had not, barking and snarling for a few days, as though afflicted by rabies or some other disease, before falling into a state of coughing, moaning and whimpering. Poor Winston had become so violent and had sounded in such terrible pain that the emergency vet they called out had been forced to put the dog to sleep. But not before the vet himself had been bitten and also infected. The man's sneezing was to spread the infection over all the animals and people that came to his surgery, and they, too, went on to spread the mystery disease to others. No one knew how it had started, or, sadly, how to cure it. It had been a terrible year.

"Can you see Jay?"

Becky jumped. Lost in her thoughts, she hadn't heard Abby coming up to the roof to join her. Had it been anything but the Australian woman's voice, Becky would have immediately taken up her fire axe to defend herself.

"Sorry," Abby said, seeing she had startled the other woman.

"Please don't do that," Becky said, regaining control of her breathing.

"Make it a little more obvious you're coming up here, next time. I was looking for vines. Thought you were one of them."

"Seen any?" Abby asked, joining her by the edge of the roof and peering over the side.

“No, but I’ve only checked these sides. Let’s check the others. If we see any significant increases in height or saturation, then we’ll have to think about either moving or trying to burn them again.”

“We weren’t too successful the last time,” Abby said, making her way around the roof and investigating the opposite sides. “And we need the fuel for cooking.”

“I think we should check the cars for petrol again,” Becky said, carefully investigating her side of the building. A quick glance wasn’t enough; you had to watch carefully for movement and memorise the location of the highest limb for the next time. Nothing climbing. Everything was still at ground level. She couldn’t tell if the plant saturation had increased at all in the past few days, though. “We could see if we can grab hold of some containers to store it in,” she said to Abby. “We can burn the ones closest to the flats, to keep them at bay.”

Abby nodded in agreement, but Becky could tell that she wasn’t backing the idea fully. Abby was clearly already confronting the likelihood that they couldn’t stay here forever. At some point they would be forced to leave, either because they had run out of food or water, or because the place had become too dirty to live in.

Keeping the flat clean was growing increasingly difficult. There were issues to consider that were never shown in disaster films or TV shows – where they would relieve themselves, what they would use to cook with, how they would wash those things, how they would wash their clothes and themselves. Becky hadn’t had a proper wash in months now. The mattress on which she slept was steadily becoming more and more filthy. Her clothes itched and felt rough against her skin. The pair had briefly attempted to wash in the sea, but the crust of salt it left behind – as well as the water of Brighton’s seafront – none

to clean to begin with - had almost left them worse off. She looked again to the hotel opposite and wondered about raiding it for supplies. She could see a mass of vines and plants protruding from the windows, however, and knew that it wasn't a realistic option.

Stay strong, Becky told herself. One day at a time.

"Clear?" she asked Abby.

"It looks like the vines are creeping up on this side," Abby reported. "I swear that they were lower down yesterday."

Becky made her way over, seeing tendrils of vegetation crawling their way up the side of the building. They were still a long way off, and not moving right now, but neither woman could be certain how quickly they might grow. Becky could vaguely make out the origins - what looked like the fusion of two former Brightonions. Three legs and four arms, greeny-yellow in colour, were fastened to the wall at the base of the building. She had no idea why they did that. Perhaps it was for support, the way some pot plant might grow around a stick embedded in the soil.

"We'll check again this evening," Becky said. "If it grows too quickly then we'll try to burn it."

"Okay. Everything else is clear. Were you able to see Jay?" Abby asked.

"No," Becky said.

"How long has it been now?"

"Four days? Either he's decided to kill himself or he's rooted. He did say that he'd been infected for nearly a month."

Jay was one of only two other living human beings Becky and Abby had seen in months. Abby had spotted him through her binoculars a few weeks earlier, as she scanned the skyline for signs of life. Like Becky and Abby, he had been stood on the roof of a building, also searching for survivors. Spotting

the women, he had communicated with them using a whiteboard. Becky and Abby had responded in a similar manner, though they had had to make use of wooden boards and paints. They kept their responses short as a result, having to paint over each previous message they sent. Jay had been asking if either of them was a doctor, if they knew of where he could get treatment, or if they knew of any other survivors. The answer to each of those questions had been simple - no. 'Infected' was a word he used a lot, too. Becky and Abby had tried to meet him at ground level, but his building was completely overgrown. 'Can't. Plants,' was his explanation.

The man's communications gradually became more difficult to interpret, until they turned into unintelligible squiggles. After that, both Becky and Abby had spotted him just sitting on his roof, looking up at the sun all day, doing little else. Four days ago he had disappeared from sight completely. He was just another victim of whatever this plague was.

"He's dead, isn't he?" Abby said.

"Yes. Or as dead as they become."

"What about that other guy?" Abby wanted to know.

Becky looked over the side of the roof, scanning the roads below. "I haven't seen him, either," she said. "I don't think he's coming back. He wouldn't have survived long out there, especially if he was roughing it on the streets."

"Unless he's sleeping on the beach," Abby said.

"Maybe," Becky said, "but if he is, then I can't see him from here. He's probably been eaten by the plants or killed by the mutants."

"Why do some people do that?" Abby asked. "Why attack and threaten others during a time like this? What did he think he was going to achieve by putting a knife to your throat?"

"I don't know," Becky said. "Maybe he was just desperate. A lot of survivors

probably will be.” She put her hand to the back of her head, where she could feel the swelling still receding. It wasn’t as pronounced as it had been in the hours after she had headbutted the man to make him release her. That had been a risk; he could easily have slit her throat right there and then.

“And why act that way?” Becky said, starting to make her way from the roof. “Some people are just evil, I guess. Right, let’s get organised.” She tapped the lingering Abby on the back, prompting her to return to their flat.

