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the earthquakes coming.

GLIMPSE

JANE
HIGGINS

PROLOGUE

PERCHED ON ITS eggshell crust of earth, the city shook like a drunk in need of a drink.

The earthquake turned the ground to shifting silt and filled the air with the dust of fallen buildings. Aftershocks followed. No day went by without a jolt. And not just in one city, but in all the cities that lay on the long track of the ruptured fault.

People ran for a time on adrenaline and goodwill. They mourned their dead. They looked after their neighbours. They prepared to rebuild. But the aftershocks kept coming—thousands of them, years of them. Whole districts were declared too dangerous even for demolition, presenting people with a bitter choice: leave home forever, or hunker down and hope for an end to the shaking and the beginning, one day, of the rebuild.

After seven years of aftershocks it was easy to despair.

But there was this too, like a gift from the rubble: across the city a small number of people began to see the earthquakes coming. And that made warnings possible. And endurance. And hope.

There were others, though, who watched the despair and the hope and they saw easy prey and a pathway to money and power.

JONAH WAS THE quiet one, and watchful too. He had his reasons. Bas, though, he liked a brawl—jump now, think later, that was Bas. He had the kind of staying power that didn't hurt till afterwards, once he'd left his opponent sprawled in the dust. And Evie was a firebrand, clever and fierce. But she wasn't there on the night it all kicked off.

It began the way work nights usually began. Jonah met Bas on the church steps in Linden Plaza at the heart of the Demolition Zone. Until the quakes began seven years ago, the neighbourhoods and streets of shops around the plaza had been the city's Downtown East, but now that whole area was scheduled for demolition, hence, the D-Zone.

On the top step you could look across the plaza and down the long—and long-destroyed—main street where

buildings broken open by the first big quakes had spilled their guts in a cascade of dust and rubble and work-a-day stuff: a mangled mess of desk tops and chair legs and paper, lockers leaking running shoes and lunch boxes, laundered piles of waitstaff aprons, framed photos of kids and dogs, bicycle wheels with handlebars bent right through them, certificates of Employee of the Week and Manager on Duty still attached to their broken walls.

It had all been picked over long ago, of course, first by looters then by the rats that swept in like an all-conquering army and fed themselves fat on the cafe spoils that lay rotting in the winter sun. With them came the clouds of blue-arsed flies. The buzz of those flies: it got inside your head so that even when you couldn't actually hear it, your brain got to work telling you that you could.

Then came the spring rains, and the summer winds that blew the rubble dust into everyone's lungs, until more rain settled the dust, and as the seasons rolled on, the place was almost washed clean.

These days only worthless trash was caught up in the rubble of the buildings around the plaza—beer cans, plastic bags, ripped-up sofas, three-legged tables and two-legged chairs—all dumped there while people went looking for a better class of trash on the next block over and the one after that.

Over the years since the quakes began, Bas and Jonah had sat for hours on those steps. They played cards

on long, boring afternoons, they dissected the tangle of which gang boss was on top this week, and they planned where they'd go when they'd saved enough money to get shot of this place.

The day's rain had moved west over the city, but the clouds were still heavy above the D-Zone and the last of the sun was lighting their underbellies purple.

'Jeez,' said Bas, trotting up the steps to the top where Jonah was waiting. 'Did you get that one just now? That was a little punk.'

Jonah grinned. 'Wake you up?'

It had been a solid jolt. And Jonah had seen it coming, glimpsed it, the way he saw all of them coming—the ones bigger than about a magnitude three, anyway.

Bas pretended outrage. 'Piss off!'

'Where were you?'

'At home. On the roof.'

'The roof. Naturally.'

'I was looking at that leak. Near as dammit fell off. How big was it? Four? Four point five?'

'About that.'

'I mean I could wait till a glimpser was nearby before I did any damn thing, but the place would grind to a frigging halt if we all did that.'

The plaza was busy, the night market setting up. There was the usual jangle of gaudy confusion thick

with chat and laughter. Strands of tiny lights were being strung from stall to stall. Molly Peyton, smoothing her length of faded green felt across her table, laid out silver and bronze jewellery and brand-name watches that were as genuine as the 'licensed' software that Stringer Jones was selling next to her. Here you could find stalls that would sell you T-shirts signed by saints and celebrities, rugs handwoven by grandmothers and virgins, tattoos to protect you from surveillance satellites, sheet music written by angels channelling dead men's songs; you could have your fortune told, your enemies cursed, your unborn children blessed and your dead assured of paradise.

