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# ZOMBIE SEASON

RISE OF THE ANCIENTS



JUSTIN WEINBERGER

A black and white illustration of four survivors in a jungle. From left to right: a man in a jacket and backpack, a woman with a rifle, a man with a megaphone, and a woman with a rifle. They are all looking towards the right.

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A large, detailed illustration of a zombie in the foreground. The zombie is covered in vines and leaves, with a wide, screaming mouth. To its left is a smaller, more grotesque zombie-like creature. To its right is a zombie with long, flowing white hair. The background is a dense jungle with sunlight filtering through the trees.

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**FOR THOSE WORKING EVEN HARDER THAN  
THEY KNEW THEY COULD: ONE FOOT  
IN FRONT OF THE OTHER**

## PROLOGUE

Deep in an old, abandoned gold mine, an elevator opens at the edge of a large cavern.

Four passengers, including a man named Sky Stone, emerge and zip up their puffy winter coats despite the midsummer California heat.

The cold in here is so intense it pulls the breath out of a person's lungs. It's so cold it instantly bites into any exposed skin.

And in the center of the cavern, there is a mound of rock and ice.

Or that's what it looks like at first sight.

On second glance, it's clear that the mound isn't a mound. It's a figure lying on its side. A giant with stony flesh so cold it causes crystals of ice to form on the walls.

Those who brave a closer examination of the figure would see patterns on the giant's skin. Sculpting, almost. Marks that seem so clear they should've been impossible to miss right away—almost like hyperrealistic tattoos or carvings . . .

Schools of fish chasing one another, flocks of birds in formation, spidery

veins of ants marching in a line. An endless canopy of trees with a mountain ridge where the giant's spine is.

"Status report, Carl," says Sky Stone in a gruff, all-business voice.

"Me, Sky?" says one of the others. Carl. He isn't really eager to be the spokesperson, it's clear.

"Three days ago, this thing charged out of a glacier and took out half a town up in Alaska," Sky replies impatiently. "We need to know what kind of zombies we're up against here. What do we know about it?"

"We're still working on a full report, sir," says Carl. He steps over to an array of modern machinery. Computers and instruments that bear the name of a company called HumaniTeam.

"No, I don't need a report," says Sky. "I need answers. Fast. How long has it been hibernating in there? Why did it come out now? What is this thing?"

Then there's a low sound. A yawning as if the cavern itself is settling deeper into the earth. It almost sounds like the cavern is replying to Sky's questions . . . as if to say, *Ask me yourself*.

"Did you just hear . . . Can it understand us?" asks Sky.

"She seems to be able to communicate," says Carl. "We don't understand why. It's not really talking. She . . . It's something else. Closer to mind reading. Somehow connected to the things around her."

Sky takes a moment, letting this sink in.

And his shock passes. A smile creases his face.

“Well, then,” says Sky. “That makes all of this much simpler. Let’s have a conversation.”

Sky Stone takes everything in stride. What seems terrifying and impossible to others is just another normal day at work for him and his team. Especially deep underground in this experimental facility. This place that was used long ago to house a zombie research program called Project Phoenix, and that has now been dedicated once more to that purpose.

He approaches the giant without fear.

She is bound and unable to move, after all.

“You know who I am?” Sky asks.

Again there is a reply that rumbles the cavern, or feels as if it does: *I know what you are*, she seems to say.

The four people in the cavern all flinch, because there is such hate in the response. Such fury. This time, it doesn’t just seem like words to them. There are images, too. Cities and towns and farms and factories. They seem hollow and hungry . . . almost like a zombie horde.

“Yes,” says Sky. “We’re humans. Like you were once.”

At this, the figure stirs. Her body spasms with haunting, painful laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Sky asks.

*I’ve been human*, yes, Sky hears in his head. *I’ve been many things*. Suddenly, the carvings on the giant’s skin pulse with movement. And not just movement but *transformation*. The fish become foxes and the birds become buffalo—but there’s far more than that. Skittering millipedes and



stretched bat wings, curling ferns and climbing ivies . . . up and up to the monster's head—

Sky suddenly comes face-to-face with something ancient and extremely powerful.

In Greek mythology, there was a woman called Medusa, whose hair was said to be made of snakes and whose gaze turned people into stone. And like most legends, there is a fragment of truth to the story.

Sky Stone finds himself locked eye to eye with the origin of that myth. An ancient matriarch of the undead. A devourer of life who has been hibernating since the time of such stories, three thousand years ago.

