

THE
TOWER
BETWEEN

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CHAPTER I

MOVIE NIGHT

“There’s more incoming,” Zack called out as another three zombies hobbled into view.

The hard-fought battle had depleted his reserves. He called forth a magical ice storm, hoping to slow the zombies’ advance.

“What are you doing?” Art asked. “Cold magic is useless against zombies.”

“Damn, sorry,” Zack said. The undead figures ignored the barrage of ice and snow and lumbered forward.

“Hang back there and try not to die. I’m going to attack the front line before the others reach us.”

Art charged forward, his sword glowing with mystic light. One of the zombies fell back from the strength of his blow, but two more closed the distance on him. He managed to deflect one attack with his shield and the zombie fell back. A second slipped past the shield, raking at him with its putrid claws. Off balance, he swung again. The blow went high, and the zombie grabbed him.

“A little help here would be nice, Zack. I can’t take much more of this,” Art grumbled.

Zack panicked and chose a spell almost at random. An eldritch bolt of green energy flew towards the nearest zombie and struck it in the chest. It dropped to the ground, lifeless.

But it was too late—the next wave had arrived. They walked over their

fallen comrades to reach Art, overwhelming him and bearing him to the ground. Zack's hands shook as he threw a lightning bolt at the centre of their ranks, electrical energy arcing between their undead bodies, and yet more came for them. The zombies surrounded him, landing one attack and then another, before he was knocked unconscious.

Art dropped his controller onto Zack's desk. "Damn, that sucks. I thought we were going to finish the map that time."

"I just don't think we're high enough level." Zack exited the game and tossed his controller aside in frustration.

"We might have done better if you were using the right spells." Art gave Zack a soft jab in the ribs with his elbow.

Zack nudged him away. "Yeah, you're right. My mind was wandering."

"Thinking about what? Girls? Her?" Art grinned.

"What — 'her'? No, I wasn't thinking about anything in particular. School, maybe?"

Art scrunched up his face like he'd sipped spoiled milk. "School? Last day of the holidays and you want to think about school?"

"I didn't want to. Mum and Dad were on my case last night about putting in the effort this year. First term is already down and they kinda noticed I haven't been studying." Zack ran his hand through his short, brown hair.

Art tsked. "That's why you need to have at least three textbooks open at your desk while you're gaming."

"Yeah, that'll fool them." Zack rolled his eyes. "I don't have a choice. If my marks don't go up—a lot—then Mum's going to come down hard on me. Grounded, no gaming and whatever else she can think of to remove my distractions."

"But this was supposed to be our year! Girls, parties, popularity, girls..."

"You've been saying that for years, mate. That's not us."

"But it could be. We're seniors now." Art crossed his arms.

"Well, if I can't pull up my grades, there's no parties for me, even if we do get invited." Zack rolled his eyes.

“Ugh, that sucks. Well, it’s still technically holidays for one last day, she can’t expect you to study now. Want to come over to mine and hang? Then we can head into the movies together?”

“Nah,” Zack said. “I have to swing by my grandparents’ place first. Family Sunday dinner. I’ll grab a bite and then meet you on the bus into the city.”

“Cool, I better get home and get ready then.” Art stood up.

“It’s like two hours from now,” Zack said.

“Yeah, but you never know who you’re going to bump into. Might be my lucky night.” Art half turned towards the wardrobe mirror and pinched at his deliberately messy blonde locks.

Zack looked at him with suspicion. “We’re going into the city. What are the odds we’re going to see anybody we know?”

“Nah, I’m just saying. You should put a bit of effort in too. You can’t wait around for girls to do all the work. You have to put yourself out there.”

Zack stood up and hunted through a pile of clothes, coming away with a reasonably clean hooded jacket.

Art grabbed it from his hands. “Dude, at least wear something clean.”

Zack tried to snatch it back, but Art held it above his head, well out of Zack’s reach. Zack jumped onto his bed, making them roughly level in height and wrenched the jacket from his friend’s hands.

Art laughed as he let go. “You’re not going to impress anybody if you don’t put in the effort.”

“I’m not trying to impress anybody.”

“Yeah, alright. Well, I’m going to go get ready. At least one of us will look good.”

Zack heard the rain plinking against his window and climbed off the bed to look outside; clouds had rolled over and it was much darker than he had expected.

“Want to borrow an umbrella or something?” he asked.

“Nah, mate. I’ll be good. I’ll see you on the bus.”

Zack’s mother came to the door as Art was leaving. “Did you want a lift home, Art? It’s looking awful out there.”