Jonah and Bas walked into the market battling greetings back and forth and seizing on freebie morsels of food. The market fitted them well, like the faultline tattoos on their faces and the battered, rubble-ready boots on their feet.

They were cousins: their mothers were friends who married brothers. In the days before Jonah could remember, Bas's dad lit out to a different town and a different family, but their mothers stayed close and Jonah and Bas grew up like brothers themselves. They were thin, like a lot of people in the Zone who didn't have a full stomach often enough, their brown-black hair was cut short now and then, and both of them had that tattoo, the branching line snaking from temple to cheek,

shaped like one of the faults in the web of faults that had broken nearly seven years ago and crashed their city to the ground. The tattoo had become the mark of the D-Zone—the sign you wore to show that this was your patch.

The market stalls where Jonah and Bas worked were up already, their owners busy and grumbling, not unkindly, about ‘the youth’, and why couldn’t they turn up on time and how was it possible to run a business when you were beholden to sloth of such magnitude. Pizza My H’Art, where Jonah worked, was basically a pizza oven on wheels, but Art’s pizzas were legendary. Tonight, he’d set up beside Carlotta’s Luck Candles—*Get a Handle on your Luck!* On Art’s other side, Nemy was well into his work stuffing potatoes and grouching at Bas for turning up when most of the night’s work was over already. Bas snorted. It was barely half six and it was bitterly cold—it had all the makings of a slow night.

Opposite Pizza My H’Art was a Glimpse Corporation stall. It had only been at the market a month or so and Jonah had chatted a couple of times with its attendant. She was in her early twenties, her name was Shikha Doran and she came with a bodyguard. Every evening she travelled across from the GlimpseCorp tower in the central city, set up her stall, stayed a couple of hours, and then went back through territory that Jonah wouldn’t hang around in longer than absolutely necessary, even in

the daylight. Hence, the bodyguard.

The stall was there to advertise the Glimpse Show, a flashy reality-TV program where people who had glimpses relived their experiences and underwent intense personal questioning by the show's resident psychologist to work out why they had glimpses. This was followed by the high point of every show: emotional encounters with people whose lives they'd saved through their timely quake warnings. There were rewards, mainly gifts of the sponsors' products and, for those participants who were really popular, there were the inevitable sponsorship deals and social media celebrity.

Shikha was at the night market to enlist participants. No surprise, she wasn't having any success. Jonah wondered if he should put her out of her misery by explaining that a lot of people in the D-Zone didn't have citizenship papers and were regarded by the authorities as illegal immigrants. Which meant that a tell-all show exposing who they were and where they lived was never going to be a winner.

By half ten, Shikha was long gone and Jonah was on his bike, a tower of pizzas strapped behind him, heading for Needle's fortress of Ruskin Flats. Needle was one of a feuding set of local gang leaders. Jonah knew most of them; he'd even gone to school with a few. These days his only contact with them was pizza delivery. They never tipped. They were tougher than he was by an order of

magnitude; also, they could and would deploy weapons when riled. Jonah didn't have weapons; his version of self-defence was a fast getaway. These guys dealt in stolen goods and drugs, and also construction crews, which were hard to come by in the D-Zone.

By eleven Jonah was sitting on the steps of Ruskin Flats feeling his ribs after Needle's security boys had asked where the freebie was: hadn't they ordered the half dozen? And wasn't there always a freebie when you did that? Jonah made the mistake of explaining that that was last week's special, but Needle's boys took against this idea and indicated their disappointment by kicking him down the steps. Unpaid. Because, for a man to pay for his pizzas after being insulted like that in his own fortress, well, wouldn't that show a shaming weakness of character?

Across the street, a couple of glimpse obsessives huddled in a doorway, out of it on whatever Needle was peddling today. Obsessives were usually out-of-towners desperate to turn themselves into glimpsers. They were easy prey for local gang bosses. These two had watched Jonah's kicking like it was a stunt for their entertainment. Jonah waved at them and called, 'Thanks!' but they stared back, dim-witted and empty-eyed.

When he could stand up, Jonah got to his feet, grabbed his bike and headed back to Art.

He was almost back at the night market when a

sound he hadn't heard in years sailed across the sky.

A saxophone. Music he knew in his bones.

It soared above the shrill and clatter of the market, trilling, diving deep and climbing again, over and over, high, wild and sorrowing. It swept the night sky like a searchlight. Jonah stopped beside Irondog's Demolition Bonanza: *Nails, Knives and Knuckles! No Questions Asked!* No one was at the Demolition Bonanza except old Irondog himself. In fact, no one was at any of the market stalls except their owners, who were grouching because their would-be customers had been distracted from buying stuff. A marquee had gone up across the front of the church steps and about thirty people were milling in front of it.

