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THE WAR FOR **BANKS** **ISLAND**

Written for the 2011 Project for Awesome

**THE WAR FOR
BANKS ISLAND**

This story is dedicated to the very patient philanthropists who donated to the Project for Awesome in exchange for this belated sequel. This story is not made of awesome. But you are.

1

On the morning of the elections, I woke up early so I could beat the line at the polling station and get to the lab by 8. I wanted to spend some quality time with my zombie before class started.

And of course to actually vote, you have to walk through the gauntlet of people handing you flyers and encouraging you to vote for this party or that party, and it all just became cacophonous and unpleasant and I wanted to say to them, “Do you seriously think I’ve made it to within TWELVE PACES of my polling station without making up my mind?” This was compounded by the facts that I was generally nervous—having never voted before—and also that it was, as we say on Banks Island, balls ass cold. The wind was blowing from the North—and it reminded me of a phrase I’d read in a novel once, a novel set in Alabama. It referred to “blistering heat,” and sometimes when it was very cold outside—i.e., usually—I would conjure the image in the hopes that imagining the kind of heat that could blister skin would somehow warm me.

There is some medical research that this actually works, by the way. I’ve since learned that in military survival training, they train you to imagine a crackling fire as you try to stay warm enough to build an actual fire, because the thoughts can actually constrict your blood vessels and—for a few minutes at least—stave off hypothermia.

So anyway I just walked with purpose past all the campaign volunteers, and I was nearly to the door of my former elementary school when I heard someone repeating, “Caroline. Caroline. CAROLINE.” I looked up. It was my next-door neighbor, Marcus MacEntire.

“Hey, Mr. MacEntire,” I said.

“Caroline, will you read this before you cast your vote today?” He pressed a flyer into my hand. “It’s time, Caroline. It’s time for us.”

By us, I assumed he meant time for immies to be granted the vote. We were mostly Americans, but some Mexicans, and a spattering of Central and South Americans who’d fought all the way to Banks.

“Of course,” I said, because my own mom was an immie.

“Just read it,” he said. I nodded.

“I hope you’re doing okay,” I said. He was a widow, and he’d lost a son, James, on the mainland a few months before. I didn’t know the story—if it was Zs or a logging accident or what—but anyway he was dead, and he’d only been like 23, and I hadn’t seen much of Mr. MacEntire since.

Sometimes you have to wonder if there’s a point to living without a family. My mother had done it, but I think it hollowed out something inside of her. The truth is, immies were different—not because they weren’t Canadian, but because by and large they’d come from further away, making treacherous journeys without families, propelled forward by a rotating cast of fellow orphans, a caravan in which everyone had lost almost everything, on the cold and Z-stalked journey to Banks more than two decades ago.

I took the flyer and walked inside. It was just a log cabin, really—built by the first AZ settlers—but it still felt big to me, although not as infinitely large as it had when I was a kid. The ceilings were just so high; the rooms so much bigger than those of any apartment I’d ever seen. Big indoor spaces are hard to heat, but when they’d built this first school, no one had known that we’d be here forever.

I read the flyer while standing in line waiting to show my ID.

Friends and Neighbors,

My name is Marcus MacEntire. I’m an immie, born in Texas, and I fought my way north as a young man in the first months AZ, losing my family and everything else that mattered to me along the way, until the great nation of Canada welcomed me in as a refugee and then I was lucky enough to make my way to Banks in April of 2 AZ.

I helped build this school with men and women like Mia Carpenter and Leroy Jenkins. I helped build the apartments, too, and when the heavy machinery came, I worked for twenty years as a foreman, building spaces where we could be safe. I married. We had a son, James. I always wished to vote for representatives in the land that I had helped build, but I also understood that I am not a Canadian, and that the people of Canada were generous and kind to accept me and other immies. My wife died in the 15 AZ flu, and then it was just James and me.

My son James was privileged to vote twice in parliamentary elections before he died on the frontier last April, 24 years and 2 days after my arrival on Banks Island. I will tell you what the government did not: He was attacked by a Z in his tent one night, heroically confessed his injury to his boss the next morning, and was summarily shot and killed by his best friend. He was a hero of our nation, and of our species.

Having given a Canadian son to this great struggle, just as so many Immies have, is it not time for our voices to be heard? Am I not Canadian?

Yours truly,

Marcus MacEntire

My brother had lived and worked with a foraging crew on the mainland for five years. I’d had no idea there were Z’s in the far north of the mainland. Or maybe James had gone further south. In my brother’s letters, he’d always tell me that he could damn near see Banks from their camp on the waterfront, so he was very far north. I told myself not to worry.

The voter registration volunteers took my ID and my fingerprint, and I was ushered into a voting booth. I voted for the Immie party,

of course. For one thing, my mom was our parliamentary candidate. I couldn't very well not vote for my own mom. I'd knew she'd lose, of course: The Immie party, The Democratic Union, never won more than 20% of the vote, even though 55% of Islanders were immies. But with more of us kids who'd been born on Banks coming of age each year, we got closer and closer to a government that would allow immies the vote. It was mostly a symbolic thing, but I did want my mom to vote just once. It'd mean a lot to her.

Then I walked a frigid half-mile to the lab, walking backwards to shelter my face from the blistering north wind.

2

My zombie was a second generation Z, the kind that wasn't supposed to exist. I called her Irma. She was maybe 20, although Z's look old as hell, and she'd probably died in childbirth. Like all Z's requisitioned for the Banks University Medical School, she'd been discovered by foraging parties and shipped to Banks. The bodies tended to hold up fairly well as long as you got to them during the 9 months it was cold as hell on the northern mainland. They pumped her full of formaldehyde, and now she was mine. Well, I shared her with Abe, my lab partner.

When I peeled open Irma after gloving up, I found a note pinned to her liver.

"I liver you, Caroline. I've always livered you, and I've never known how to say it. —Abe"

I'd known Abe since we were seven years old, and his sense of humor had never progressed. The Anatomy Z's are pretty well dried out before we 18-year-old would-be scientists and doctors get to them on account of how contact with even dead Z saliva or blood can theoretically lead to infection. In reality, you pretty much have to French kiss a Z corpse to risk anything happening to you, but the government—understandably, I suppose—was rather keen on not

seeing the disease spread through one of the few remaining colonies of humans left in the Americas. I pulled out the liver and examined it for tumors—Z's get tons of cancer because D131Y turns out to be exceptionally carcinogenic and they eat little else. I couldn't find any cancer, but I was pretty bad at spotting tumors. I was pretty bad at anatomy in general, to be honest. I didn't want to be a Z scientist. I just wanted to be a regular family doctor, a Sore Throat and Sorry Your Tummy Hurts Doctor. Abe wanted to cure the disease, of course. Everyone in our class except me wanted to cure the disease.