They made their way down, just one level, to the floor they had largely sealed off with various pieces of furniture, liberated from the flats of people who had fled the block already. Some had remained, however, which was why the barricades were there. Becky didn’t need to peek inside to know that, by now, their flats would have been transformed into the equivalent of miniature jungles or gardens, harbouring horribly mutated people. She could sometimes hear them groaning softly at night and did her best to ignore them. She and Abby had been lucky in getting those barricades erected, she knew. She also knew that they were only the slightest of deterrents and wouldn’t withstand much of an impact or dedicated assault.

“Water?” Becky asked, as the two women started to take inventory.

“Three full bottles, one half full,” Abby said.

“We’ll need some more.”

“How many bottles should we take?”

“Three each, two litre ones,” Becky said. “That okay?”

“Sure,” Abby said.

“Food?”

Abby looked over the cans that were stacked up in the corner. Perhaps thirty or so there. Two weeks’ worth if they each had just one a day. “Good for now,” Abby said, the lie hard to hide behind. “But we could always do with

more.”

“We’ll go looking again after we’ve got the water,” Becky said. “Anything else?”

“No,” Abby said. “Torches and radio are still working.”

Becky nodded. That was all for now. Their morning’s objectives clear, the two women took up their fire axes, water bottles and rucksacks, and descended the fire escape stairwell to ground level.

~ ~ ~

The water tap was located on the beach itself. It was the only working tap Becky and Abby had so far discovered. None of the taps in their building produced what could be described as drinkable water. A sickly green sludge would seep out, which both women felt would be fatal to ingest.

Ever increasing sweeps of their building and then further afield had eventually led them to discovering this one uncontaminated source. Why it worked and none of the others did, Becky couldn’t say, but neither did she care. So long as it continued to produce drinkable water, it was one less thing to worry about. Strangely, she had found that they were mostly safe while using the tap. None of the plants and few of the infected would come near the sea for some reason. She wondered if that had something to do with the salinity of the water and the sea air itself. Whatever it was, it didn’t deter everything.

“We’ve been spotted,” Becky said, keeping her voice calm and steady.

“What by?” Abby asked, willing the water tap to fill her bottle faster.

“One of the fused ones – three people.”

“How fast is it coming?”

“Fairly quickly,” Becky said, glancing back to the bottles Abby was filling. She was on the fourth, two more to go after this. “It will get here before we’re done.”

The thing approaching was a new one to Becky; she had never seen anything quite like it before. It was a brute of a creature. Three human beings were joined together, all of them men. It was lumbering towards them on four legs. Three arms were present, two on its right side, one on the left. The stubby remains of a fourth were also on the left. What had happened to the other two legs and arms, Becky didn’t know. All three heads were there, though. Two looked to be either dead or asleep, as only the one in the middle seemed alert. The two others were rocking back and forth as the creature advanced, almost threatening to snap off at any moment.

It appeared to Becky to be somewhat like a centaur from Greek mythology, except a great deal more horrific. Greeny-yellow skin, loose vines trailing behind it. It was in a transition state, somewhere between being a human and a plant. The sight of such fusions lumbering towards her always made Becky want to immediately turn and flee. She had learned to steel herself against such thoughts, however. Standing her ground and fighting was generally the only way to survive such encounters. While many of the creatures only staggered around, some moved so fast that running from them wasn’t an option.

The thing made no noise as it came forward. How it would attack was uncertain. It might try to bite or scratch, or maybe even spit or vomit. Becky had seen that a few times. She wasn’t sure what it might do, but had always made certain that she was well out of the way. The vomit would harden within minutes of coming into contact with the air. It didn’t seem to be corrosive, but more intended to immobilise the thing’s target.

“Oh Jesus, that’s a big one,” Abby said as it drew nearer.

Becky nodded, steadying her axe. “I won’t be able to take it on my own. We’ll both have to cut it down. Get ready.”

Abby continued to fill the water bottles, snatching glances at the advancing creature, before eventually switching off the tap and taking up her own axe, joining Becky in preparation to deal with the threat.

“Same as last time?” Abby asked.

“Same as last time. Alternating strikes,” Becky said. “Call it whenever you make a strike. I’ll go first.”

She swung as soon as the thing was in range, her axe meeting the thin arm that reached out for her. The axe cut deep into it, very nearly lopping the arm off just below the elbow. The creature moaned, a sticky green substance immediately beginning to leak from the wound. There was no bone there any more, just plant tissue.

Becky retreated as the second arm reached out for her. Abby leapt forward, her own swing meeting with similar success. The thing continued its advance, gnashing what teeth were left in the live head and swinging its remaining arm. The thing’s eyes were milky white, no pupils visible. None of the heads had noses or ears, and none of them possessed any hair. Hair loss was one of the first indications of infection, Becky knew.

The two women responded to the centaur’s repeated attacks as Becky had proposed, one moving in to attack after the other, circling around the thing and hacking it apart. The two damaged arms were separated from its body, the third arm following swiftly after. The initial shock of seeing the creature faded as it began to fall, until it eventually slumped down and stopped moving. Despite being a horrifying fusion of three human beings – and maybe other things, Becky conjectured – the creature did not bleed blood. As with those

that had gone before, it was 'sap' that leaked out of the wounds the two women had inflicted.

"Three people," Becky panted a little, setting her axe down. "That's a new record, I think."

"There are probably worse ones in London," Abby said, returning to the tap and continuing to fill the water bottles. "It was bad when I left, at the very beginning. I can't imagine what it must be like now. There were a lot more people to ... absorb." She fell silent, concentrating on filling the bottles.

