



THE ZOMBIE PROJECT

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The page features a minimalist, black-and-white decorative design. In each of the four corners, there are stylized, branching floral or leaf-like motifs. Interspersed among these are small, delicate butterfly silhouettes. The central text is elegantly framed by these corner elements.

*To Grandpa,
for the bedtime stories.*

THE RULES

- #1** Never take your eyes off them for a second. They're faster than you think.
- #2** Long sleeves, trouser legs tucked into socks, no exposed skin. Glasses clean and on. Stout boots. Gloves. Cat.
- #3** No direct contact with the dead on less than six hours' sleep.
- #4** Don't travel after dark.
- #5** Always have a backup plan, even if you never intend to use it.

THE PROTOCOLS

PROTOCOL 5: On-the-spot testing and a short observation period (two hours) in a closed room.

PROTOCOL 4: On-the-spot testing and a six-hour observation period in a closed room.

PROTOCOL 3: A twelve-hour observation period in a closed room.

PROTOCOL 2: A twelve-hour observation period in an isolation ward or field equivalent.

PROTOCOL 1: Forty-eight-hour maximum observation period in an isolation ward or equivalent, with in-depth medical assessment after twelve hours and release after twenty-four hours if no one involved shows any signs of exposure to larval toxin.



CHAPTER ONE

Merian woke up to a zombie tapping on the window.
Tink. Tink. Tink.

She knew the sound well. The clack of bone on glass followed by a wheezy moan. Grumbling, Merian tried to go back to sleep.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

‘Go *away*.’ Merian rolled over and opened the curtains, letting in the sunrise, and a zombie’s stare. The zombie had one cloudy blue eye, while the other was just an empty socket. Its jaw flopped open, showing a row of broken yellow teeth, before snapping shut again.

It was a great specimen, Merian had to admit. But her bed was warm and comfy. She snuggled

back down under the covers. Maybe if she ignored it, it'd go away.

'Merian! Can you deal with that, please?'

'Ugh . . .' Sighing, Merian sat up. Zombies normally gave up after a few hours. The same couldn't be said of her mum.

Rubbing her eyes, she clambered down from her bunk and put her glasses on. The cabin where she lived with her mother was tiny but cosy, crammed to the ceiling with all the equipment needed to be Dr Gwen Hope, top scientist in the highly specialized field of death-flies. In the middle of the room was a worktable, covered in pages of scribbled notes. Shelves full of sample jars took up an entire wall, while the opposite held a huge map of the forest, bristling with coloured pins that marked the zombie movement patterns. A rack of catch poles stood by the door, along with an axe, a machete and a couple of stun guns. Soft dawn light peeked through the window.

'Is there only one, Mum?' Merian asked as she pulled on her overalls. *Long sleeves, trouser legs tucked into socks, no exposed skin.*

'I think so.' Gwen was at the table, squinting at her notes. Her short black hair, cut in a bob just

like Merian's – *no long hair, nothing they can grab* – was sticking up in messy points. Dark circles framed her eyes. She looked about as lively as the shambling dead outside.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

The zombie snapped at the window, trying to bite through the glass. Its crusted lips left a greasy smudge. Merian wrinkled her nose. She'd be cleaning that later.

'Can you take care of it?' Gwen nodded at the window. 'I'd go myself, but . . .'

'*No direct contact with the dead on less than six hours' sleep,*' Merian finished. That was Rule Three. 'No problem. I can deal with one, easy.'

She carried on running through the checklist in her head as she got ready. *Glasses clean and on. Stout boots. Gloves. Cat.*

Where *were* the cats? Merian looked around the cabin. Ollie was almost invisible under the lower bunk – just two green eyes staring out from the shadows. But Jack was sitting bolt upright on a chair, his tail swishing as he glared at the zombie. His ears were back and his usual purr had turned to a grumbling growl – a typical reaction for a cat when there was a zombie in sight.

‘Jack!’ Merian patted her shoulder. ‘Jack, hup?’