Me, I quite liked living on Banks. I had no interest in taking the world back. *But we could drive whenever we wanted*, my friends would say. *In California it's warm all year. You can take a six-hour airplane ride and be in Paris, looking at the Eiffel Tower.* They made it all sound very romantic, but I read a lot of books from the Beez, and honestly it seemed every bit as screwed up as the Aze, only with more people.

The lab started to fill in a few minutes before class, everybody coupling off with their Z's, while I stood over mine until Abe walked in with Dr. McLean. She took off her coat revealing a threadbare white labcoat underneath. White labcoats, I supposed, were not at the top of the Plunder List for the crews on the mainland. "So who had a cancerous liver?" About half the class raised their hands. I kept mine down. "Wrong," she said. "None of these cadavers have cancerous livers; what you mistake for tumors are in fact something else. We know they're something else because they don't grow; they don't metastasize; and they don't appear to overtake the Z. Almost all Z's die of nutrient imbalances, one of which presumably causes the masses you're finding in livers. So what's going on?"

The class was silent.

"That's a nonrhetorical question, by the way. So many of those in the study of Z anatomy. Abraham, are you *texting*?"

Abe slid his phone back into his pocket. "Sorry, I just have so many lady suitors, Professor. It's just... I never let it get in the way of my studies, but there are a lot of young women trying to get in contact with me throughout the day."

"Uh huh," said Dr. McLean. "Well, they'll be sad to learn that you'll be unavailable for the rest of the morning, as you'll be jarring

and preserving these livers after class."

"But—"

"No buts. We are engaged in a serious business here, whether you choose to take it seriously or not. If we can identify the mechanisms that kill them—if we can find a chemical to spray on their crops or a disease we might introduce to their population—the planet could be ours again, Abraham, and I would submit to you that being part of such a civilization-changing event might actually further improve your standing with—and I'm sure they appreciate you calling them this—'the ladies.'"

Abe, defeated, could only shrug. He'd never won a fight with a teacher, not even in primary school, but it didn't keep him from trying. (He was not great with the ladies, it rater goes without saying. Stretched and scrawny and still boyish at 18, Abe was the kind of boy you rooted for, not the kind you kissed.)

We moved on to an aching boring discussion of the pancreas, which I couldn't even really see until we flipped our Z over and Abe cut her down the back, revealing the spine curved from a life bent over corn, and it occurred to me that people who spent all their time bowing down before the Lord might end up with the same problem. It made me stand up straighter.

The muscles of a Z are amazing—no one knows if it's because they spend every waking moment of their lives working or because the virus itself functions as some kind of anabolic steroid, but anyway we had to cut through the sinewy, meat-like muscles of her back to get to the abdominal cavity, where the little pancreas, hidden amid the larger and more famous organs, pumped a very different set of hormones into Z's than ours pumped into us.

The study of these hormones was one of the most exciting fields of research into the virus, but I could never quite understand why, because—as previously noted—all the, like, superintellectual whyzs-are-zs stuff didn't interest me very much. I just wanted to know what to do about strep throat given that our supply of antibiotics was perpetually low and threatened by spoilage and it cost us like half the island budget to import a single plane of medical supplies from the Africans.

All of which is just to say that I zoned out pretty hardcore after the liver talk and Abe's subsequent humiliation, and really I only tell

you any of that to explain that Abe could not walk home with me that day as he usually would, because he was pickling innards.

Right so I walked home alone, which meant that I was by myself when the storm siren went off. It was godawful loud, and I happened to be walking right past the barracks when it started, so in addition to the screeching of the siren, our entire army was running around me like chickens with their heads cut off.

I wove my way through them along the street as people ran into stores or apartment buildings. Downtown Banks is built up—not like the pictures of cities I see from the Beez, but still, there are lots of stores and hair salons and plenty of places to hide from the wailing of the siren, but I stayed outside, jogging toward home. All I could think of was getting to my mom and finding out what was wrong, and I felt kind of panicked, since I'd never in my life heard the siren in a non-test situation, and also because the siren sound itself is just not helpful when it comes to maintaining calm.

I hadn't felt this way since I was a kid, this aching need to be home, this belief that all would be well if only I could be inside those four walls with my mom. As I ran, I told myself it was just a drill, although the drills happened only on Sundays. I told myself that I'd go home and Mom and I would crawl into bed under the mountain of covers and because the election coverage would be broadcast on the radio, we might even have heat all night instead of one hour on two off. I thought of my brother on the mainland, wondered if he felt this way every day.

I saw more and more uniforms as I got closer to our building. It was mostly an early immigrant building, nice for immie housing, the best building in the neighborhood really in terms of insulation, not the kind of building where we saw a lot of the Service, and I just kept thinking that she was dead, that no way would they sound the siren if there weren't Z's on Banks, and no way would the Service be swarming our neighborhood unless...

But then I saw my mom from a block and a half away, waving frantically, organizing the Service members. Mom wasn't in the

Service, and she wasn't an elected official, but everyone on Banks knew and trusted her. I could see her shouting but couldn't hear over the siren and the din of panic. But I ran straight through the crowd to her, and as she hugged me, I felt her turning me away from something she didn't want me to see.

Unfortunately, I am taller than my mother, so all I had to do was look over her shoulder. It was Mr. MacEntire, lying dead on the gravel sidewalk outside our building, shot many times in the head and chest. Next to him lay a late-stage Z, not unlike my cadaver, except with the unique skin pallor I'd heard my mother describe so many times: dehydrated piss yellow. The Z was still kind of twitching. Still holding me, Mom shouted, "No one poses a threat to you unless they attempt to attack you. The people in this building are your friends and neighbors and this appears to be an isolated incident. Let's not get trigger happy." Then she reached out an arm. A mustachioed service member wearing the red coat of an officer handed her a shotgun.

"I'm gonna search the building," she told me. "You go stay with Abe. Everything is fine. We are fine."

"Mom, how are we fine if a zombie made it to Banks? How will we ever be fine again?"

"Don't call them that," she said. "They're sick people, but they're people. I love you. Go to Abe's now. It's going to be okay."

But it wouldn't be okay, of course. For the first time in the 25 years AZ, a live zombie—I don't care if my mom hates the word; that's what they are—had made it to Banks Island. Not only that, he'd bitten Mr. MacEntire, who then had to be executed just as his son had been. It was the first death by gunshot on Banks in four years, since two Service members fighting over a girl broke into the weapons cache and decided to have an Old West duel that killed one and paralyzed the other.

Also, I'd seen my first dead person.

One gets used to carnage, of course. But you never forget the first dead person you see—the desperate mouth agape, the eyeballs nearly popping out of the head in fear, chunks of his face blown away, his arms not splayed out like I imagined a corpse would be but clutching

at his chest, his eyeglasses—salvaged from the mainland and worth at least a month's pay—shattered, only half on his face.

I ran the block to Abe's house and told his mom everything as she made tea. She kept saying that everything would be okay, too, but I could hear the edge in her voice. She texted several times—Abe and his dad, I assume—and they got back at almost the exact same time.

"I mean it's not the *ideal* way to get out of pickling livers," Abe said to me as I hugged him.