Becky returned to keep watching as she did so. Nothing else was coming their way. She only hoped that the creatures had not chosen to lie in wait and ambush them on their way back. They didn't seem capable of planning such attacks, though. Those that were infected by the disease gradually dwindled in intelligence. The creatures were smarter than the fully-turned plants, but even theirs was a basic intellect. If they were capable of walking, they would move as quickly as possible - usually quite ungainly, given the irregularity of the limbs they might have lost or inherited - and then attempt to attack their opponent. Should they still possess arms, they would swing them, trying to scratch or punch. If they had none, they might resort to spitting or vomiting. Few did this, however, and most simply tried to bite, teeth or not. Should they have neither teeth nor arms, they might attempt to butt, charge or shove, using their weight. This approach was only ever successful if the thing could catch their victim unawares, knocking them down and then pinning them, apparently able to remain there for days, gradually starting to melt and absorb their flesh. That was largely how the fusing occurred.

No, the most dangerous ones were the ones with the vines, those that were more plant than animals. The vines might not move too quickly, but they could do so silently. A mass of them could wrap around a victim's legs or body, and

then drag them away. If the possessor of the vines was only a recent transformation, the vines might be easily broken with bare hands. At other times, they might be so thick that only a blade could cut them loose. The other danger was that the vines themselves might be acidic or covered in dozens of sharp, poisonous little needles. That's why Becky and Abby carried axes. It was easier that way.

"Done," Abby reported.

Becky saw that all six bottles were now full of fresh, untainted water. They had a good supply from this tap. She hoped it wouldn't run out any time soon. She cast an eye out over the sea. Brighton's waterfront had been declared for many years 'dirty, polluted and unsafe'. A shame. If the water were cleaner, she and Abby might have been able to separate the salt and drink it. She had done so in chemistry class many years ago. Sure, it had only been a small amount and had taken a long time, but it was still possible.

"Good, let's go," Becky said, grabbing up the bottles and stuffing them into her backpack. The two women made the short trip back to their flat, re-entering through a fire escape door they kept locked. A few staggering creatures sighted them as they left the beach, but moved too slowly to be of any real threat. Becky checked that no vines or creatures had rooted themselves near the door yet. She sealed it shut behind them. They would be safe for another day.

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"Why haven't we caught it?" Abby asked, continuing to wind one of the two radios they had managed to liberate from the mall.

"I don't know," Becky said. "Maybe some people are just immune."

“It’s airborne, right?”

“I think it can get you almost any way,” Becky answered, fiddling with one of the other radios. Static, only ever static. She slid through the frequencies, turning the dial all the way to the left and gradually moving it to the right, listening carefully for the sound of voices or any sort of broadcast, no matter how faint. Next to her she had a piece of note paper, to jot down the frequencies of any transmissions they discovered. There were only two listed on the paper and each had only existed for a few days before falling off the airwaves again.

“You could always tell the people who had it,” Becky continued, “because they started sneezing a lot. The problem with it starting in the summer was that most thought they were suffering from some sort of hay fever.”

“But it is *like* hay fever, isn’t it?” Abby said. “It’s caused by a plant. That’s why people are turning into them, right?”

Becky shrugged, concentrating on the radio for a time. She thought she’d heard something come from it. It proved to be just her imagination.

“I don’t know,” Becky said. “I always sucked at biology. I wouldn’t have thought that was even possible. Plant and animal cells are completely different.”

“Hmm,” Abby said, continuing to wind. “What do you think could have caused it? A terrorist weapon?”

“Might be a terrorist weapon. A dirty bomb or something. It could even be a superbug.”

“Do you think it’s only England that’s been hit this badly?”

“I’ve no idea,” Becky said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s infected the whole world, though. No one would be stopped from getting on a plane or a boat just because they had a cold. It could have spread all over the planet in a matter of

weeks.”

Abby found herself asking the questions almost daily. She kept wondering if there was a chance that only the United Kingdom was suffering from this outbreak and that other countries around the world had simply quarantined the isle that was Great Britain and were now waiting for the disease to play out. But what good would that be when it could be carried over the air and by almost any living creature? It sounded as though Abby desperately wanted to believe that her family and friends back home were safe and well, even though no one had ever answered her phone calls when the lines were still working.

“Anything?” Abby wanted to know, as Becky pressed her ear closer to the radio for a moment.

“Nothing,” Becky said, reaching the end of the dial. “I’ll keep trying for a little longer and then we should see about raiding the supermarkets and corner shops again, in case we or someone else missed something. We can never have too much food.”

~ ~ ~

They spent the rest of the day as they always did, sticking to a routine they had grown accustomed to – doing what they could to keep their food stocks high, searching the airwaves and the rooftops for signs of other people, and trying to find ways of keeping their building safe. Becky hadn’t seen a single trace of an aircraft in months, a sure sign that the world beyond Great Britain was carrying on as normal.

A planned supermarket raid was aborted, the vines and plants surrounding it now so dense that they had become largely impenetrable. The number of creatures they had to fight off had steadily increased, too, against Becky’s

hope that their numbers would be thinning by now. Abby suggested attempting to burn their way inside, but Becky had pointed out the danger they might burn down the whole supermarket, destroying anything still left there. They would simply have to find another way.

Retreating disconsolately to their flat, they ate their rations and continued to search for signs of life. They found none.

~ ~ ~

In the night, Becky was woken by Abby's sobbing. This had happened more and more recently. Becky got up from her mattress and made her way over to Abby's, lying down next to her and cuddling her.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

"I'm so hungry," Abby said. "Just one can a day. It's nothing."

"I know," Becky said, stroking her hair. "I'm hungry, too. Do you want to open something to share now? Something small?"

"No," Abby said. "We can't spare it. I just wish we had more to eat."

