

ZOMBIE SEASON

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SEMPERVIRENS

When Joule came to live in the Northern California countryside three years ago, it was the cloud-scraping trees that reminded her most of where she used to live. In New York, looking down from a tall building made her feel like a small part of a big, big thing. Here, it's the reverse. Here, looking up is what gives her the thrilling feeling.

Her father had taught her that coastal sequoias live longer than most of human history put together, and they grow so tall that they collect water from clouds without it ever having to fall as rain. Standing in the middle of a grove of them, it feels like you're above it all. Like it's entirely possible to slip into another world.

Now Joule climbs up a ladder carefully secured to the side of the largest tree. "*Sempervirens*," she utters. It's the Latin name for these coastal sequoia evergreen trees, and translated it means something close to "always alive."

"Dad?" Joule whispers into a smartwatch on her wrist. "You out there?"

There hasn't been an answer for over a year. But that doesn't mean Joule will stop asking.

Two, three, four. Joule hunches forward, looking through the cracks of

the treehouse her father built for her. It's too small for her now. She's taller than some adults, which makes them think she's way older than she is.

She talks into the tiny watch, knowing that its twin is on her father's arm, and that his walkie-talkie function was always on, in case she ever needed him. "I know you're out there, Dad," she says. "Please. Come home."

Joule glances at the treetops, which are now catching orange smoke instead of clouds . . . bringing something that isn't rain into the quiet grove.

Here they come, Joule thinks.

She cranes her neck and sees a flicker of movement that makes her pull back in surprise. "Who's there?" she barks. Only silence follows, and the words ring in her ears.

"Dad?" she says.

A twig snaps.

She looks out, waiting for any sign of movement.

"It's me! It's Joule!"

No one answers her.

That's not him, Joule.

She finds an unexpected trickle of sweat running down her back, and the air suddenly feels too close. She knows how quickly a flashpoint can form.

Like everyone around here, Joule has seen her share of disasters, both natural and unnatural. She's fully aware of how quickly everything can change.

Joule already lost one best friend like that. A wave, out of the blue.

She will never see Lucy again.

No one needs to warn her she should slip away right now. Kids aren't

allowed out unsupervised after Dusk has fallen, she knows. But if her dad is here, too, then she's not unsupervised, is she?

After what her mother just told her, she's got exactly zero time left to find him.

"Come on!" she says into the watch, letting caution drop away. "Nelson Artis, this is your daughter! I need you to come home." She feels panic welling up inside her. "Cause if you don't find me soon . . ."

In her mind, Joule sees the luggage all lined up by the front door of her house. *This is not a discussion, Joule, her mother told her. I'm not going through it all again. There's nothing left for me in Redwood. Or for you.*

Joule shuts the door on that memory. Hard.

"I'm not leaving 'til I find you," Joule whispers amidst the trees he taught her to love.

She's waited numbly all year for the Dusk to fall over Redwood and for zombie season to begin. It's a fresh chance to start looking for her father, who found himself too far from shelter last summer, when a flashpoint formed up in the hills—

Missing, presumed dead is what they call it.

Almost a full year without her dad. A fall without anyone texting her funny animal videos to watch on the bus home from school. A winter without anyone to sample her latest baking experiments—like the cherry cayenne brownies Joule made last Valentine's Day. Joule's mom uses her gluten allergy as an excuse, but they all know that she doesn't have a taste for her daughter's wild creations. But nothing made Joule's dad happier

than digging into one of her kiwi peanut butter pies, or taking a delighted sip of her signature peppermint coffee milkshakes. Sometimes, Joule would forget—just for a moment—that he was gone. She'd pull a cake out of the oven and take a breath to shout "Dad!" before remembering that the house was empty. Wherever her father was, he couldn't hear her.

A gust of hot air blows straight in Joule's face, and its smell flips her stomach. The orange smoke streaming into the grove gives the green trees a horrible, blood-colored cast.

She forces herself to look straight to the west, where a sole figure crests the hill amidst the failing light.

It has a human face, but its eyes are large and orange. Tigerlike. There is an intense heat coming off it, like the shimmering air coming off asphalt in the summer sun. It has the same pollutant smell.

None of this is a shock to Joule.

Silently, she waits. *Is there only one of them?*

She waits a bit longer, looking around for other zombies.

She knows she should run. She doesn't have a chiller with her—she can't even get a permit to carry one until she turns thirteen.

Don't let it see you, part of her screams.

But another part is asking, *What if it's him?*

"Hello?" she says, trying to make out a face from her perch in the treehouse.

It ignores her. It's focused on scooping leaves and branches into its mouth. It finds a wasp nest in its path, and pushes the papery mass into its face. The

insects living inside it try to respond to the shocking destruction of their home—flying, stinging, swarming—and the only reaction from the zombie is a single, small cough. The superheated breath kills all the wasps it touches, instantly.