In fact, she didn't expect that she would ever awaken again, after the last time. She slept through the formation of the Munivit glacier. The construction of the town that took its name. But then came the factory, its surging power calling her awake.

She will not rest again until her enemy is destroyed.

Until the human race is extinct.

With a gasp, Sky sees all this in his own mind. The hate, the destruction—he recoils from the creature, his hands flying up to protect his head.

The others react swiftly and pull a lever that makes a solid *thunk* as it flips on. The giant's body tenses from head to toe—the cables wound around her all thrum with electric current.

A scream too deep for human ears to hear echoes throughout the entire cave network, though the humans can feel it as a vibration. A rumble.

This rumble travels through the earth, registering on the machines that

measure earthquakes. It passes through deep places far underground. Places where other ancient monsters have been hibernating, while billions upon billions of human beings lived their lives. In all these places, there is a fitful moan of awakening.

The zombie crumples, seeming to shrink as the electricity courses through her. She is shocked and stunned, in all the various meanings of those words. Figuratively, she is surprised by how these humans have captured lightning in a bottle. And literally, she is unable to move as the electricity flows through her like the venom of a jellyfish.

Then it ends.

Sky Stone discovers he can look away from the matriarch of the undead. That whatever she was doing to him with that gaze, the spell was interrupted.

He looks around, as if he's surprised by where he is, by his beating heart and ragged breathing.

"What just happened?" Carl asks.

"I don't know," says Sky.

Carl looks concerned. "Are you all right, Sky?"

Sky hesitates only a fraction of a moment before he falls back into the same blustering confidence that's always been as natural as breathing to him. "I'm not the one who you should worry about right now," he says. "Just get back to work."

Sky is careful not to look at the giant body on the ground. He heads toward the elevator, not interested in staying here a moment longer than he needs to. Relieved to have escaped whatever nearly happened.

Or *believes* he has escaped anyway.

But on the ground, the ancient zombie looks slightly different than she did before. Like she's more awake now. Like she's the one in control.

Deep inside Sky, a change has begun. A transformation that would've happened eventually anyway, the ancient zombie knows. But now it's accelerated.

As he rides the elevator alone, there's a tremor in the earth, like the ancient zombie is laughing.

But it's not *just* in the earth, Sky realizes with a rising concern. There's also a tiny tremor *inside* him, too.

As if some part of him has become petrified.

Turned to stone.

For a moment, the concern becomes panic.

Something is wrong, he has realized.

He can't quite put his finger on what it is. All he knows is something is missing inside him, and there's a stone in its place. A stone that grows with each pump of blood.

*Help me*, he wants to scream.

But it's far too late for that now.

*We are what we are*, *Sky Stone*. The ancient zombie's voice resonates inside him. Quickly, he comes to enjoy the sound of this new voice in his head. It soothes him. He's said it to himself many times before.

And that other voice? The one screaming for help . . . It dwindles and disappears without his notice. He's ignored the voice so many times

before. It's far too easy to do it one more time. The last time.

Sky emerges from the mine shaft and throws off his puffy jacket in the summer heat, feeling better than ever.

Like there's a weight lifted off his shoulders.

He's unstoppable now, the voice in his head tells him.

# 1

## NEW ALCATRAZ

Joule Artis stares up at the enormous iceberg towering above the deck of the *Undercurrent*—mesmerized by a large, milky eye that’s watching her right back.

Immobilized inside the ice is a monster from the deep sea—a giant zombie with translucent skin and an eerie yellow-green bioluminescence. This glow makes the entire iceberg gleam, like a sinister jewel floating in the ocean off the San Francisco coast.

Other eyes are watching as well:

Human eyes up and down the rails of the large, rugged research vessel, wide in horror. And in the ice?

Undead eyes—trapped, yet very much awake. A whole horde.

Everyone can see the huge, dark shadows in the translucent ice. Dozens, probably. And that’s just what’s above water. Joule knows all too well that only a small part of an iceberg is visible above the surface. There’s far more below the waves.

Human in their outlines—heads, torsos, hands, and legs—but these are

not people. They haven't been people for a very long time. These monsters are what people leave behind when they die.

For kids like Joule, it's always been clear that the impact we make on the world around us doesn't vanish when we're gone.

And these particular zombies, which are immune to water—seemingly indestructible, in fact—have grown to the size of giants in the deep sea. She shivers, thinking of what they've devoured.