With a ‘*prrrt!*’, Jack jumped on to her shoulder and wound his tail around her neck like a scarf. Merian went to the door, taking one of the catch poles from the rack as she passed.

‘Back in a minute,’ she said as she stepped outside.

The catch pole was two metres long and as thick as a broom handle. It was made of aluminium, with a C-shaped bar at the end. The tool felt comfortable and familiar in Merian’s hands.

Merian ran through her mother’s lessons as she stepped out of the cabin. *Back to the door as you close it. Keep your eyes ahead.*

It was an especially beautiful morning in the forest. The clearing where their cabin stood was cool and bright. The grass sparkled with dew, and the light shone through the trees in clear, sharp slices. Birdsong threaded between the sound of growling. The air smelt fresh and crisp. It would be a lovely day, if it weren’t for the zombie.

Merian scanned the treeline and the ground. Clear. No zombies shambling out of the woods or crawling through the grass, their hands ready to

grab a careless ankle.

Just one, then. A normal morning.

She crept around the side of the cabin, treading as lightly as she could. *Wall to the right, clearing to the left. Check your peripheries. Trust the cat. He's watching your back.*

Merian turned the corner. Jack hissed in her ear, his tail fluffing up like a feather boa. Merian scratched him on his head. 'Shh, it's all right.'

The zombie was still pawing at the window. Its teeth chattered like an angry squirrel's. Gwen was behind the glass, dancing and pulling faces to keep the zombie's attention away from Merian. Merian held back a giggle and raised the stick, aiming the C-shaped end at the zombie's neck.

'Rrrraw!' Jack yowled in Merian's ear, making her wince.

The zombie's head creaked around. Its dead eye fixed on her.

'Oh, great,' Merian muttered as the zombie lurched towards her. It had a broken ankle, so its foot dragged sideways and it swayed as it walked. It was harder to aim at zombies like this. If she missed its neck, it'd be on her before she could run.

Jack sank his claws into her shoulder.

‘Yes, I *know* it’s there, I can *see* it!’ Merian raised the stick and punched forward.

The C-shaped end of the pole hit the zombie square in the throat, cutting off the moan that came out of its ruined mouth. Merian squeezed the trigger, pulling the arms of the ‘C’ shut like a claw grabbing a prize.

The zombie twisted, trying to get free, but its muscles had long since wasted away. Merian grinned as she steadied the pole under her arm and held the creature still. A lone zombie was so weak that even an eleven-year-old like her could wrangle it. It was only when they moved in packs that you needed to worry.

‘Right. Let’s go.’ She began to steer the zombie towards the woods.

The nearest dead-trap was just by the treeline. She’d put the zombie there, and Mum could deal with it later after she’d slept.

Jack’s tail lashed against the back of her head. He dug his claws in and growled in her ear as she wrestled the zombie forwards.

‘Calm *down*, we’re almost there,’ Merian said, exasperated. This was the problem with cats. Great lookouts, but there wasn’t much difference between

a look, there's a zombie you've caught hiss and a look, there's a zombie sneaking up behind you hiss.

Dead-traps were specialized scientific equipment, even if, to the untrained eye, they looked like massive pits in the ground. Merian braced herself against the zombie – it kept reaching back, trying to claw at her face, which was *very* annoying – and shoved it over the edge of the pit.

The zombie let out an ‘*oof!*’ as it hit the ground, and there was a noise that sounded like a bone breaking. Merian would have winced, but she knew from years of living amongst zombies that the pain centres in their brains were long gone. As bad as the fall sounded, it wouldn't hurt. Sure enough, the creature started staggering to its feet as if nothing had happened.

Merian peered down into the pit, taking her first proper look at the zombie. It had been a grown man when it was alive, with a round belly and greying hair. Now the belly was sagging, and there were only a few tufts of hair left on its head. She tried not to think about who it might have been before. That person was gone now. It had taken her a little while to learn that, when she and Gwen had first come out here. These days Merian could look at a

zombie and understand that it was as much a part of nature as the trees and animals of the forest, even if a tiny part of her remembered that it was once a person who had been important to someone too.