Joule watches it happen, filled with distress. She sees now it's not her dad. But what if he's out there somewhere, like this? Compelled to consume. Hunger the only feeling inside him.

She's been told a million times, *They're not people, Joule. Even if they used to be. They have no souls. No humanity.*

But Joule still can't bring herself to accept this. "How do you *know* that?" Joule asked her teachers. Her friends. Her mom. And no one ever had an answer that made sense to Joule.

So she stopped asking. And almost immediately, people began telling her how wonderful it was to see her *doing so well*. That they were proud of her for *handling things like a grown-up*.

Every time they say things like that, the mask she wears gets a little more permanent; she feels a little less like a valid human herself. A little more numb and robotic. But she doesn't know how to live any other way than the way she's been living: believing. Refusing to give up.

In a world where *no one* knows exactly what's out there, Joule has committed to discovering things for herself. She trusts the ember of hope deep inside her chest, kept where no one else can see it. It smolders with steady heat.

"Please don't leave me alone out here," she whispers into the empty grove.

Near the base of the tree, there's a rustling in the pine needles blanketing

the ground. The earth begins to rise in a gently rounding mound. Like a loaf of bread in the oven.

And Joule hears a voice in her head—the voice of her teacher, her mother, her friends—telling her, *It's too close, Joule. Get to shelter, follow the plan.*

But her teacher isn't here.

Her mother isn't here.

Her friends aren't here.

Joule is here. And she can feel her father's presence here, too.

This moment is one of the few times Joule *hasn't* felt alone since his disappearance. She can't ignore that. That feeling of connection? It's a compass that points out the North Star.

The mound of earth inflates even more and starts to crack. A puff of steam escapes the fissure. From under the soil comes a wordless moan. Dirt *flies* as a body pushes up out of the barrow.

The body flops over, like a fish pulled from the river. Limbs reaching, grime covered, coughing up its first hoarse moan.

Joule looks at the summer's first zombie approaching from the hill as the second one, its roving eyes full of dirt, struggles to emerge from its shallow, grave-like hiding place.

"Time to leave," Joule tells herself, even though in her heart she resists. The time to leave was probably hours ago, when the sky started turning orange.

The first zombie still feasts in the distance. That's a good sign—zombies have single-minded focus, and when they are busy eating one thing, they tend to ignore other potential meals.

The second zombie is still coming awake in the world. Joule figures she might have a few seconds before it focuses on its hunger.

If she's lucky.

The treehouse ladder creaks as she calmly and carefully descends.

The heat coming from the second zombie grows more noticeable as she gets to the forest floor. Its back is to her, but she can see it stiffen, sensing her approach.

There is something familiar about the body.

The right height.

The right shape, distorted by zombification.

A watch on its wrist . . .

Joule shivers. She can't help but wonder if . . . maybe . . .

She summons all her courage and says, "Dad?"

When there's no answer, she lingers a moment.

You can't stay, Joule, says no one.

The zombie is listening. Zombies aren't supposed to listen; they are only supposed to eat and destroy.

"If I go home, my next stop is San Francisco International Airport," Joule says. "I'll never be able to get back. Mom will make sure of that."

The silence stretches . . .

Slowly, the zombie turns . . .

Joule screams.

The face is not her father's.

It was never going to be her father's.

No. Even with the amount of flesh that has melted into a horrific frown, she can tell this man was never her father, and is no longer a man.

It's a monster.

A hungry monster.

Its eyes spark when it sees Joule.

Joule spins around and sprints away at top speed. In normal circumstances, she'd run toward the nearest source of water, but in this case she's let it get too close and has started to panic. She plunges into the densest part of the forest, hoping that the branches and everything that lives within them will slow the zombie down, provide it with an easier target.

The newly awakened zombie erupts in a guttural roar, and from the distant trees, there are others echoing it—from everywhere, it seems.

Branches scrape at Joule's skin and tear at her sleeves. A startled squirrel darts away, scared of Joule, and it runs in the direction of zombies, sealing its fate and probably saving Joule's life.

It's only when the smell of zombies is lost on the wind and their body heat no longer lingers in the air that Joule allows herself to catch her breath.

She finds herself laughing jaggedly. The more it hits her how close she came to being caught, the more intense the laughter gets.

In her mind, the zombie's face is vivid and unshakable. And definitely not her father.

It leaves her wrung out, but even more determined.

He is not dead. Or undead.

He can be found.

She can do this.

She *needs* to do this.

Where are you going to go? she asks herself.

In response, all she can hear are the moans of the undead carried through the trees.