The marquee was black—such a deep midnight black that you had to look twice to see it there; it had none of the stripes and flags and stuck-on stars that fancied up the rest of the night-market stalls. At its entrance, a single glowing globe hovered in the air, held up by nothing that Jonah could see. It drifted now and then with the movement of people passing by.

The saxophone's song was so lonesome it made you stop and think of the ones who were gone. Over the last seven years, loss had become as familiar as hunger, but bringing the lost to mind was a gift too, because it put you right back with them, before they were taken by the quakes, and it gave you permission for the tears on your

cheeks and the loneliness that grabbed at your gut.

Irondog noticed him. ‘Close your mouth, kid. It’s nothing good.’ He spat on the ground. ‘It’s PANN.’

Jonah nodded. His voice had dried up.

Irondog swore. ‘People for a New frigging Nation.’

‘I know who they are,’ murmured Jonah.

‘Some New Nation. Pan-dae-mon-i-um, more like.’

Irondog pronounced it like it was five words. ‘We don’t need their sort here, you know that, right?’ He spat again. ‘I’m packing up. I don’t want trouble.’

Jonah didn’t want them here either. But the wail of the saxophone across the stalls was like a wind on his face, blowing in from faraway places. He could tell the crowd felt it too; there was a buzz, as though people knew something was coming. He moved off around the edge of the market, keeping to the shadows, watching.

It had been years since PANN had first shown up in the D-Zone and last time it happened, well, it hadn’t looked like this. The last time was Quake Year 2, when Jonah and Bas were twelve. Jonah remembered running—he and Bas, both—to catch up to the crowd that was gathering to see what was going on.

Back then, PANN had arrived with a trio of brightly painted house buses and a few dozen people wearing blue and white tunics bleached pale from long hours on the road. They walked alongside the buses ringing small bells. Jonah remembered the strangeness of that sound.

In a neighbourhood whose daily soundtrack clamoured with hammers, buzz-saws, pneumatic drills and the occasional gunshot, that gentle chime of bells seemed to promise another world.

But that was a long time ago. Jonah wondered if things were different now. When he reached the black marquee he hung back, wondering if they'd show up: the pale woman, Phaedra, and her blind brother, Damon.

'Gimme your hand, boy.' Madame Clara, the clairvoyant, had come out of her tent beside the marquee and grabbed Jonah's hand. She shone a little torch into his palm, muttering at what she saw. Eventually she closed his fingers over his palm, patted his hand and peered up into his face. 'Don't go in there, lad. It'll only give you grief.'

Too late, he thought. Far, far too late.

Madame Clara nodded as though she understood then wrapped her shawl around her and retreated into her tent.

A tall, pale woman dressed in a long blue tunic stepped out of the black marquee. It was her. Phaedra. Jonah edged back into the shadows. Five years ago, his twelve-year-old self had watched her climb down from a brightly coloured bus in Wulfstan Wood and captivate her audience. Back then she was the most striking woman he'd ever seen. And nothing had changed. He couldn't see her eyes in the dark now, but he remembered

them well: they were electric blue. Her skin was paler than pale and her eyebrows and lashes were white, like her hair. His twelve-year-old self had been entranced. His seventeen-year-old self, not so much. He wondered where her brother was.

Back then, in their beauty and mystery, the sister and brother had cast a spell across the broken land of the D-Zone and the broken spirit of its people. And, Jonah realised, they were still doing that. They shone in a way that made everything around them look grey and dull in comparison: the night market lights strung between stalls looked like what they were—hot wires inside plastic baubles, the flags were tattered and the bunting torn and dirty, the signs for Pizza My H'Art and Nemy's Hot Potatoes were rough stencilled whitewash on bent and splintered plasterboard. The air stank of food that had been charred or over-boiled. It was sad and dreary and even he couldn't love it right now.

Phaedra looked out across the crowd, smiling and inviting people inside. Jonah wanted to march out of the shadows and implore them not to go in, but his feet wouldn't move and he could only watch and listen.

Phaedra's voice was as musical and warmly inviting as ever. 'Come in! Come in! Relax. Lay down your troubles. You'll find rest here, and a promise of so much that is to come.'

Watching the queue move, Jonah recognised tiny

Paulina with the orphan Mina who was always at her side. When they reached the head of the queue, Phaedra cupped a hand under Mina's chin and smiled into the little girl's eyes then put an arm gently around Paulina's shoulders and ushered them both inside. And then came Louisa, whose brilliant sewing fingers brought old clothes back to life. Phaedra held both hands out to her as though she were a long-lost friend. Then she summoned a young man from inside the tent to assist old José, hobbling over his walking stick. And when she saw Jean Pierre with his arm protectively around his fragile and very pregnant partner, Mae, she gave a small cry of delight and ushered them in.