I pushed him away from me. "Not a time for jokes," I said. "I saw him. I saw Mr. MacEntire."

"I'm sorry," Abe's dad said. "I often wondered how he could go on, but he did. That's heroism, I'd say. Probably stood up to the Z, too, to keep the Z outside. Imagine a Z in an apartment building. It'd be carnage."

We sat down and huddled over our tea, and then suddenly the power came on. After a few minutes, the radiators got hot enough for us to take off our overcoats, and we huddled around it.

"It's a long way for a Z to travel," Abe's dad said. "That's 20 miles of open water, and with the wind pushing him South."

(Side note: People always referred to Z's as "him" when the gender was ambiguous. This says a bunch of things about humans, and about zombies.)

"Well, at least it's over," Abe's mom said, then sipped from her tea cup.

"How do we know it's over?"

Abe's phone beeped. He flipped it open.

"Can't talk; I'm here with Caroline. ... Shut up. ... She's like my sister. ... If I were going to set her up with a guy, believe me it wouldn't be you. ... I voted for the Immies, natch. ... Dude, I *can't* talk. ... I'm just going to hang up." He looked at me. "They all think you're pretty. It's so *weird*."

"You're weird," I answered.

"Your butt is weird," he responded.

"*Your* butt is weird," I said.

"Incorrect. I don't have a butt," he said. (This was true. Too

skinny.)

Abe's dad interrupted us. "Prime Minister's about to go on the radio," he said.

We left our tea.

3

I could hear the nervousness in news anchor Mark Hamish's voice as he spoke. Hamish had been reading me the news on the radio my whole life; I'd never heard him like this, and his insecure fumbling quieted everyone. It seemed there was only me and the radio. Even after my mom arrived, casually bringing the shotgun into Abraham's house like you just walked around with a gun all day instead of a purse or whatever, I barely registered her presence.

I'd voted for the Democratic Union, but I had always respected Prime Minister Stone. He'd helped the economy a lot by dramatically increasing mainland salvaging expeditions; he'd increased our natural gas reserves and improved food delivery, especially fresh food like fish and hothouse vegetables, to the poor. He even knew who I was. Whenever I was walking to school or to the fish market or whatever and happened across him, he'd always tip his hat and say, "The daughter of my loyal opposition," and I'd say, "Mr. Prime Minister, sir."

Something about him felt magical. I don't buy into any of that if-you-don't-have-a-dad-you-fall-for-powerful-men crap, but I liked the Prime Minister. And I expected him to comfort me, because Mark Hamish sure couldn't.

Uh, we're expecting to hear from the Prime Minister momentarily; I've been told he is uh making his way down to our, our station headquarters at the moment but again to recap a creature with the virus has apparently been seen on Banks in the Southend neighborhood, where the creature apparently attacked at least one individual two blocks up from the shore on Madison. Both the stricken individual and the uh I'm hearing that Prime Minister Stone will very soon – Mr. Prime Minister, sir. Yes, he's uh here with us live in the studio. I will turn the microphone over to him. Ladies and gentlemen, the Prime Minister of Banks Island Jack Stone.

He cleared his throat, and then spoke with all the confidence that Hamish had lacked. *Fellow citizens and friends, our island remains safe. One male Z arrived via boat at Banks with a large supply of corn kernels, presumably for planting. It is well known that Z's seek to infect people; seeing a human settlement, it appears the Z arrived in town and bit one immigrant resident, Marcus MacEntire, who was tragically but appropriately killed by Mia Featherstone, who saw the attack from her apartment window and brought down a licensed hunting rifle. Ms. Featherstone, who lived longer in the United States than almost any survivor of the pandemic, is well-trained and knows the dangers of Z's better than most. Her swift, decisive action saved lives today, and although she and I have long been political opponents, I am in her debt. Ms. Featherstone and several units of Banks Marines cleared the area, searched it tirelessly, and uncovered no further infections.*

I wish to express my thanks, and the island's thanks, to Ms. Featherstone and to our security forces, who responded to this threat appropriately, sensibly, and with great courage. Our security forces contain both immigrants and native Canadians, and today I have been reminded that there is no longer a Canadian, or a Mexican, or a Honduran, or an American on this island. There are only humans. Banks is our country—all of ours—and I want to announce tonight that our party will no longer oppose voting rights for immigrants. We were reminded today that immigrants are among our heroes. And in the next election, they will be among our voters.

We are a young island. Most of our citizens have never known a time in which Z's posed a threat. But tonight, my friends, we are an island that must grow up quickly. If one can arrive in a boat, another can. And next time, we might not be able to contain the attack.

In the coming days and weeks, we will work with all the island's political parties and our military to determine the path forward. But rest assured, fellow citizens, we will fight for our home and native land. The threat may feel nearer today, but it has never been far. Think of our island's heroes who've died on the mainland so that our island might be free, safe, and prosperous. Tonight, we bring their strength into our hearts, and together, always together, we will protect our island, our nation, our continent, and our species.

I sing poorly, friends, so I hope you will join me.

The Prime Minister began to sing the national anthem, O Canada. Soon you could hear other people in the studio singing—I heard Mark Hamish and then many other voices, and then Abe and his parents were singing. And for the first time in my life, I heard my mother sing the anthem, too, with tears in her eyes.

With glowing hearts we see thee rise, and even though I'd never felt entirely like Canada was my country, I was singing, too. God keep our land glorious and free! Mom wrapped both arms around me and we all sang together in full voice, the whole of our island: *O Canada we stand on guard for thee.* You could hear the applause not only in our apartment and in the neighborhood but on the whole island—a people finally united by the anthem of a nation that no longer even really existed.

The thing is, we hadn't had time to make our own songs yet. And if the Z's had anything to say about it, we never would.

We had electricity all night instead of two on one off like usual so that we could listen to the election results come in, which was interrupted by lots of analysis from scientists and other experts theorizing how the Z got to Banks and what it wanted. Mom said almost nothing the whole night; her party's election rally, and all

the election rallies, had been cancelled. Abe's parents and my mom shared a bottle of wine as the results came in: As expected, the Democratic Union did slightly better than in past elections, since more kids of immies could vote, but they still only polled about 22% across the island. Stone's party was denied a majority, but not by much, meaning they'd form a coalition with the Democratic Union or the other main opposition party, the Greens. Mom wouldn't be in parliament, but as a leader in the party, she had a chance for a cabinet post if the Democratic Union ended up in the coalition. All in all, about the best we could've hoped for.

To celebrate, both Abe and I were given glasses of wine. It was really good wine—rich and earthy and throat-burning, like grape juice infused with a touch of both smoke and fire. Mom watched me as I drank.

"You like it," she said.

"I do," I answered.

She had a faraway look on her face, and I thought she might be worried. "I'm not gonna become an alcoholic or anything, mom. Booze is too expensive."

"Yeah we'll just huff paint. Cheaper, and a much better high," Abe said.

"Abraham," said his father.