Becky nodded reassuringly. "Tomorrow, we'll make a determined effort to find more food. I'm sure there's stuff that hasn't been looted yet. Though we might have to go a lot further."

"I don't mind. So long as we find *something*."

"It's going to be all right." Becky kissed Abby's cheek. Soon both women fell asleep, and Becky cuddled Abby until morning.

## Harry

The M6 was clogged with abandoned vehicles, forcing the Posse to take back roads and alternative routes to reach the south of the country. Harry Kingsley was driving today. Out of the five men, he enjoyed it most. The others saw driving as something of a chore and preferred to lounge at the back of the mini bus, sleeping, playing cards, bragging, planning, and smoking - cigarettes, cigars, weed, whatever. They had no beer left, though. They would seek to resolve that problem soon.

Harry considered himself a better driver than the others. They would attempt to go too fast, burning the petrol wastefully, forcing more frequent stops to siphon fuel from cars and buses. There's lots of them about, Harry, don't worry, the others said. But that wasn't the point. Having to stop and do it was a pain in the arse.

Not that Harry drove steadily all the time. He would accelerate whenever he saw the chance for some fun. A relatively empty stretch of road, one or more plant creatures standing in the middle of it. Harry would declare his intentions to the others, before putting his foot down and ramming the thing. Ten points each they were worth, or, if he hit more than one in quick succession, it counted as a combo multiplier. His highest score in a single run had been five of the things: one hundred and fifty points by his count. One of his mates had contested this, stating that he had left one of them alive. Or at least more alive than was required - who knew with plants? Talk about pedantic. Harry had stopped the bus, got out and finished the piece of shit off with a spade.

The result could be different whenever he struck the things with the bus.

Sometimes they would burst like water balloons, the windscreen filling with that sticky green saplike stuff that was their 'blood'. At other times, they would be flattened, breaking apart as the wheels ran them over. Whatever the result, the bus never suffered any damage.

The Posse had no real direction, no specific purpose, other than heading south towards Liverpool. They were using a country road today, somewhere between two national parks by the look of it. There was a lot of open land here, crappy little towns, too. Nothing like the big cities. A sign that Harry had spotted earlier had said Kendal, whatever the fuck that was. He wasn't interested in the smaller towns and villages. They slipped by largely unnoticed, like the hills and fields.

"Oi, Harry," Jamie Gay shouted to him from the back.

"What do you want, Gay Lord?" Harry shouted back, grinning at the man in the rear view mirror.

"I have to take a piss. Pull over for a minute."

"Me too," Elvis rumbled.

"Have you all got bladders the size of walnuts or something?" Harry taunted. "If we keep having to stop every half hour so you can take a leak, we're not going to make it to Liverpool before the middle of next month."

"Fuck you, man," Jamie said. "Just find a place to stop so I can bleed the lizard."

Harry did so, finding a place to park the bus up. He exited along with the rest of the Posse, also taking the opportunity to relieve himself, just in case he suddenly found the urge to do so soon after they set off again. The other four were pissing by the side of the road, keeping a close eye on their surroundings. Plants could tunnel up from the ground, Harry had discovered, vine-like tentacles grabbing hold of your legs.

He could see no immediate danger, and looked down the line of the four men. Jamie Gay had been his go-to guy for years, always willing to help him out with a job, whether it be a simple opportunist mugging – stealing phones, wallets, handbags and the like from teenagers, or those stupid enough to walk the streets on their own, late at night. He was quite happy to assist with a burglary too, either someone's house or their flat, or a shop. Shops were risky, as they often came with CCTV surveillance, meaning the two men would have to cover their faces. And one occasion, the shopkeeper had surprised them with a gun. Harry hadn't raided shops as often as a result. Like Harry himself, Jamie had a finger in every pie, dealing a variety of drugs on the sides. Career criminals the pair of them – that was what society would call them. Harry preferred to regard himself simply as opportunistic.

Elvis – not his actual name, but he refused to reveal his real one – was a Scot. He had moved down to Leeds to work as security for nightclubs and the like. His methods of keeping the undesirables out of the places he guarded were said to have been too heavy handed for most, though. He had no problem with roughing people up a good deal for even the smallest of offences. He had chosen to call himself Elvis after he had put on a lot of weight in recent years, going from a skinny rake to a beefcake. He was definitely the muscle of the group.

Rory Cullen, the third man down the line, was a mechanic, someone good to have along at times such as these. He had been able to get the mini bus started in the first place and he kept it ticking over. Rory was obsessed with card games and gambling, always wanting to see how much money he could extract from his opponents. His dream was to go to Vegas and win it big at Caesars Palace, surrounded by dozens of sexy, doting bunny girls. He had never quite made it that far, staying local or playing games online. Rory had

also had access to a lot of guns, won in underground poker games. The weapons now travelled with the Posse in the back of the bus, zipped up in three leather bags.

And finally there was Mike Deaton. He was quite the contrast to everyone else. Younger than the others, only about twenty or twenty-one, he was something of a goody two-shoes, keen to search for more survivors, band together and find a way to rebuild the ruined world. He didn't exactly fit in with everyone else, sitting by himself in the middle of the bus in silence, trying not to breathe in the smoke from the cigarettes. The only reason Mike was with them was because he had saved their lives on one ... no, two occasions.

The first time had been when the four original members of the Posse had been fixing up the bus. Neither Elvis, Rory or Jamie had seen the pack of school children approaching. Over sixty of them, all knee high to a grasshopper but horribly mutated, some conjoined, others dripping a peculiar substance - Harry later discover it was some sort of acid - from their mouths and other orifices as they came. As the children crowded into the garage blocking the exit, the four men had nowhere to go, and certainly not much to fight them with. The guns were still at Rory's house, awaiting pick-up. The men had armed themselves with whatever they could - wrenches, spanners, boxes - but were clearly outnumbered.