It's chilling to think of the people they once were. To imagine herself ending up like that—as one of *them*.

But she finds the courage to take a long, hard look. And it helps her remember why she's out here with Professor Halyard and his team. It reminds her what's at stake right now, with zombies like this spreading across the oceans. They've been lurking in secret, but now the truth is known.

Everything's changing.

For the civilized world, for the natural world . . . There's never been a zombie season filled with such danger before.

And there's never been a time filled with such opportunity, either. Not for Joule, at least.

Joule is surrounded by so many brilliant and passionate people here on the *Undercurrent*. People who dream of big solutions. People who pour their hearts and minds into studying the planet and trying to protect it from harm. Being connected to all that passion fills her with excitement. With a

bottomless source of energy. An urgent, almost feverish hope. And Joule doesn't want to let go of it. In fact, she's working to hold on to it after the journey is over.

Back on land, her friend Regina is trying to save the world all by herself, and Joule is determined to help. To form a team of friends who are there for one another in moments when it's too much to do all alone. Because one thing that Joule has learned out here is how much smoother and better things are when you know you're part of a team. The wins are more thrilling and the losses less overwhelming. Especially when battling zombies that feel so unstoppable. Having people you can trust brings dreams into reach.

And she feels a deep determination, standing here watching the monstrous zombie, trapped and unable to move. Human beings did that, she marvels.

As a team.

It fills her with hope.

*We're going to get through this,* Joule tells herself. *If we can stick together, that is.*

She's already gotten her fellow student explorers to agree to help. People like the boy standing beside her—Anton Zarkovsky. They've gotten to be friends very quickly, both bantering and bickering. She's not quite sure which of these she enjoys more . . .

There's no time for either right now.

As she looks over at Anton, she sees that he's got his phone held up to the iceberg, using it like a telescope to magnify something on the far edge of the thing.

With a pulse of panic, Joule sees what he does. A ship, coming into view. The vessel is damaged and it's been partially frozen in the ice. Very slowly, the embedded boat is rolling over, capsizing, as the iceberg shifts in the sea. Rotating to show a different side of itself.

As the hull of the other ship rises into the sky, there's a twitch of movement that catches Joule's eye. A person. *Alive.*

"Help!" she calls out. "Hey! Someone's moving out there!"

"Person overboard!" cries Anton, having seen them, too.

As Joule and Anton keep their eyes locked on the figure, the crew of the *Undercurrent* comes together at top speed to deploy a rescue team and save the marooned individual.

Getting to them is extremely tricky, though. The iceberg is shifting, and they could be swept under the sea at any time. Gone for good. It's a miracle that someone could cling to the icy mountain this long.

Joule can't do anything to help from here. But as she watches, she realizes that she recognizes the figure.

"*Mr. Herrera?*" Joule cries out in disbelief.

Turning at the sound of his name, the man slips.

"Mr. Herrera!"

The rescue team has to be very careful around the unfamiliar iceberg,



but they hurry to throw Mr. Herrera a life preserver. To keep his head above water.

Joule's heart beats fast as she wills the team to rescue the man—to rescue her friend Regina's father.

And every time she looks at the iceberg, she finds another zombie peering back. A different terrible, vacant eye, trained on Joule. And to Joule it seems far too close for her comfort, even inside the solid ice.

They're trapped, and unable to harm anyone, but they aren't fully defeated.

*They're watching,* Joule thinks to herself.

They'll never rest, but they'll wait as long as they must, for a chance to feed . . .

Joule shudders as a chill runs down her spine.

But the shudder doesn't stop with Joule, she sees. A tremor goes through Anton at the same moment. And as they look at each other, Joule realizes it's a vibration going through the deck under their feet. Through the entire vessel, in fact.

The boat struck something, Joule knows. Something big.

*The iceberg?* she wonders.

Suddenly, there's a second, much larger tremor. The *Undercurrent* jerks under her, and before she can brace for impact she's thrown off-balance and nearly tumbles over the railing, into the sea. Instinctively, she reaches out and grabs for the boy beside her.

"Anton?" she calls to him.

They can't link hands, but each of them clings hard to the railing as the boat is pushed onto a new course by some obstacle under the water.

Beside her, Anton gasps in surprise. When Joule looks over to him, she sees his phone glitter as it falls into the sea. But Anton isn't reacting to that right now. From the horror in his expression it's clear to Joule that there's something else he's worried about.

"Anton?" she asks. "What is it?"