"Clearly I'm kidding," Abe said. "Have I ever not been kidding in my entire life?"

It occurred to me that Abe hadn't, not really. Mom was still looking at me. "Jeez, mom, seriously, stop worrying."

"I'm not worrying. I'm just remembering. I always loved wine, too, Caroline. In the days before I headed north, I lived in a wine cellar for a while. I was just thinking that I was your age then, drinking a bottle of wine a day, and here you are having your first sip of it ever."

Abe snickered.

"I don't know what he's laughing about," I said. "I'm as pure as the driven snow. I've never kissed a boy, tasted alcohol, smoked a cigarette, told a lie, or otherwise sullied my inborn perfection, mother."

She just smiled at me, like she knew more of the world than I ever would.

Later, Mom decided to go back to the apartment, "just to make sure everything was okay," but made me stay at Abe's. It was past midnight when she left. Abe's parents turned off the radio and sent us to bed—me in his bed that dated from the Beez and him on a half-inch thick feather-stuffed mattress on the floor.

I lay down wearing longjohns, jeans, a long-sleeve undershirt, a pink wool sweater, and a hat. In short, I was not in a particularly vulnerable state or anything. This is a trope you always see from stories in the Beez—like, a girl and a boy end up in a room together and suddenly they're half-dressed and then the whole thing just becomes inevitable, but on Banks, sleepovers were utterly unsexy.

Abe—also adequately dressed—did crunches off in a corner of the room, talking the whole time. "I think I'll volunteer," he said.

"For a scavenger crew? They won't take you. You're in med school, Abe. There's no shortage of strong backs for scavenging."

"No, for the Service. You know there's gonna be a recruitment drive now. It's inevitable. We've gotta establish a perimeter."

"No offense, but you'd make a terrible soldier."

"Why? I can talk to you while doing sit-ups; I'm fit enough."

"You're just not a soldier. You're a...you're a nerd. I mean, even the way you work out is nerdy. You don't have like a killer—"

"What do you mean the way I work out is nerdy?"

"How many calories have you burnt in the last five minutes?"

"Um, I dunno. 17 or 18 probably."

"Abe, that's not something normal people know."

He sighed and hopped up to a standing position in a single fluid motion. "What's your type?" he asked. "If you don't like soldiers and you don't like med students and you don't like nerdy fitness enthusiasts, what exactly are you looking for in this world, Caroline?"

"What, romantically?"

"Yes, romantically."

"I'll tell you what I'm not into. I'm not into people, like, constructing themselves in a super self-conscious way in order to be attractive. I'm not into lives that are just kind of like merely *performed*, you know? I like people who are *living* their lives. There are people who volunteer for the Service who do it because they really love the country, and they feel like this is the best way they can

serve it. And then there are people who want to be heroes. I love you, Abe. I love you to death. But I think you want to be a hero."

He smiled with closed lips. "I like that you never bullshit me, Caroline. But it would be okay, you know if you wanted to just bullshit me like *occasionally*."

He turned off the lights. What a luxury, to choose when in the evening the darkness comes.

I couldn't sleep, of course, because I'd seen MacEntire clutching his chest, and because immies could vote now, and because Mom might be in the freaking cabinet, and because I could tell that Abe wasn't asleep, either.

This is a totally perverse thing to say about dead people, but seeing MacEntire and the Z...it made me feel this huge adrenaline rush, this unprecedented awareness that I was *alive*, that I remained among all the other things still growing in the universe. It could've been me of course who'd been bitten. *But it wasn't*. And this surge of feeling, this hyperawareness of my aliveness, felt more intense than anything I'd ever felt.

And that's when I realized that I might be a warrior after all, like my mother was.

"Hell of a coincidence," Abe said in the dark.

"What?"

"A Z shows up for the first time in the history of Banks. On election day. The same election day that Stone announces immie voting rights. That's a lot of events to occur on a single day."

"I guess. I think the immie vote is all about unifying people before a battle, though, you know?"

"Yeah," he said. And then it was quiet again, for minutes, and I returned to my consideration of MacEntire's corpse and my aliveness. I don't know. Maybe I should've felt ashamed about it, but I really didn't.

"You awake?" he asked.

"Yup," I said.

"It's just, like, even supposing you DO make it to Banks, you probably land on some god-forsaken rock a hundred miles from here. And the wind was coming down from the North. He doesn't have a motorboat, does he? He's smart enough to tack a sail against the

wind? Or strong enough to row across an ocean? And on today of all days, he washes up in our town and kills a widower."

"I don't understand what you're saying. Is there some alternate explanation?"

"I'm not saying *anything*, Caroline, except that it's a hell of a coincidence."

The next morning, I went home to change at dawn. I took a long if not particularly warm bath and got dressed—long johns, long-sleeve t-shirt, cardigan, coat, gloves, and a scarf from the Beez declaring the glory of Liverpool Football Club. England was gone now, from everything we could gather. Too fertile. Too close to the initial outbreak. Too urban. All of Europe had been, really. A huge part of Africa had survived, and once every few years they'd fly a recon mission over Banks, but they never landed. Everything we knew about them came from the leaflets they dropped, and the armaments that would come down in wooden crates attached to parachutes. They wanted us to win, but couldn't risk their meager fuel supplies. So they said. They had a lot more fuel than us if they could fly planes around the world, though.

So but anyway I wrapped myself in the scarf of a football club that had played in a now nonexistent nation and walked downstairs into the frigid north wind toward school in hopes of being alone again with my zombie for a while so I could think about her pancreas, and her liver, and what made her variety of human (if indeed she were human) so much more effective than my variety of human.

But on the way, I saw a crowd gathered down Main Street by Voss's Scavenged and New.

When it is 31 below zero, which is to say usually, crowds don't often form outdoors on Banks, so since I had a bit of extra time, I decided to walk down there and see what was going on. I could hear the bullhorn before anything else. A man dressed in scavenged fatigues of the Canadian army stood on the roof of Voss's, shouting.

"We will take only 50 volunteers. Only 50 today. You can come back tomorrow, and we may take more."

Abe was at the back of the line. "What the hell are you doing?" I

asked.

He handed me the front page of our four-page newspaper, *THE BANKS RESTORER*. Headline: A MESSAGE FROM THE PRIME MINISTER. Subhead: WE CAN WAIT NO LONGER.

I scanned the article. We would initially send some scouts into the field, penetrating deep into the mainland, trying to establish which Z communities threatened us. These scouts would not be an army, merely observers, who'd report back so the Service could respond appropriately.

Then he got into the Collins. Every schoolchild on Banks read the work of Susan Collins, the anthropologist and military strategist whose work on defensive warfare proved vital to the initial survival of many Canadians, and whose calculations were still taken as gospel on Banks. But the Prime Minister tackled them head on, especially her famous statement that we would need 2 million armed soldiers to fight the 100 million Z's believed to be alive. Collins argued that within four or five generations, we could grow our population enough to fight them, particularly since she believed Z populations grew very slowly based on all the 20-something dead ones.