It was then that Mike had put in his appearance. He had shouted to the child-plant-zombie-things, attracting their attention, before dousing them in petrol. It had taken him a few moments to actually find the will to set them alight, despite exhortations from Elvis, Rory and Jamie to do just that. It had been one of the few times that Harry had sympathised with Mike. At that stage Harry might have had qualms himself. But that was well over a month ago and now he didn't care.

Mike had joined them shortly after, begging to go with them. They had agreed, still grateful for his quick thinking. He would be someone useful to have along. Mike also tended to do all the cooking. The guy seemed to have a lot of faith in his four companions, always searching for the good in each of them. Harry didn't hold out much hope that Mike would live very long in this world. He was too nice, and these days you couldn't be that way. It was every man for himself.

Believing that, Harry kept a close eye on his three other travelling companions. He had to be prepared to exit the group at a moment's notice, sure that the others would drop him like a red hot brick if they thought it would benefit them.

Mike finished peeing first, scampering back on the bus, seeming fearful that it might suddenly drive off without him.

Jamie scowled at the young man's back, then looked past him. "Hey, ho," he said. "What's this?"

Harry followed his gaze, seeing a house standing in a field not a long way off. A farmhouse, maybe. Or perhaps something that belonged to an eccentric millionaire who appreciated his own space. Doubtful, though, it was a little too shabby for that. Harry couldn't see what the big deal was.

"Yeah, it's a house," he said. "So what?"

"It's boarded up."

Harry looked again, seeing the windows darker than they ought to be. He would have expected the boards to have been applied on the outside, but perhaps it was actually better to do that on the inside, to make them easier to maintain.

"Think there's people in there?" Rory asked, zipping up his flies and walking over to Harry's side.

“No harm in going to find out,” Harry said. “They probably have supplies. We could sure use a few more.”

The three other men grinned in anticipation, and got back into the bus.

~ ~ ~

A turning off the road led up a muddy track. There were a few farm vehicles here, a couple of tractors, some trucks, and a few cars. It looked to Harry as though the people living in the house had at one time considered blocking off the road, before realising that it would do little good. The plant-zombie-things would simply walk around them. They were doing a good job of stopping their bus from making further progress, though.

Harry turned the bus off the track, felt the wheels sink into the mud and quickly backed up, so as not to risk it becoming stuck. He reversed, brought them to a stop and yanked on the handbrake.

“Everyone out,” he said. “Let’s go and pay old Farmer Palmer a visit, and see what he has for us.”

“Maybe some of his daughters will be needing attention from a different daddy for a bit,” Rory said, turning to Jamie and Elvis and high-fiving them.

Harry smirked at them and accepted the shotgun that Rory handed over.

“No, thanks,” Mike said, as Rory offered him one of the handguns. “I don’t think we’ll be needing those.”

“What you talking about?” Rory asked. “This is farmland. They all have guns up this way. They’ll be shouting ‘get off moi land!’ from the roof of the house as soon as we put one foot out of the bus.”

“Yeah, you were always hearing about it on the news how some crazy old man would shoot you for just being in his house, even if you’ve done nothing,”

Jamie added. "We have to protect ourselves."

"I'll just take a golf club," Mike shook his head. "You know, something not as lethal or threatening. We don't want to give anyone in there any reason to hurt us."

"You know, sometimes you are such a pussy, Mike," Rory said. "Hard to believe that you were the one that set a class load of children on fire."

"They weren't children," Mike said. "They were infected. They were already dead."

"Whatever," Jamie said, getting up from his seat and sliding the side door open. "Just don't come wailing to me if you get shot, okay?"

Mike didn't answer, and the five men exited the bus together. They trudged up the muddy track towards the house, looking all around them as they went. Farms usually stank to high heaven of shit and all kinds of other things, Harry thought. The air here was as clear as anywhere else of late. There were no flies here, either. They had been some of the first things to go when the plague had struck. They had just dropped out of the air, curled up in little balls on the ground, creating carpets of bodies that crunched as they were crushed underfoot.

Harry noted bundles of greeny-yellow things near the house and the path they walked, a few feet wide and a few feet tall. He made his way over to one to investigate. It wasn't moving.

"Ha!" he said. "Look - this used to be a sheep. See? It's still got part of its face."

The other men came over to join him, prodding at it with their weapons. The head and face were just about recognisable, though the legs appeared to have gone. Perhaps they were folded up beneath the former animal, or maybe the mutation had decided to just get rid of them completely.

An inspection of the other bundles revealed that the mutation had worked far quicker on those sheep. Vines covering the things began to extend and probe about as they sensed movement nearby, but the motions were lethargic and non-threatening. Even so, Harry kept his distance. The mutation seemed to go in stages, gradually becoming more and more passive depending on how advanced the infection was.

“This is definitely the work of some Middle Eastern country,” Elvis pronounced. “They’ve probably designed it only to infect people living outside there.”

“Yeah?” Rory asked.

“Yeah. You bet they’re all holed up in Mecca, waiting for the first phase to blow over, before coming here and filling the place with mosques or something.”

“You can’t make something do that,” Mike said. “You can’t target a particular lifestyle group with a disease.”

“How do you know? Are you a biologist now or something?” Elvis growled at him. “Maybe it’s linked to what you eat. They’re all for that kosher stuff over there, right? If you’ve been eating bacon then you’re fucked.”

“What about sheep?” Mike said, nodding to the leafy bundle. “They eat grass.”

“They’re probably unclean animals or something,” Rory said. “This whole thing has probably been caused by some dirty bomb they set off in London.”