She couldn't see any death-fly maggots yet, which wasn't surprising. If the death-fly larvae were old enough to be visible, the zombie wouldn't be down here at the foot of the mountain. It would be making the long, slow shamble up to the summit. The larvae would be feeding on the zombie, growing so they were ready to take wing as death-flies when they reached the top.

Merian straightened up and glanced over her shoulder at the cabin. There was no sign of Gwen. Her mum had probably gone back to her work, or else fallen asleep in her notes.

Which meant it was a good time for a walk.

'Come on, Jack,' she said, scratching him on the head. 'Let's go.'

Walking through the forest in the early morning made Merian feel like her brain was drinking a glass of cold apple juice. The sunbeams slid through the leaves, soaking her and Jack in crisp green light. Tweets and flutters sounded as more

birds woke up, and all around her, the air was alive with the hum of the death-flies.

One winked through the air and landed on her arm. Its silver-green back glinted in the sun, and Merian smiled. The death-fly was the same shape as a hoverfly, but bigger, with huge compound eyes and rainbow-tinted wings. Not so long ago, it would have been a maggot chewing its way through a zombie. Now it was beautiful.

The death-fly took off again, zipping through the trees. Merian strolled after it. The forest never felt more alive than at this time in the morning, when it was just her, a cat and the wild creatures around her.

A squirrel skittered across a low branch above them. Jack tensed, and Merian put a hand on his back.

‘Don’t go running off,’ she told him. ‘I need you to keep a lookout for zombies.’

Merian followed her usual path, checking the dead-traps as she went. The first three were empty, but the fourth had a couple of zombies shambling around inside.

‘Hello.’ Merian crouched down by the edge of the pit to get a closer look. One of the zombies was

just a few days dead. She wrinkled her nose at the stench rolling off the creature. Summer was always the hardest time of year to think kindly of the dead.

The second zombie was a little older than the first, and, thankfully, starting to dry out. Merian leant forward to look closer. Jack hissed, but she ignored him.

‘How many flies are you hatching, then?’ Merian asked the older zombie – older in that it had been dead longer, not because of the number of years it had lived. Judging by the ripped T-shirt it was wearing, this one had been a teenage girl. It turned its face towards Merian and clacked its gummy jaws at her. It stretched upwards, grabbing at the air, but the dead-traps were three metres deep. There was no way it’d be able to reach her.

Merian could see tiny silver-green dots sprinkled over the girl zombie’s skin. Newly hatched death-flies. She chuckled. It was always exciting to see a new brood. Gwen had moved them out here eight years ago because there had been a worrying drop in the death-fly population. More people were choosing to be cremated when they

passed away, so the death-flies were losing their food source – and they were the world’s most important pollinators. Lose the zombies, lose the flies. Lose the flies, lose the plants. If the dead died for good, Gwen always said, the living would soon follow.

Jack’s tail thumped against Merian’s back.

‘I know, I know,’ Merian said. ‘Don’t worry. They can’t get us up here.’

At least this zombie girl had been treated properly. Its family had stuck to the rules brought in when the dead started walking. They’d pulled its teeth and laid it to rest by the forest, so it could get up when it was ready and wander into the trees. Now it was feeding the larvae until they grew up into death-flies.

Looking at the newer zombie, Merian wrinkled her nose – and not just because of the smell. The second zombie had been a middle-aged man, most likely from the city, going by its mud-stained suit. Its teeth were all present, flashing in the sunlight as it snapped at her.

‘Why are city people so useless?’ Merian asked Jack, tickling his chin. ‘Don’t they realize how dangerous it is to leave the teeth in?’

Jack growled in her ear.

‘Oh, shh. I already told you they can’t get us—’

A branch snapped behind her.

Merian stood up and spun around. She wobbled, almost falling into the pit, but caught her balance at the last moment.

Another zombie was stumbling out of the trees. It was an older woman, new-dead, with a body nearly as strong and fast as when it had been alive – and a full set of bared teeth.

Fear shot through Merian like electricity, freezing her to the spot.

‘Oh no,’ she whispered.