The Prime Minister quoted all these statistics and then responded: "But how can we grow our population without the resources to feed and house and clothe those children? Only by protecting our island from the scourge. To wait is to surrender."

"Turn the page," Abe said after I finished.

On Page 3, there was another editorial beneath the article about Mr. MacEntire's death. *THE OPPOSITION STANDS WITH THE PRIME MINISTER*. By Mia Featherstone.

"So are you going to?"

"Hell, yes," Abe said. "I'm smart. I'm quiet. I know how to walk in the woods. Those seem the only prerequisites for the job. And you?"

"Hell, no."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I am privileged to attend med school, as are you, where we can do much more for my country than any military scout."

My mother never talked much about her year in America in the Aze. I know I was named for a friend of hers who died, and I know she stayed longer than most because her sister was Z'ed up, and I

know about her escape to Banks, but she never talked about killing or anything like that. And I never wanted to find out what it would be like to be surrounded by brain damaged corn addicts.

"Suit yourself," he said. "But before you go, quick question: Have you always wanted to marry a hero of the zombie wars?"

I rolled my eyes. "Abe, you're like my brother."

"Secondary question: Are you into incest?"

"Abe!"

He smirked. I hugged him and walked to class.

I went home that afternoon, walking past the queue outside of Voss's, which still snaked for almost a block.

In the apartment, Mom was hunched over the desk, writing furiously when I opened the door. She quickly flipped over the sheet of paper and said, "Caroline, we need to talk."

"Yeah, we do," I said. "Have you seen the line to volunteer for the war that you endorsed?"

She motioned for me to sit on the bed, so I did. "I may have made a mistake," she said quietly. "I—I know you think adults have it figured out, Caroline, but I am just as...I'm the same person I always was."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"We need scouts in the field, Caroline. These Z's, they may not be ashore yet, but they kill more and more scavengers a year, and it's only a matter of time before a weak-minded scavenger fails to admit he's been bitten and gets sent home and....just trust me, Caroline. You cannot possibly understand the stakes here."

"They aren't ashore? Because one was yesterday."

"Right. Yes. Well." She stood up, looked out the window down toward the sidewalk.

"What?"

"I didn't kill him if that's what you're thinking. MacEntire volunteered. I didn't—I couldn't have done that to him. A soldier, a good soldier, doing his—"

"Wait, volunteered? He offered to die? What the hell are you talking about?"

"In exchange for the immie vote, MacEntire volunteered. The

leaders of the parties worked out an agreement, Caroline. We get the vote; Stone gets support for the scouting parties he needs to expand our perimeter. MacEntire...MacEntire knew better than anyone that too many of our men and women working on the mainland are being attacked. So, yes, Caroline. Obviously, I am trusting you with a national secret, but I am doing so because I love you and I need you to understand. MacEntire was shot by an army officer. The Z was imported, dead, from the mainland."

"No, Mom, bullshit. I saw him. I saw the Z twitching."

"They implanted a device, an electrical device, that made the corpse spasm. That's what you saw. Caroline, we need these scouts. We need people to understand the seriousness—"

I was furious. I got right up in her face. "So you decided to fill boys like Abe up with patriotic fervor and send them off to hunt through the mainland wilderness for Z's? That's—"

"Abe volunteered?"

"Yes, Mom. He did. He did it because—a"

"I'll try to get him off the list."

"No. NO! It doesn't work that way! We don't play favorites in this country. You should know that, Mom. You should know that if you pull this crap ANYONE could volunteer. Abe could. Hell I could."

"No, Caroline. No, you can't."

"Sure I can, Mom. You don't think I love my country? You don't think I want to honor Mr. MacEntire's wishes? If he died so that I might be full of revolutionary Z-hating zeal, and so that you might have more political power, maybe I should just thank him by going right down to Voss's and putting my name in."

"Caroline, I forbid you."

But I was so full of feelings—full to bursting with hate and rage and sadness and disappointment, and still with that lingering feeling of life that only bearing witness to death can give you, so full that I could not take it, and I shouted, "I'm going! I'm going! You can't stop me."

I wrapped my Liverpool scarf around my face. Mom jumped up and grabbed me. She was strong, but not as strong as she once had been. I threw her to the ground and ran downstairs and then down the street toward Voss's. I found Abe inside, browsing a rack

of scavenged greeting cards, standing next to the table where Service members in fatigues took your relevant stats. I was one of the last to offer my services.

I have no idea if Mom followed me, but at any rate, she never found me.

4

"Name."

"Caroline Featherstone."

"Nationality."

"Banks Born Immie."

"Age."

"18."

"Occupation."

"Med student."

"Weapons experience."

"Um, limited? I can use a scalpel, I guess?"

"Weight."

"That's a bit personal. I'm a bit round in the hips, but I'll fit into a uniform."

"Weight."

"61 kilo."

"Height."

"165."

The intake processor, a gray-bearded man, glanced up at me with his dark eyes for the first time. "Are you prepared to fight and die in the defense of humanity on the North American continent?"

"Sir, yes sir."

"Do you have tracking experience?"

"I grew up hunting with my dad, yeah, both here and sometimes in the winter on the mainland."

"Names'll be called at the end of the day."

5

The intake room was just Voss's, closed for the day. Abe and I ate some jerky and walked around looking at the weird collection of scavenge Voss's had in stock: There were cracked plastic fire trucks and new wooden tops; new ivory handles attached to scavenged knife blades; greeting cards wishing the recipient a happy new year 2015. There were several hundred others packed into Voss's, most of them young, undereducated, the type of people who'd end up scavenging or logging on the mainland if they didn't get this gig.

It was a full hour before the officer with the bullhorn entered Voss's.

"If I call your name, you've been selected." Abe grabbed my hand. I could feel his nervous fluttering pulse through his tight grip. My heart was beating, too, but I was mostly still just angry at my mom for being precisely the kind of corrupt politician she'd always railed against. People want power, I guess, and they'll do anything for it. Even Mia Featherstone.

Abe's name was called 12th. Mine was called 34th.

6

I hadn't been on a ship since my dad's little long-lining boat was seized and sold after his death, and it had been a decade since I'd ridden in anything gas-powered. But I hardly had time to think about any of it while crossing over to the mainland because I was so busy 1. Vomiting, and 2. Trying not to be vomited upon. The ship had sails in addition to engines, and there were all these fit, handsome guys with wind-reddened cheeks running around doing sailor stuff. I gathered the boat was usually a fishing vessel, but all its nets or whatever had been offloaded to make room for the 50 of us, pressed almost up against each other in a teeming mass of seasickness.