“Nah, not the Middle East. North Korea will have done it,” Jamie pitched in. “They don’t let anyone come into that country and see what they’re doing. Most secretive place on Earth. They can do that all DNA targeting stuff, right? I bet you it only affects things outside of Korea. Here, give me that,” he said, snatching Mike’s golf club from him and giving one of the bundles a shove. It

moved only a small amount, no matter how much he pushed it.

“Stuck to the spot,” Elvis said.

“It’s put down roots,” Mike began to explain. “It’s what happens when—”

“Okay, you guys can carry on with your little school lesson, but I want to find out what’s in that house,” Rory interrupted, turning away and carrying on up the path.

“Definitely boarded up from the inside,” Jamie said, as the five arrived just outside. “Someone’s gonna be in there.” He mounted the porch steps and began thumping heavily on the door. “Hey! Anyone home? Open up, eh?” He thumped some more when no answer came. He looked back to the others. “Probably all dead. Let’s see if we can find a way inside. Maybe anything they hoarded won’t have spoiled.”

“Who’s there?” a muffled voice came from within the house.

Harry spotted a small glass spy hole in the front door. Whoever was inside quite likely had a few ways of keeping an eye on the outside world. He joined Jamie by the door, silencing the man.

“Survivors,” he answered, simply.

“What do you want?” the gruff male voice wanted to know.

“Our bus has broken down. We’re looking for some help to get it started and some shelter for the night. Can you help us?”

Silence for a time. “Not sure I can trust you, mate. You’ve all got guns,” the man inside the house said.

Harry glanced to the group, indicating for them to lower their firearms. “Of course we have, friend. But it’s for our own protection. You know what it’s like out here. Or maybe you don’t. We need to fend off the plant monsters and things. Sometimes a club isn’t enough to do the job, you know? There are also a load of unsavoury types wandering the countryside. Can’t be too careful.”

“I seen you come up the road in your bus,” the man inside said. “Looks fine to me. You boys should just get back on it and continue on to wherever you were going.”

Harry was certain he could sense the person on the other side of the door starting to move away. “We think it might be something to do with the engine,” he called. “It’s started to slow down a lot and we’ve had to pull over to stop constantly. We restart and then it’s okay for about five minutes, before a light on the dashboard comes on. We don’t think it’s because of a lack of petrol because we’ve got plenty of that. Can you help us? We’re trying to get to Liverpool.”

“Liverpool’s forsaken, mate.”

The farmer – if that’s who it was – was clearly quite reluctant to open the door. Harry began to wonder what was inside that farmhouse. Plenty of food and water, and maybe lots of other goodies. Maybe they even had power and heat. The Posse needed to get in there. *Harry* needed to get in there.

“Mike here has friends who are still alive. They’re holed up with some others in the docks. They’ve invited us down there to ride this thing out with them, but we need to get our bus working.”

“Take another vehicle. As you said, plenty to choose from.”

Bastard. Fine, they were just going to have to do this the hard way.

“Guys, let’s go,” Mike said, turning about. “We don’t need to be here. We’ve got plenty of stuff of our own.”

“Mike, shut your face!” Harry growled at him.

“I’d do as your friend suggests and move on,” the farmer’s voice joined.

“You know, I’m sick of talking,” Elvis said. “Our selfish farmer friend is clearly holding on to his Aladdin’s Cave and wants it all for himself.” He cocked his shotgun. “I say we blast our way in there.”

“Seconded,” Jamie said.

With that, the two men marched up to the front door and began blasting at it, directing their fire at the lock. Harry joined in after a moment, splintering the wooden frame and chunking it apart. The door refused to give, clearly bolted in more places than that, and so the men started to fire at the top and bottom of the frame. Rory added his own contribution as the others paused to reload their guns. The farmer could be heard shouting from within, but his words were lost over the sound of the gun blasts. A number of hefty kicks from Elvis, Rory and Jamie followed, and the front door finally gave, the four men at the front moving to either side as soon as it fell open.

The expected gun blast from within the house came at that moment, the nose of a rifle poking slightly out the door. With the men having moved to the sides, the blast missed everyone, including Mike, who was standing a few metres from the bottom of the porch step. He remained there, golf club in hand, as the shot whizzed past him, quivering with fright.

Harry lunged for the rifle the instant after it had fired, yanking it free of the man’s hand, before throwing it aside and walking casually into the hallway of the house. The farmer began backing up, raising his hands. He was clean shaven, portly and somewhere in his early fifties.

“Okay, boys, look,” the farmer started. “We’re not looking for any trouble here. Just take what you’re after and let us alone.”

“Nice place,” Harry said, glancing around. The house was in a near-immaculate state, not like the rundown hovels the group had encountered along the way from Carlisle – filthy conditions, dirty water, stale food. No, this place was a palace by comparison.

“What you got for us, then?” Harry asked.

“Nothing,” the farmer started.

“You don’t have *nothing*,” Harry said, advancing and pushing his gun up against the man’s chest. “Not in a place that’s sealed up like Fort Knox.”

The farmer took a step back, but said nothing more, looking at the floor.

“Fine. Don’t tell us,” Harry said. “Not like we won’t find out ourselves just by searching. See what you can find, boys. I’ll hold this one here, where I can keep an eye on him.”

Rory, Jamie and Elvis set to work, filtering into various parts of the house, Rory and Jamie working the ground floor, Elvis heading up the stairs. Harry remained where he was, listening in as they began to ransack the place, opening cupboards and sweeping useless and unwanted items off shelves.

“Hey! Cut that out! Stop trashing the place!” the farmer shouted to them.

“Shut up,” Harry ordered him. “Not another word out of you, you hear?” He listened to the sound of Elvis tramping around upstairs, opening doors and going into various rooms. It seemed that it was quite a big house, more than the two storeys that the outside had suggested.