“All good, Mrs. M. Thanks for lunch.”

Zack’s mother lingered as Art walked past her. “We’re leaving in five, Zack.”

“Okay.”

Zack started to put his arms into the jacket before he stopped and sighed. He dropped it back onto the floor and hunted through his closet for a clean one.



Zack snatched another ladle’s worth of dumplings from the middle of the table and deposited them onto the remains of his goulash. Conversation hummed around him at the table as his uncles, aunts and older cousins chatted their way through the weekly meal. Zack devoured the rest of his food and pushed away from the table. He held up his hand in a general farewell, kissed his mother on the cheek and moved up to the head of the table to his grandfather. He gave him a hug goodbye, which his grandfather returned, swallowing Zack in his strong, broad shoulders.

When he was released from the embrace, Zack turned to his father. “Can I say goodbye to Babi?”

Zack’s father shook his head. “I’m sorry, mate. She’s on some new, stronger painkillers since she visited the oncologist. She’s sleeping now.”

“You’re a good boy, Zacharias.” His grandfather always used the Czech version of his name. “I’ll tell her you said goodbye.”

“Thanks, Deda. I’ll see you next week. Sorry I can’t stay longer.” Zack missed the way the family gatherings used to be, with his grandmother at the end of the table, holding him close, before sneaking him some extra lollies she had in an old butter tub.

“No, you’re young. Go have fun with your friends.” His grandfather gave him a warm smile before turning back to the table to continue arguing about politics.

Zack let himself out the front door and hustled up the street towards the bus stop, his mind lingering on his grandmother's suffering. He couldn't help her—nobody seemed to be able to help her—and it made Zack's chest ache and filled his mind with dozens of 'what ifs.' He was so distracted; he almost missed the bus approaching. The driver screeched to a halt as Zack ran to flag it down.

The driver scowled at Zack as he swiped his card. Art waved to him from a seat near the back and Zack was halfway up the aisle before he noticed a second head of blonde hair sitting next to his friend—Art's little sister, Jackie. The blonde siblings shared enough features to mark them as related, but Art towered over Jackie even more than the four years that separated them should have allowed.

Zack also thought Art towered over him more than their one month of difference should have allowed, but he kept that to himself.

"Hi, Jackie," Zack said with a smile as he sat down on the seat in front of them. "I didn't know you were coming."

She smiled back without quite meeting his eyes. "Hi, Zack."

"Mum made me," Art said, "but I've made her promise not to embarrass us in front of the girls."

Zack's eyes narrowed. "What girls?"

Art avoided eye contact. "Tabitha, Charlie and some others, I think. I'm not sure."

"Oh, screw you. This is why you wanted me to dress up."

"Putting on a clean jacket should not count as dressing up, man. Besides, you like Charlie. The movies are a good place to make a move."

"Yeah, her boyfriend would love that."

"He's not even coming tonight," Art retorted.

"It doesn't matter if he's not there, he's still her boyfriend," Zack said back. His friend didn't get it. He leaned his head against the bus window.

"Nah, he's just a speedbump."

"That's disgusting, Art," Jackie said, screwing up her face.

Zack rolled his eyes. "I'm not hitting on a girl with a boyfriend."

“Fine. But you can be my wingman with Tabitha. Might be my lucky night.” Art grinned widely.

Zack smiled at his friend’s optimism. “Has she shown, like, any interest in you?”

“She’s always nice to me.”

“She’s nice to everybody. She’s probably going to be school captain next year.”

“Don’t know if you don’t try.” Art shrugged.

Zack glanced out the window as the bus took the bridge across the harbour and into the city. The rain and clouds had left the water a dark blue that deepened as afternoon turned into early evening. Small waves crested and crashed against each other in the wind.

Art tapped him on the shoulder and Zack tore himself away from the window. “We’re here.”

Zack blinked and looked around. “Sorry, yeah.”

The three teens trundled off the bus and onto the footpath. The afternoon’s rain, together with the clouds that were threatening more, had coaxed the already light Sunday foot traffic off the street.

Art gave an exaggerated stretch and then pointed down the street. “Hey, is that the girls over there?”

Zack looked in that direction. There was a small group of teens huddled together and while they were too far away to see their faces, Zack would have recognised the messy dark blonde curls, anyway. Charlie. His stomach twisted. “Um, might not be, I can’t tell.”

Art looked at him, his expression flat. “Nice try. C’mon, let’s catch up.” He strode down the street, forcing Zack and Jackie to jog to keep up.

Before they could close the distance, the other group turned left into a service street between a convenience store and a Vietnamese takeaway. Art moved to follow, but Jackie stopped walking.