The endlessness of the voyage made it utterly obvious that no zombie could ever row across this ocean, but no one mentioned it. I wonder whether we just constitutionally trusted our government, or whether there was something inside of us that wanted to fight, that wanted to take back the warm land where you lay on the beach in your underwear and the sun burns like every day is August. Or maybe we wanted to kill those who'd killed so many of us. Or maybe we wanted what the government wanted: More land so we could eat more food and live more comfortably. I like it in books when people just want one thing: They want to marry off their daughter to an aristocrat, or they want to get into that special university that never accepts members of their social class, or they want to convince the

girl they loved way back when that she should never have married that other dude in the first place.

But nobody ever really has one want, or one motive. Really all the motives are convoluted and complicated and no one ever knows for sure why anyone—especially one’s self—does anything. Which is the other thing I was thinking about as I heaved bile over the rusted railing of the fishing boat: Here I was, headed for the mainland, with no trust in the government of the country I’d agreed to fight for.

I wondered why I’d done it—why I’d taken the uniform and put it on and signed the intake forms and held up my right hand while swearing allegiance to Banks and humanity as we know it. Why I’d agreed to get on the boat without saying goodbye to my mother. Maybe in the end motivation wasn’t so complicated: Maybe in the end we did the things we did because we were told to do them, and all our little decisions that felt so momentous were really just instants of swimming either with or against the current, neither of which of course mattered in the end, because the current—in the fullness of time—will take you where it’s going.

Maybe in the end we were just being dragged along by our nature—like the Z’s were.

I wondered what it would be like to kill such a ... person? Creature? Post-person?

Anyway, I got to find out eventually.

My platoon consisted of four people, led by Captain Angelina Morrison, age 28, a native Canadian who’d signed up about four hours longer than me and therefore got to be an officer. The other members of my platoon were Abe and an Indian girl named Hannah. She was 16, and very quiet. Which of course meant that Abe talked to her constantly.

Our second morning on the mainland, the four of us ate a breakfast of half a chicken egg a piece and some smoked moose. “You were born on Banks?”

Hannah nodded.

“You live in town?”

“We live up north a bit.”

“Your family traps?”

She nodded.

“You like it up there?”

She shrugged.

“I’m a med student myself, born in Banks. Immie parents. Live in town, just a couple blocks from downtown actually. It’s a nice neighborhood, plus I’m like spitting distance from Caroline here, who has been my best friend since—”

“Might gain some weight if you ever stopped talking to eat, Private,” said Captain Morrison.

“Ma’am yes ma’am,” he said, taking a forkful of eggs—which is to say his entire serving—and piling it into his mouth. Like so many boys, Abe was not blessed with particularly attractive table manners, and so when the scooping forkful of eggs only halfway made it into his mouth, he shoved the rest in with his hand.

“So charming,” I said, whereupon he proceeded to chew with his mouth aggressively, terrifyingly open.

Our job the first three weeks was mostly to sit around base camp and “train,” which meant passing around the few guns and learning how to clean and shoot them, and then practicing digging holes and setting snare traps. I’d trapped with my dad as a kid, and Hannah knew all about trapping, so we were top of the class. Abe struggled like the science nerd he deep down was, and Captain Morrison mostly just ordered us around. She was pretty stuck-up about everything, always making us call her Captain and whatnot.

Sometimes we’d be sent on little training missions to learn how to use our compasses or whatever; we’d venture a few miles into the tundra, and once all the way to the treeline, where I saw my first evidence of struggling corn plants, frozen and unharvested. But no one ever saw Z’s.

And then we received orders to ship out. We were among the first scouting crews to be sent down into the wilderness, only a radio to connect us to the base, and only our compass to radio in our position. We were to look for Z’s, observe their social hierarchies, attempt to get a deeper understanding of what might be pushing them north—whether it was population pressures or a sincere desire to expand into the Arctic. The day before I left, I received a letter from my mom.

Caroline,

I love you. I am sorry. I am very, very sorry, and I can only hope to God that you are reading this. Throughout my life, I have tried to do right and, in the trying, done wrong—but never more so than now. You and your brother are the only unambiguously good things I’ve ever made, my beloved, and you must stay safe. You must above all stay safe. Do not be a hero. Do not volunteer to go into the bush. Return home, so that you can grow into a better woman than your mother.

And if God forbid you do find yourself scouting: DIG A HOLE, NO MATTER WHAT, EVERY NIGHT. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. Mom.

We set off marching. We dug a hole the first night, hacking through the permafrost in the late afternoon arctic March darkness, but even after three hours our foxhole was barely big enough for the four of us to crouch in.

The next morning, we began walking at 8 and after a few hours found ourselves in and among the forest, a terrifying place full of shadows and trees thicker than I had thought possible. So many apartments could be built with this wood, so many hearths could be kept warm, and it just stood here, doing nothing. It made me understand the rapacious hunger of humans in the Beez, how they slashed and burned so much of the world, how they half-covered the world in corn even before the Z’s showed up to finish the job.

As we marched, Captain Morrison tried to keep us silent, but Abe wouldn’t stop talking to Hannah in the hopes of making her open up. He believed this about people, I guess, that they all have a story to tell, and he wanted everyone to have the chance to tell it. It was his greatest generosity, I suppose, but it was also crazy annoying.

“You don’t live in like an igloo do you?”

“No. That’s a myth.”

“Yeah I figured. But I love the *idea* of an igloo, you know? The idea that ice can save you from ice?”

“I guess.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“...no.”

“There was a pause there. I sensed a definite pause. Caroline, did not you hear the brief hiccup in Hannah’s voice when asked about the—”

“I think it’s probably none of your business. Also if we die because Z’s heard you asking Hannah about her private life, I’m going to kill you.”

“But in the hypothetical you just posited, I’m already dead.”

“I will double-kill you.”

“But you’d be dead also. I don’t mean to belabor the point, but a dead person killing another dead person is a terrible idea for a consequence. If you were saying you’d HAUNT me or try to prevent my entry into a hypothetical postmortal PARADI—”

“Shut up, Private,” Captain Morrison said.

“Ma’am yes ma’am,” answered Abe, dejected.

And then we walked on in silence.

We walked for two weeks, due South, radioing in every day what we’d seen: Some plants, tightly bunched in crooked rows. Once, evidence a campfire, albeit cold and rained upon. Each day, I hoped they might tell us to turn back, that we’d gone far enough and could return to base camp. But every day they sent us farther into the forest, picking our way through the underbrush, 20 kilometers on a good day, our packs lightening as our food started to run low, all the water we drank tasting of iodine because we dosed the creek water in case there were dead zombies upstream poisoning the river. (Poisoned zombie water was a popular theory as to how the epidemic managed to spread so quickly.)

I’d never walked so much in my life. I wore through the soles in my shoes, and Abe had to stitch these leaves into the rubber to make them comfortable. I smelled horrible. My hair clumped into unbrushable tangles. On the fifteenth day, we radioed in, saying we were low on food.

You have a rifle, they reminded us. Kill something and eat it. Then they told us we’d walked further than the entire length of Banks. Our country, for all practical purposes, had doubled in size. The Service was moving behind us, securing the land, establishing a perimeter. I was further from home than almost any human had been in decades. All the trees we’d picked our way around would be

property of Banks Island now. We were doing our country proud.
And we'd done it all without killing a single Z.