Harry glanced over his shoulder to see that Mike was still standing at the bottom of the porch. Not a bother right now, the guy could keep an eye out for anything that might be coming towards the house. Plants, animals, other people. He ordered him to do so and Mike nodded with unmistakable reluctance. He looked as if he was fighting with desires to either flee the scene or aid the farmer. Harry was certain he wouldn’t do either, however.

Rory returned to the hallway, carrying a heavy-looking cardboard box. “Kitchen’s fairly well stocked,” he grinned.

Harry inspected the contents of the box, seeing it filled with tinned goods – baked beans, spaghetti, pasta, hot dogs, peas, carrots, and a few other random items.

“Good, good,” Harry said. “You can leave the chopped tomatoes. Not much

we can do with those.”

“There’s sauces,” Rory said, nodding back in the direction of the kitchen.

“Can add them to a pasta dish.”

“Fine. Take it all, then.”

Harry eyed the farmer carefully. He didn’t seem all that bothered about the group relieving him of his food and supplies. Not yet, anyway. Harry soon found out why. There came the sound of thumping from upstairs, Elvis clearly trying to force his way past a locked door. A couple of crashes followed, and then the sound of splintering wood.

“Hey, Harry,” Elvis called from the upstairs landing.

“Yeah?”

“Tons of food and water up here. Enough to feed an army, by the look of it. Our farmer friend looks like he’s raided a wholesaler’s.”

“Clever,” Harry grinned to the farmer. “Tried to make us believe that all you had was what was in the kitchen. Bring it down and load it into the bus,” he called to Elvis.

“No!” the farmer cried. “That’s ours!”

“Not any more, friend,” Harry laughed. “Ours now. Hey! *Don’t* move!” he added, as the farmer flinched, and he raised the gun from the man’s chest to his head. “I’ll shoot you right in the face. Don’t believe I won’t.”

“I’ll see if there’s any more,” Elvis said. More tramping came, then the sound of a door opening. “Oh ho!”

“What’s up?” Harry shouted.

“There’s a dead woman up here, in one of the bedrooms,” Elvis answered, returning once more to the top of the stairs.

“That’s my wife,” the farmer said, his voice remaining defiant. “And she’s not dead, she’s sick.”

"Looks dead to me," Elvis said.

"She's breathing, check her. She's in shock. Collapsed about a week ago. We've not been able to wake her since."

"She infected?" Harry interrupted, causing Elvis to pause.

"No," the farmer said. "We didn't get it for some reason."

"Good for us, I say," Harry replied. "We might have had to cut down to two meals a day if you hadn't done all the shopping for us."

Elvis soon came down the stairs, carrying a box that was significantly more packed than the one that Rory had brought from the kitchen. It looked as if the bottom might fall out of it at any moment. So long as it held long enough to transport the goods to the bus. Rory came back in at that moment, Elvis handing the box to him and telling him to take it the rest of the way.

"Hey, Mike, stop standing there like a fifth wheel and go grab some stuff!" Harry shouted at the younger man, who remained on the porch, doing very little.

"Don't do it, lad, don't help them," the farmer pleaded with Mike, as he started up the stairs after Elvis.

Harry stared at him in disbelief. He was appealing to Mike's good nature? Good luck with that. As expected, Mike carried on up the stairs without so much as a sideways glance, but kept his head down to avoid eye contact. The sound of rummaging and stacking followed.

"Look, please, don't take it all," the farmer began pleading. "We're trying to survive out here, just like you are."

"That's right, we are," Harry smirked. "And that means taking advantage of any and every situation that presents itself. In this case, it's taking all of your stuff." He shrugged. "This world isn't big enough for all of us any more."

"You're scum," the farmer said, miserably. "That good people perish and

the likes of you go on living, free to roam the country and act the way you do is a tragedy for the entire human race.”

“Well, you know what they say, grandpa – survival of the fittest and all that. You can’t get nowhere without a good supply of food and water, and a way to defend yourselves. Those who don’t, die. It’s what Darwin said, eh?”

“That’s not what he said,” the farmer corrected him.

“I think you’ll find it is,” Harry said, dismissively. Mike and Elvis were coming down the stairs with more heavily-laden cardboard boxes. They would be brimming full with food and all sorts. The Posse could afford to feast tonight.

“Hey, Elvis,” Harry said, looking to the man. “Now *this guy* is trying to give me a biology lesson—”

He took his eyes off the farmer for just long enough. The man moved at the speed of lightning, grabbing hold of Harry’s gun hand and punching him in the stomach, hard. Harry wasn’t sure how he lost his grip on the gun so easily. Perhaps it was because the attack had come so unexpectedly. He heard crashing as the boxes Elvis and Mike had been carrying dropped to the floor, bouncing down the stairs.

“What Darwin meant,” shouted the farmer, retreating backward, “was that the creature best suited to its environment is the one that would go on to breed. Usually the ones that work for the benefit of all and not just themselves. Not like you!” He fired the gun ... and missed. At such a range he shouldn’t have, but with his hands shaking the way they were, coupled with his unfamiliarity with the pistol, he had failed to strike his target. Aiming for the body, rather than the head, might have helped.

Harry lunged immediately for the gun again, punching the farmer in the face and yanking the weapon out of the man’s hand, pointing it once more at

him. The farmer backed away again, totally defeated. He started weeping, letting his nose bleed freely.

“And as I said already, *we’re* the fittest,” Harry smirked, ignoring the man’s distress. He glanced to the stairs, seeing that Elvis had been preparing to put the farmer down.

“You okay, Harry?” Elvis asked.

“Peachy,” Harry said. “Can’t say the same about this old fucker, though.”