And all these people had a light in their eyes as they looked at Phaedra. It was more than curiosity, Jonah thought. It looked disturbingly like hope.

'Ladies! Gentlemen! Friends from the past, and friends newly welcome!' Phaedra was lifting her voice now, inviting the whole market to hear. 'Welcome to our New Nation! Are you anxious about the earthquakes? Come on in. Are you worried about Border Control? Come in. Money troubles? Wounded in love? Family problems? Come in. Come in. We understand your worries. Come and lay them down here. Because right here, with People for a New Nation, you will find a truth that will set you free.'

She stepped aside to allow more people to enter the

marquee. Then she saw Jonah. She gestured towards the entrance. 'Come in. There are wonders inside.' Her voice was gentle. When he didn't answer, she walked towards him and it took a surprising amount of willpower for him to stand his ground. Her eyes narrowed, puzzled. 'Have we met?' she asked.

His voice stuck in his chest.

She smiled. 'I'm sure we have. I never forget a face.'

But she had, he thought. She had forgotten.

There was movement at the marquee opening; her brother appeared and Jonah's throat tightened. Damon hadn't changed either: as tall as his sister, as thin, as pale, but with eyes white and clouded. Phaedra turned back towards him and took the hand he offered, like a queen to her king. She murmured, 'Someone we've met before.'

Damon turned towards Jonah. 'Invite him in,' he said.

'I have, sweet. He won't come.'

Jonah clenched his fists in his pockets.

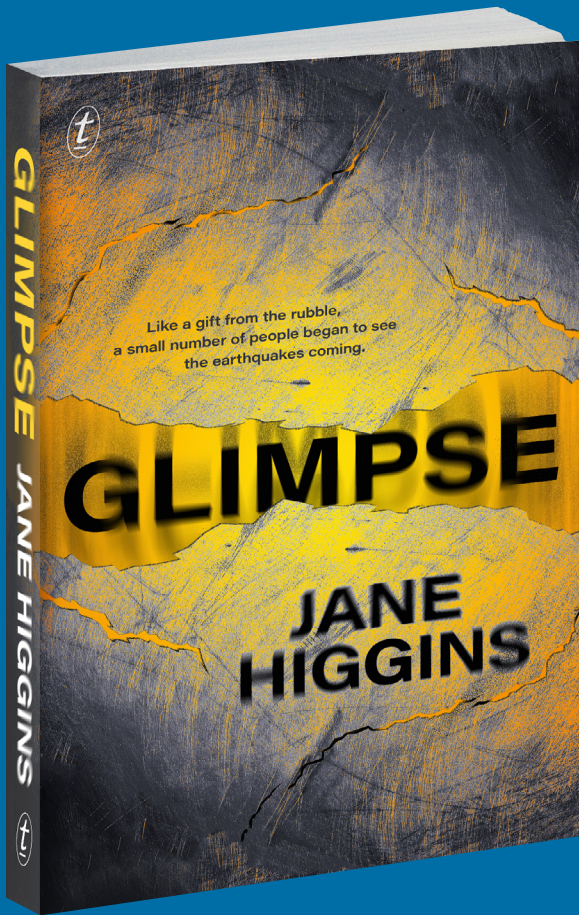
'Ah!' Phaedra lifted her head, eyes glitter-bright. 'I remember now. The glimpse boy. Yes.' She dwelt on the word. 'What a dear child you were. And with such a gift. Do you have it still?' As she spoke her smile slipped and Jonah could have sworn that for a moment, her blue eyes went dark and her mouth turned hungry. She moved towards him extending a graceful hand. 'Come. You carry so much pain. I see it. Let me help. Come inside.'

Be free of what troubles you.'

Jonah almost choked on the words surging in his throat but he couldn't find his voice or the right words. He wished Bas was here. Or Evie. They'd know what to say. They'd know how to shame these two with the truth. How to send them packing.

Phaedra, gestured again towards the tent. 'These are your friends, your neighbours. Don't be left out in the cold. Because this?' She glanced at the queue, then back to Jonah, 'This is just the beginning. Wait till you see.' When Jonah didn't move, a tiny frown appeared in her colourless brows. 'No? Think carefully, glimpse boy. Make sure you are on the right side when the time comes.' Then she took Damon's arm and walked back inside the marquee.

Jonah realised he was shaking.



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