Three days later we were surrounded.

7

By then, of course, we had long abandoned our commitment to dig a foxhole every night. Holes were hard to dig—we had to hack through roots and rock with nothing but our glorified hand shovels. And so I woke up one morning to Captain Harrison screaming. I got out of the tent. Her pants were at her ankles and she was screaming bloody murder and crying, screaming *Tell my parents I fought don't tell them it went like this do it Caroline just do it just get the gun and do it.*

"What—what is going on? What happened?"

"They're out there. They're everywhere. They've got us surrounded. I went out to take a piss and," she spun around and I saw a vicious bite taken out of the back of her shoulderblade.

"Oh God oh Captain oh God," whereupon the Captain launched backwards, her head bursting open as a hollowpoint bullet blew through her skull. She'd been shot between the eyes. I spun around. Hannah was holding the rifle. "Where are they?" she asked, utterly calm.

"Oh my God what is even happening?"

"Get the radio get Abe up and let's get into the trees," she answered. "Don't forget your guns." This represented perhaps the combined total number of words I'd ever heard Hannah speak in our months together.

"Right, yeah," I said. I rushed into the tent, where Abe was

pulling on pants, and he began to ask me in his verbose way what had happened, whereupon I just shouted "Radio! Guns! Into the trees!" By the time we got outside, I could hear them: Their feet shuffling along the forest floor, and then the terrifying sound of their inhuman grunts. Grunts of pain or excitement or fear I couldn't tell. What scared me most about the sound was that I could not attach it to a feeling. It was the sound of creatures finished with creation, and it seemed to me that the sound was above all what made people in the early Aze think of them as zombies. It was the sound of the walking, careless, emptied dead.

In retrospect, it should've occurred to me how odd it was that an ostensibly human military could be outsmarted and surrounded by several thousand noncommunicative, arguably human corn-obsessed monsters. It should've occurred to me that they clearly intended to keep us walking until we found Z's.

But none of this actually did occur to me as I scrambled up the tree helped by Hannah's extended arm. I made my way higher up the tree, above Hannah, my rifle slung around my shoulder. My rifle. American-issue. Military assault rifle. A mere eighty-six rounds of ammunition. Abe tossed the radio—which maybe weighed 10 kilos—up to Hannah, but his throw was so weak that it looked like it would crash back down to the ground, thereby cutting off our only connection with the non-Z'ed world.

Then Hannah swung down from the tree branch like a legit monkey and grabbed the radio before doing a one-arm pull-up to get herself high enough to hand me the radio as I scrambled down. Abe was apologizing profusely but I just told him to shut up and get in the tree.

"I never do anything right," he muttered, and honestly I was inclined to agree.

As the only other person besides Captain Morrison trained to use the radio, I immediately called in to base. Sigma to Base Sigma to Base do you copy?

After a few seconds, the crackled gave way to *copy sigma*.

Base, Captain Morrison was bitten and has been killed. We are now in a tree surrounded by, um, by a lot of them, sir.

What is your position, Sigma?

Oh right right sorry. I felt like a little kid playing at war, except I really sucked at playing. I gave him the coordinates Morrison had written in marker on the radio last night.

He asked us about our ammunition situation, whether we had a foxhole. He asked us how many Z's there were.

I don't know, sir. There are a lot of them.

Thousands?

I don't think so. Definitely hundreds. I could see them in a ring around the tree.

Only shoot ones that attempt to climb the tree. You will have to wait patiently, soldiers. You may have to wait days. Be patient. Base out.

They didn't seem particularly into climbing trees. They gathered at the base of the tree and stared up at us, grunting. I couldn't bear the sound. "Talk to me," I said to Abe.

"What do you want to talk about? Zombies? There's a bunch of them."

"Really anything else?"

"How about moose?" He asked. "I wish a moose would show up, spear a bunch of these zombies with his antlers—just like a crazy, zombie-hating moose impaling hundreds of zombies and then as thanks for his zombie-attacking I'd shoot him and then eat the shit out of him."

"I've always found the phrase 'eat the shit out of' a little weird," I said.

"Yeah, true. I probably wouldn't eat the shit out of him."

"Right," Hannah said quietly. "God forbid you become full of shit, Abraham."

I managed a laugh. And then one decided to grab a branch just above his head.

Z's who (that?) were born Z's are much shorter than others, and almost all of these appeared to be second-generation at least, but this guy was tall—maybe five three—and I couldn't tell if he'd been born or infected. Anyway, we all got real quiet then, as the tallest of them stepped forward and reached up for the branch. He was wearing a moose hide wrapped around him but not so well that I couldn't see his penis. His eyelids were drooping; his eyes jaundiced and

bloodshot. The skin of his face sagged away from his eyes and lips like some kind of surrealist painting, and I figured he must be very old. Maybe he was an infectee. Hell, maybe he was from Chicago. Maybe he was friends with my mom. His fingers black and mangled from decades of planting wrapped around the branch. I saw the muscles in his shriveled forearm tighten.

"You or me?" Hannah asked.

"Me," I said, lowering my rifle, switching off the safety, and firing a single round into his undead face. He fell back, and thrashed for a while. Before he was even dead, a tiny female Z pulled the moose hide off and wrapped herself around it. I couldn't imagine how cold they must be, assuming they felt things like cold.

And then I watched him die naked and alone as the other Z's kept a step or two away from him. I watched the blood, as red as mine, pour out of the hole I'd put in him. He was real, and he was alive, and he'd been alive for a long time, and all he wanted was to keep being alive so he could do the thing that he thought mattered, live the life that he thought was the right and good and noble life—that of devotion to d131y corn.

He wasn't an animal, is what I'm saying. Or at least not any more than the rest of us.

After he was dead, a Z stood on top of his corpse and reached for the tree. She just barely got her fingers onto the branch, and this time I said, "No no if we shoot her we'll just build them a pile of bodies they can climb. Make sure she can do it first."

She couldn't do it. She lacked the strength. They all did, coming forward one after another throughout the endless morning to try to pull themselves up to bite us, but none of them could. They'd grasp the branch, and then you'd see their muscles flex, and maybe they'd lift themselves an inch or two off the ground, but they either lacked the strength for proper pull-ups or the intellectual capacity to sort through which muscles would be needed to execute such a maneuver.

We were safe in the trees, and would be safe, so long as none of us fell out, until we died of thirst or exposure.

But throughout the day, the numbers grew. More and more of them, until there seemed to be a sea of them in the forest. Abe kept trying to count them, but the concentric rings got bigger and bigger until we couldn't see land without zombies, even when we climbed

up to the swayingly high narrow trunk of our tree. There were thousands. Maybe ten thousand. I called it in to headquarters.

There are thousands now, sir. Definitely thousands.

Patience, he counseled.

There might be ten thousand.

Really? Can you get a count?

They're uncountable.

You said ten thousand. You estimate TEN thousand?