“Can’t we go around, Art? I don’t think we should go through an alley.”

“Alley?” Art stopped and turned around. “This isn’t Gotham City,

Jack. It's fine, it's not even dark."

"Okay," Jackie said, not looking convinced.

"It's okay, Jackie," Zack said. "It's not far and if it starts raining again, we'll be drier in there."

Jackie nodded and the three turned the corner. The other group had stopped in the middle of the alley and were staring at one of the side walls. Closer now, Zack could see it was Charlie and Tabitha, as well as two others from their school—Bast and Kimmy. Zack didn't know either of them very well and regretted letting Art push him into this.

Art hurried towards them. "Hey everybody, Tabitha. What's up?"

The four other teens looked over at him. "Oh hey, Art," Tabitha said. "Come check this out. There's this weird light and I can't work out where it's coming from."

They walked closer and Zack saw what the others had been looking at. There was a strange oval of grey light on the wall, about one metre wide and one and a half tall. Tabitha, closest to it, seemed almost silver by the glow. Her jacket, jeans and brown ponytail were all cast with a steely sheen in front of the wall.

"It's deadly, right?" Bast asked.

"It doesn't look dangerous to me," Art said, stepping closer.

"Nah, mate. Deadly in Koori. It means cool."

"I don't like it." Jackie's voice was almost too soft to hear.

"I agree. Whatever it is, let's get away from it," Charlie said.

"Don't be silly," Tabitha said. "It's got to be one of those light projector things, like they have at the Vivid Festival. If I stand somewhere over here, you'll see my shadow."

She moved closer, sliding from side to side and contorting her body in an effort to create a shadow against the grey. Regardless of where she stood, the circle of grey light remained unbroken.

Zack also took a step closer. The strange grey light was almost fluid against the brick. Stranger still, it was dense enough that he couldn't see the brickwork underneath. "Actually, Tabitha, I think Charlie's right. You should get away from it."

Tabitha looked over her shoulder at him. “What are you talking about? It’s just a…”

An inky green-black shape surged out from within the circle. It was long and thin and made Zack think of a root, or tendril, of some unseen nightmare of a plant. Before any of them could scream, it wrapped itself around Tabitha’s thigh and pulled her towards the grey light.

CHAPTER 2

ATTACK

Tabitha was yanked from her feet and her back thudded hard onto the wet asphalt. Zack and Art leapt towards her, grabbing hold of the teenage girl's arms. The tendril jerked in response to their efforts and both boys fell to their knees. They scrambled to hold tight onto Tabitha as the three of them were dragged towards the circle of grey light.

The initial shock gave way and the momentary silence was shattered. They grunted, shouted, yelled and screamed, but all were drowned out by Tabitha's frantic pleas. "Don't let go of me! Don't let go!"

Charlie grasped a discarded glass bottle and threw it at the tendril. The bottle arced wide but, instead of shattering against the hard brick, it disappeared, sinking into the strange greyness of the wall.

Kimmy scrounged behind a dumpster and found a short metal fencing pole. Without hesitation, she attacked the tendril, but it seemed to have little effect, bouncing off its rubbery exterior. Jackie gave a quiet shriek and pressed her back against the opposite wall, watching on with wide eyes.

Bast joined Tabitha and the other boys on the ground and threw his arms around her waist. It was clear straight away that Bast was stronger and fitter than the other two boys and, planting his feet against the ground, they finally halted the tendril's progress. Tabitha cried in pain as her attacker's hold tightened around her leg. Zack and

Art scrambled to their feet, bracing against the unrelenting pull of whatever this thing was.

Charlie knelt down and grasped for another discarded bottle. This time, instead of throwing it, she smashed it against the ground, creating a jagged edged bottleneck, gripped tight in her hand. She screamed and charged forward, throwing herself the short distance between her and the creature and thrusting into it with the sharp glass. She stabbed at it again and again until it reacted, letting go of Tabitha. The boys and Tabitha fell down hard on the asphalt and the dark green appendage thrashed and flailed, slamming Charlie backwards.

Tabitha and the boys struggled to untangle themselves from each other as the tendril loomed overhead, threatening to crash down on them. Kimmy stepped in between them, brandishing a rolled up newspaper she had set fire to with the lighter in her other hand. The flame cast an orange glow over her scowl and dark, bobbed hair. She thrust it at their attacker and it recoiled. Zack cheered as he and the others clambered to their feet. Kimmy charged at the retreating tendril, forcing it back into the grey light. It disappeared and a terrible screech came from within the wall.