"No way," he says, his face even paler than usual. "Not again. We need to get off this ship."

"What?" says Joule. "What's happening?"

"Just trust me. I've—I've . . . I've seen this before. I've been through this with my—with my . . . on our . . ."

"With your family?"

Anton nods.

"On your fishing boat?"

Anton nods again. "With Alek," he adds.

Joule remembers the tragic story Anton shared with her. How Anton lost his cousin Alek right before his eyes. It was an amphibious zombie that attacked the family on their fishing boat. Big. From the sea. Like the ones frozen in this iceberg.

*What if not all the zombies were frozen?* Joule wonders.

It's as if this thought summons a monster into existence. From underneath the water, the crown of an enormous head appears—like the sun rises above the horizon, but much, much closer.

The zombie's eyes emerge next, cloudy and faraway. Vision isn't the main way these sort of zombies hunt, Joule knows. They can sense the living through other, keener senses.

And once a zombie like this chooses its prey, there's nothing that can stop it. Its supercooled blood makes it immune to the weapons people usually use to fight zombies with superheated blood. A superchiller would actually make it *more* powerful.

Joule is beginning to realize that she's trapped. That they're all trapped.

There's nowhere to run and nowhere to hide, out here in the middle of the sea.

"Abandon ship," says Anton.

She looks at him in fear. "What?"

"Now, Joule! Or it'll be too late." He races across the deck, opening up a locker where there are life vests and removing two. One for him and one for Joule. But before Anton returns with them, the leader of the expedition, Professor Halyard, bursts out of a door and races across the deck of the ship. In his hands is an invention called the Eel. A dangerous, experimental device that uses electricity to stun the undead. Or that's what it's *supposed* to do anyway. It tends to backfire on the person who uses it.

And Joule looks away just in time to avoid seeing Professor Halyard experience exactly that.

There's a high-pitched whine, and Joule can hear Halyard's jaws snap shut, teeth crashing together. She imagines the electricity coursing through

Professor Halyard's muscles so his brain can't control them. Even his heart is unable to beat, Joule thinks, as her own beats out of control.

"Help!" she calls out. "Somebody?"

As the professor falls to the deck, Anton is the one to act, just in time, kicking the Eel out of Professor Halyard's grasp with his foot. It skitters to the edge of the deck and tumbles into the sea below.

As it disappears, five huge fingers wrap around the lip of the deck, and a huge zombie pulls itself out of the sea.

"*Not again,*" Anton says under his breath as he looks up at the thing and remembers his cousin Alek.

The zombie is enormous. Bulging in its midsection—as if its bloated body has been inflated with seawater, and now that it's no longer in the ocean there are awful fluids leaking from every orifice and pore. From its mucus-covered skin comes a sickly green-yellow glow. And there's a chill in the air from the breath it exhales.

For a moment, everyone on the ship seems to freeze and stare.

"Anton, come on!" Joule rushes toward him and grabs his hand. "Let's go!" she says, pulling him away. "Professor Halyard?"

"Go!" Halyard calls out.

As Joule and Anton start to run, Anton fastens the life vest around her. Meanwhile, Professor Halyard regains control of himself and catches up to race alongside them. He keeps his body between the monstrosity and the kids, as if to shield them.

But no one can protect them from something like this. *There's nowhere I*

*can keep you safe*, Joule remembers her mother saying, explaining why she'd sent her daughter across the country on this expedition. *All I can do is prepare you. Make sure you have the tools to survive.*

The giant zombie reaches out and plucks Halyard off the ship as if the man is a doll. Joule halts in her tracks and turns—

But by the time she does, Halyard has disappeared from sight.

All she can focus on is the face of the huge zombie. Its toothy jaw unhinged, dropping wider and wider. Its eyes alight with a hunger that's just been whetted.

Lunging for Joule, the moan of need that escapes its throat is deep and powerful. Vibrating in the cavity of her chest.

Suddenly, Joule dives to the ground and presses herself behind the nearest bulkhead. She thinks of her father, wondering if this was what it was like for him, on the day he disappeared forever. She thinks of her mother, worried how she'll feel, losing her daughter that way.

Joule's throat tightens.

She feels her body tremble as the moments tick past—

Joule Artis almost wishes it would all be over.

There's nothing she can do now.

It's all so much larger than she is. So overwhelming.