I don't know, sir. It seems possible.

We'll be there by morning, he promised.

Although night lasted some fifteen hours, it wasn't hard to stay awake, not with understanding the consequences of falling. We stayed up talking. Abe recited the periodic table in order of atomic number. I sang to the zombies to try to call them, sang the lullabies of my childhood, but they just kept trying and failing to climb the tree, each of them stepping on the body of the poor old Z I'd killed. It was a long night, but I knew they'd come for us. I pictured the Service arriving at dawn, thousands of them, all with machine guns, gloriously mowing down the zombies. We'd have med school cadavers for *decades*.

But in fact, it happened before dawn. Hannah, who'd finally opened up, was telling Abe about her *girlfriend*, hence the pause before, who lived in the city of Banks and whom she saw once every two weeks when her family came up to check traps, and Abe was commiserating about long-distance relationships.

"I've been in a long-distance relationship for years," Abe said.

"It's really challenging."

"With who?"

"With whom. And with you, Featherstone. I'm in a relationship with you, but you're a long distance from being in a relationship with me back."

"That's not fair, Abe. You've never even asked me out."

"Want to go out?"

"If we get down from this tree and don't get Z'ed up and you have a shower, possibly."

"I'm not taking a shower for a *maybe*."

And then I heard the roar of engines overhead.

For the longest time, I couldn't imagine what it might be. The Africans? Why would they do recon missions here but not on Banks, where actual people lived? The roar got louder, and I saw machine gun fire begin to strafe the ground digging holes as it went, before a huge bomb fell not more than 200 meters from our tree. The carnage was unbelievable: The Z's were packed so tight up against each other that the blast sent jaundiced body parts flying into the air. The machine gun fire continued unabated as the plane swooped down just above the treeline. They kept firing as they flew directly over us. A red maple leaf was painted on the side of the fuselage.

"They're us!" Abe shouted. "They're us! They're here to save us."

"Well, they're freaking shooting at us," I said.

"No, they're shooting at them," he shouted over the gunfire, whereupon a bullet tore through Hannah's calf. She screamed and reached for the wound, letting go of her hold on the tree. I grabbed her under the arms just in time. Abe scampered down and took off his shirt, wrapping it around her calf. The plane droned on, firing into the distance, dropping two more bombs.

"Okay, so they don't seem to care much if they hit us."

Hannah had tears in her eyes. Her teeth clenched. The engines got further away, but didn't disappear. "We're bait," she said. "Walk us in until we get treed by zombies, and then wait for them to come to protect their land, thousands of them, and then mow them down while we stand here."

I knew immediately she was right.

Why had my mom reacted so violently to the thought of me volunteering? Why had the guy on the other end of the radio seemed more interested in the number of zombies than anything else? Why had they kept marching us further and further south until we found zombies? If you could kill 10,000 zombies while only losing four intrepid scouts, you'd need far fewer than 2,000,000 soldiers to defeat 100,000,000 zombies. It was a numbers game. They'd been saving fuel and ammunition. They could take back all of Canada like this, maybe the whole of the Americas.

We were dead. Whether in the end the zombies got us or

the bullets of our nation did, we were goners. Former people. As I wrapped Hannah's wound tighter, I wondered what to do, then realized there was nothing *to* do. "We're screwed," I said.

"So they...they just put us out here to attract zombies?" Abe asked. "Those... *bastards*." He lifted his rifle and fired it toward the distant sound of the engines.

"Don't do that," I said. "If you shoot it down, you'll kill people who didn't make the decision. Maybe it wasn't even a bad decision. Four of us for 10,000 zombies. If we shoot them down, we'll still die, and the Z's won't."

He sat there. I kept the pressure on Hannah's calf, as if stopping the bleeding would save her life. I surprised myself by not crying. I just felt resigned to it. I wouldn't've survived the zombie apocalypse, I don't think. I didn't have my mother's killer instinct after all. I'm kind of glad I didn't, to be honest.

The engines started to get loud again.

"Shoot them," Abe said suddenly. "Shoot them. Shoot the Z's. Shoot as many as you can." He aimed his rifle down and started picking them off one by one, aiming first for the ones at the very base of the tree. "Shoot them!" he shouted to us, and I didn't know why I was shooting, but it seemed like as good an idea as any. As we shot them, others walked on top of the dead to get closer to us. They became a hill of the dead. I kept shooting. "Use your bullets smartly," Abe shouted. "We need a lot of 'em dead."

"What am I doing, Abe?" I asked.

"Just shoot them. Let them pile up. Let them come at us before you take them out. We need a hill of them."

"For what?"

He didn't answer. He just kept shooting. The engines were getting louder, circling us, strafing at the thousands of Z's that had surrounded our tree. I saw the plane above us in the distance, spiraling ever closer to us. I kept shooting as the Z's climbed on top of their dead to build a tower to get to us atop the tree. And then my gun clicked. "I'm out," I shouted!

The engines roared. I could barely hear Abe shouting at Hannah to keep shooting. I saw the bodies of Z's bouncing against the ground as bullets from the airplane's cannons briefly reanimated them. "Okay okay JUMP," Abe shouted. "Jump! Caroline, jump!"

I didn't know what he was asking me to do, so finally *he* jumped, landing awkwardly on the pile of dead Z's. He motioned at me to give him Hannah, so I gently lowered her down and then let her drop into his arms. He motioned me down, too, so I jumped.

"Our foxhole," he said, gesturing to the mountain of Z corpses. He began to push through them, digging down, tunneling into the pile of the dead undead. He led the way for us, squeezing through them and then pulling them back on top of us until we reached the very bottom of the pile, the man with the hole in his face where I'd shot him. I could barely breathe down there, and I was attacked with every breath by the sickeningly sweet metallic smell of blood. But as the machine guns lacerated the bodies above us, we were safe in our foxhole. Even when the plane dropped a bomb so close to us that shrapnel dug its way through all the bodies and into my forearm, we survived.

For hours, we lay there amid the undead, and I wondered if Hannah and I would be infected, with our open wounds and so much Z blood everywhere. But I knew it was mostly in their saliva, and really quite hard to transmit without an actual biting incident. We had a chance, maybe.

The engines droned above us for another two hours, emptying their ammunition on the Z 's, and only after we'd gone a full hour without hearing further evidence of them did we begin to push through the pile of bodies that had saved us. Abe and I emerged together, holding our rifles like cricket bats, ready to fight hand-to-hand with any Z's that remained.

But there were none. The plane had destroyed them. All of them. There were so many corpses, you could walk a mile without ever having to step on the ground. I know, because I did walk that mile.

Abe carried Hannah on his back—tiny Hannah, lighter than our packs had been when we started out. We walked north until we got to the edge of the carnage and then I fired up the radio.

Sigma to base. Sigma to base. We didn't die. Over and out.

We left the radio. Abe and I ran—me carrying a pack, him carrying Hannah. We ran north toward home, toward what passed for civilization.

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