“Good. Now let’s stop pissing about and get this shit on the bus.” Elvis cast about. “Where’s Mike gone? Mike! Get back down here you scrawny little bastard and help me with this lot!”

“Such scum,” the farmer blubbed.

“Oh, calm down, grandpa,” Harry said. “You’re a farmer. It’s not as if you can’t just grow some more food. That’s what you used to do, isn’t it? Besides, we’ll leave you enough to get by. For a couple of days at least.”

Elvis, Mike and Rory continued to transport the looted food and water and supplies to the bus, Harry content to mark the farmer until they were done.

“Where’s Gay Lord gone?” he asked Elvis as the big man returned once more to the house.

“No idea,” Elvis said. “Not seen him.”

Jamie then put in his appearance, coming out of the kitchen. He was carrying a few bottles with him. “The old guy’s got a cellar full of wine and spirits down there,” he grinned. “Enough to put a landlord to shame.”

“Any beer?” Harry asked hopefully.

Jamie frowned. “Didn’t see any. Plenty of Irish whiskey, though.”

“Take as much as we can fit in the bus,” Harry said. “I don’t care for the wine, myself. Get Mike to give you a hand, he’s too slow with the boxes, anyway.”

Harry was about to call for Mike to lend a hand when he saw that Mike was already doing so, emerging from the kitchen just behind Jamie. Curious. He hadn't seen Mike go into the kitchen. An instant later, he realised that it wasn't Mike at all.

"Jamie!"

Jamie turned in time to meet the person behind him, just as the shotgun was raised and discharged, twice. The blasts struck Jamie in the legs, being fired too early, the wielder too eager to get the job done. Jamie went down as his legs buckled beneath him, the wine bottles slipping from his grasp and shattering on the stone floor of the kitchen.

Harry reacted fast, pushing past the farmer and firing his pistol several times, striking Jamie's attacker in the chest with at least two of the shots. He hurried forward as his target fell to the floor, preparing to finish them off. He paused as he stood over them. It was a girl, no older than sixteen Harry judged. Blood was seeping from the wounds in her chest. Harry realised then that when the farmer had said 'we', he had been referring to the girl and not his comatose wife.

Jamie was thrashing about the floor, screaming and clutching at his legs, his jeans soaked through with blood. "Where the hell did she come from?" he wailed. "The bitch has screwed my legs!"

Harry couldn't tell how much of what was in the immediate area was blood and what was red wine. It was all mixing together.

"Tasha!" the farmer began to sob. "Tasha! You monsters! You bastards!" Elvis was pinning the man to the floor, pushing a gun into his back, keeping him in place.

"You alright, Jamie?" Harry asked.

"What the hell do you think?" Jamie wailed. "Fucking bitch!"

Harry looked down into the face of the girl. Her eyes were focused on his, her body shivering, her breathing ragged. She was in shock from being shot, that much was clear. Probably wouldn't live more than another ten or fifteen minutes at most. Pretty thing. Pity.

"Sorry, sweetheart. You shouldn't have," Harry said, and shot her twice more in the chest. She stopped moving after that. "Pick up the rest of the stuff and let's get out of here," he told the others.

"What about me?" Jamie wailed.

Harry heaved the man up off the floor, ignoring his howls of pain and discomfort. "I'll put you back on the bus, mate. Don't worry, you'll be all right." He knew that Jamie probably wouldn't be, though.

Elvis still had the farmer pinned to the floor when Harry returned to the house, the man weeping for his dead daughter. Rory and Mike were continuing to ferry out supplies.

"Let him up," Harry told Elvis. "We've got what we came for."

Elvis did so, the farmer scrambling over to the body of the teenage girl and cradling her head. "You didn't have to," the man said.

"She shot first," Harry shrugged.

"She was only seventeen," the farmer wept.

"Well, that's just the way things go, mate. Brave new world and all that." Harry shrugged. "Right, the Posse's moving out. Let's go. Good luck, Mr Farmer Man."

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"We can't just leave them like that," Mike said, outside the bus.

"What do you want to do, short arse?" Rory rounded on him. "You can stay

here with them if you like, but you need to remember that the world isn't all nice and fluffy any more. It's either them or us now. Every man for himself."

"But ..." Mike glanced back in the direction of the house.

"You getting on or not?" Harry asked, as the younger man lingered outside the bus, after everyone had got back on.

"Mate, screw him," Rory called. "He clearly wants to stay and play 'house' with the farmer and his dead wife."

"Might have been more fun if Harry hadn't put a few extra holes in his daughter," Elvis said. "She only needed the three she already had."

Rory and Elvis laughed. Jamie continued to groan.

"Yeah, easy on the trigger next time, Harry," Rory said. "She could've been the entertainment for at least a couple of hours."

"Last chance, Mike," Harry said, looking back to him. "Either you get on now or we're going without you."

Mike weighed up his options for a brief period longer, before getting back on the bus, Harry giving the younger man a boot up the arse as he clambered aboard. Harry knew would have to watch that one - he could become a liability. And they didn't need that, not with them having potentially lost a part of the team. Even if Jamie ever walked on those legs again, he wouldn't be able to go very far. Or fast. At some point Harry knew he would need to declare the man dead weight and abandon him.

He climbed behind the wheel and started up the bus, reversing back up the muddy track and heading once more down the road towards Liverpool.

## **About the Author**

Stephen J Sweeney was born in Brighton, UK, in 1977. H1NZ is his seventh full-length novel. He attended Worth School in West Sussex between the ages of ten and eighteen, after which he went on to study environmental biology at Oxford Brookes University. Somehow, he ended up working in IT in London (although he's worse than useless if you ask him to help fix your computer). You can find him online in various different places -

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