In the middle of the ocean, Joule realizes how completely she and the other humans here are separated from the rest of the living world. Floating on the surface, while so much else is taking place underneath the waves, in

sunlit shallows and those depths where it's eternal night. She imagines herself an alien on her own planet.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Joule tries to say. But the words won't come. Eyes closed, all her muscles locked up, Joule Artis waits for the end to come.

But she feels that heart thudding in her chest, beat after beat, carrying blood to her lips, her fingers, her brain. She can feel the zombie's proximity, its supercooled blood raising goose bumps on her skin. It towers above, as tall as six Joules standing on one another's shoulders.

*Why am I still alive?* Joule asks herself.

She stays very, very still, searching for an explanation.

It doesn't know where Joule is, she suddenly realizes with a rush of hope.

*How can I stay hidden from it?* Joule asks herself.

That's when she feels a tiny pressure on her pinkie finger and looks down to see the most unexpected sight she could imagine in this moment.

A tiny octopus. Dimly, Joule is aware that it has escaped from a tank across the deck in the chaos.

"Mina?" Joule whispers. "Get out of here."

Mina just lifts herself onto Joule's hand and shifts color using her species' special ability to camouflage itself and blend in with Joule's brown skin.

"I can't play now," says Joule.

The octopus stretches its way up to her shoulder, tickling her ear. It's ridiculous, and she can feel a laugh and a sob competing to escape her lips.

She keeps her emotions inside, and sternly tells the creature, “You need to get out of here, Mina. *Now.* Before—”

Before it’s too late, is what Joule is trying to say.

But it’s already too late, she suddenly realizes. The zombie has figured out exactly where she is. An undead eye locks on, staring right at Joule and Mina. For a terrible moment, Joule can feel the zombie’s awful cold steal the heat from her body.

The bloated face leans closer.

“Get to the water!” Joule tells the tiny octopus. “Get to safety.”

Mina stays on Joule’s shoulder, where she draws herself up to her full height. Despite the peril, she’s fearless. Standing up to the zombie. Facing her fear. Mina’s body flashes through a spectrum of colors and inflates to quadruple its usual size.

Mina is somehow claiming Joule as her own, she realizes. Telling the world that Joule Artis belongs to *her*. And the zombie seems to take note—

For a moment, the zombie peers at Joule with what seems almost like . . . curiosity.

The monster’s milky eye draws Joule’s attention, and she notices something peculiar. Shapes moving *inside* the eye. Like there’s something pushing up against the other side of the membrane. Colors and shapes . . . She tries to peer closer.

But then, as the giant’s huge face lowers directly in front of Joule, she realizes this is her opportunity to fight back. She kicks it as hard as she can. Square in the eye. To her queasy alarm, it simply squishes . . . absorbing her

hiking boot. Her foot sinks in, and the zombie doesn't seem to even notice.

She screeches amid her revulsion.

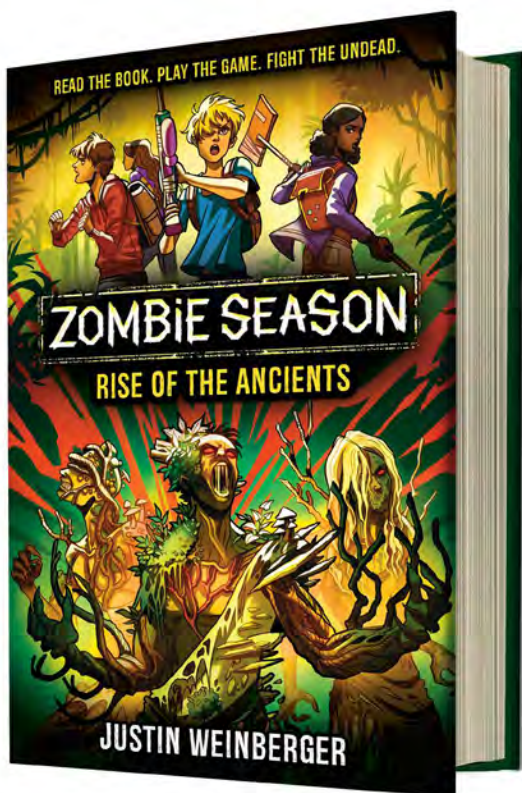
That's when Anton pulls her free. "Let's get out of here, Joule!" Anton calls, bravely rushing across the open deck and grabbing Joule. Pulling her to her feet. Urging her forward beside him.

As they run, the off-balance zombie lunges.

The fat fingers stretch toward Joule faster than she can run.



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