“Guys. Help me.” Bast had both hands on the corner of the large dumpster and was attempting to force it towards the circle of grey light.

Zack hesitated a moment before joining Tabitha and Art in pushing at the bin. The wheels gave a protesting squeak as they conceded to the teenagers’ demands and screeched across the alley. Kimmy leapt out of the way as the four youths slammed the bin against the wall, sealing the strange grey circle between it and the wall.

The dumpster shuddered as it was hit from the other side. Tabitha and the boys pushed hard against it to keep it in place.

Art shouted, “Somebody lock the wheels.”

Kimmy stepped down on the lever, testing the lock on the wheel closest to Zack. “It’s not working.”

Zack pointed at the metal pole Kimmy had discarded for her flaming newspaper. “Kimmy, break them off!”

Kimmy didn't hesitate. With grim determination evident on her face, she snatched up the pole and jammed it down at the nearest wheel. The thudding from their attacker continued as Kimmy brought the pole down again and again until one of the fastenings snapped and the corner of the dumpster tilted violently down.

"The others. Quick." Art shouted at her, straining in the efforts of holding the dumpster against the wall.

She shot him the briefest of glares before moving to the next wheel and repeating her assault. Clanging sounded from the opposite side of the bin as Charlie joined the attack on the wheels. After a few short moments, the bin crashed hard to the ground. The thumping continued, but without the wheels, the dumpster held safe.

"C'mon, let's go. Now!" Kimmy shouted and the others pushed away from the bin.

Art lingered to throw a stunned and silent Jackie over his shoulder and they fled out of the alley and on to the main street.

They didn't stop running for four more blocks, finally pausing in an area well-lit by street and shop lights. Breathless, they knelt or leant against the wall of a store as they tried to regain their wind and wits. The streets around them seemed deserted.

Zack squeezed Tabitha on the shoulder. "Are you okay?"

She flinched at the touch. "What do you think? God knows what tried to do God knows what to me..." She sobbed a moment before turning to face him. "I'm sorry, Zack. Yeah, I'm okay I think." Her jeans were scratched, but not torn through and she was already clearly favouring her other leg against the pain from the attack.

Art put Jackie down, but didn't let her go. "What about you, Jackie? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It didn't get anywhere near me." Her wide eyes reflected the shock of what she had seen, though. Hers and everybody else's.

"What was that?" Kimmy broke the momentary silence.

Nobody offered an answer, but Charlie asked, "Should we call the police?"

Tabitha snorted. “And say what, exactly? They wouldn’t believe us. Hell, I barely believe us and it had my freakin’ leg!”

Bast nodded. “I don’t think there’s anything we can do. I just want to get home.”

Zack’s heart slowed down and his body replaced his adrenaline with exhaustion. They headed for the bus terminal together and without any further discussion, shared their trip with each other as far as possible, despite it extending their travel. No words were spoken even when they parted, replaced by silent nods and a squeeze of the arm or hand. Zack, Art and Jackie exited their second bus and walked the two blocks to home. The normally shy Jackie gave Zack a fierce but wordless hug as they parted and Zack walked down his driveway and unlocked his front door.

“You’re back early.” Zack’s mother called out as soon as he closed the door behind him.

Zack couldn’t respond straight away. The normalcy of the situation threatened to overwhelm him in comparison to what happened earlier.

“Zack, is that you?” His mother raised her voice.

He forced himself to snap out of it. “Yeah, it’s me. We decided to give the movies a miss. We, um, just hung out instead.”

“Oh, okay. Have a good time?”

“Yeah, good. Listen, I’m not feeling great, so I’m going to head up to bed.”

He bit his lip at his own words, but it was too late and an instant later his mother appeared from the lounge room.

She held the back of her hand against his forehead. “Well, you don’t feel warm. But you do look a bit pale. Did you get caught in the rain?”

He latched onto that as an easy way to his room. “No, but the wind had a bit of a wet chill, so I really want to warm up and go to bed.”

“Okay, good boy,” she kissed him on the cheek. “You’re still going to school. Second term starts tomorrow and I meant what I said. You start putting in the effort or you’re going to lose some of your privileges.”

Sighing, he escaped to his room and closed the door behind him.

In the back of his mind, he knew he should shower, but then he caught sight of his reflection in his wardrobe's mirrored door. His skin appeared so pale with shock it made his brown hair look almost black in the dim light and purple rings were already visible around his dark brown eyes. He decided the shower would have to wait for tomorrow. He kicked off his shoes and dropped onto his bed, where he was asleep within seconds.