

Exodus North: A Tale of the Zombie Apocalypse
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It was late March, still a cold time of year in the far north, and the pine trees were burdened with a heavy load of white from a late-season snowfall. Jack Stanton trudged through the snow, knee deep and powdery; his mustache crusted with frozen breath. A dead buck rode on the makeshift sled behind him and the rifle slung over his shoulder see-sawed back and forth as he struggled to pull the heavy load. The snow against his boots made the distinct squeaking noise he remembered from his childhood days playing in the snow. He exhaled a visible cloud of warm breath into the brisk northern air as he fell to one knee, then got back to his feet and continued on.

Moments later, he broke into a clearing from the forest of tamarack and spruce. His children tossed snowballs at each other in the yard outside the cabin, and Jack stopped to catch his breath and watched the children play. Many things had changed since the end of it all, but this was one thing that remained the same, and he was glad.

"Kids have to play," he thought.

Katherine looked out the window as she washed dishes in the cabin; a place built on a hilltop by a stranger from another time who couldn't have known how it would save a family one day. The door opened and Jack came in, shedding snow by the pound as he stomped his feet on the carpet remnant that functioned as a doormat.

"Jack, look at you," she said as she hurried to his side and unwrapped the scarf from his neck. She swatted at the shoulders of his jacket with her dish towel.

"I was just about to call the kids in," she said.

"Let them play," Jack said, out of breath. "They should enjoy it while they can."

Katherine snatched the stocking cap from his head and shook it out.

"You shouldn't stay out so long," she said, worried. He was in his forties and not getting any younger, and she knew if something were to happen to Jack, their family would be in big trouble.

"I got a buck," Jack said. "That should hold us for awhile."

The buck rested on the sled outside the cabin. It was not yet frozen, but like all the other dead things in this climate, it soon would be, as long as the cold weather held.

While the other children played, Nina ventured from the group to the edge of the forest. At eleven years old, she was older than the other kids, and frequently lost interest in kids' games before they did. She was more interested in what was going on *out there*.

Shafts of sunlight penetrated the canopy and illuminated the depths of the forest, and her eyes widened a bit as she walked into the tree cover. Her mom would spank her something good if she knew what she was doing right then. Katherine always told her to stay out of the forest. *"It's too easy to get turned around in there,"* she would say. *"You can get lost in a minute."* Nina thought getting lost wasn't the only thing her mom worried about, but they didn't talk about that stuff any more than they had to, especially in front of Charlie.

She stepped onto the trunk of a fallen tree, but her foot slipped and she tumbled into the snow.

"Ah!" she exclaimed as she fell hard on her butt.

She looked around quickly, nervous that she might have attracted some attention, then got back to her feet and continued into the forest, her breath visible in the subarctic climate. She could still hear the other children playing in the distance.

Ahead, Nina spied a shape -- a human silhouette stood motionless in the woods. She slowed her pace and approached the shape tentatively.

The shape was frozen in place, and an icy, red bloodsicle hung frozen from the corner of its mouth, a sharp contrast to its ashen gray skin.

A twig popped in the distance and Nina flinched a little as she scanned the forest for danger. She saw nothing. She returned her gaze to the creature before her. Carefully, she moved a little closer and stepped onto a stump, bringing her to eye-level with the undead thing. Her footing was unsure, and she struggled not to fall again. She had heard hushed discussions about things like this, on rare winter days when the mercury crept above freezing. Her mom would pepper Jack with urgent-but-whispered questions, and he would reassure her. Nina could never hear everything, but she heard enough to imagine one of these things.

Nina examined the thing intently. She stared into its face and watched for any sign of movement but saw none. She looked directly into its eyes and imagined how the thing inside must feel. She thought it must be something like when she had gone to the dentist as a little girl, before the end came. She had been forced to sit while a strange man had stared at her, their faces uncomfortably close. This had once been a man, but now it was a *thing* with a horrible, bloody countenance. She reached out her hand and extended one finger. She had never touched a zombie.

Her hand inched forward. She touched the zombie's face with her fingertip and pulled it back quickly. It felt like ice. Her eyes were wide and she extended her hand again, more deliberately this time. She tapped on the creature's cheek, which responded with a flat, hollow sound.

"Heh, heh," Nina chuckled.

"Raaaahhhhr!" Charlie screamed as he jumped out from behind Nina.

"Ahhhhh, God!" Nina screamed as she fell off the stump. She quickly jumped to her feet and took a swing at Charlie. The punch landed harmlessly on his shoulder.

"You little bastard, Charlie!" she shouted.

"I'm telling Mom," he yelled back as he bounded away with Nina in hot pursuit, the zombie still motionless in the forest.

In the bedroom, Katherine sat down on the side of the bed next to Pepper. His head was bandaged, his eyes closed. Amber sat in the rocking chair next to the bed, rocking, her pregnant belly growing by the day.

"How is he, honey?" Katherine asked.

"In and out, but he's eating," Amber said with a cautious tone.

"Thank the Lord," she added. "He'd have wasted away by now."

"I was askin' about the other little guy," Katherine said, smiling.

Amber's hand went to her swollen belly and she smiled.

"I don't know how you can be so sure it's a boy," she said.

"Call it a mother's intuition," Katherine said.

She placed a turkey baster to Pepper's lips and the man, who had been motionless, stirred, and turned his head slightly as Katherine slowly squeezed some broth into his mouth.

"His appetite seems to be coming back," Amber said, "but he still can't hear."

Katherine tried to be optimistic.

"God willing, he'll get his hearing back," she said.

"Mom," Amber said quietly, "What Sullivan said... do you think it's possible? Could there be help coming?"

Katherine didn't have the heart to say "*no*," but her expression said it for her. The only thing coming was an influx of people, all looking for a place to stay.

In the first winter after the plague, there was an exodus of people from the south, all looking for a refuge from the constant horde of undead that roamed the warmer climates. Some had come by car, truck, and RV. Many more had come on foot, walking in pathetic parades of the morose. They had brought whatever they could carry, and they were all desperate for shelter. Railroad ghost towns across the north, relics of the steam locomotive era, filled-up with people again. Abandoned homes with peeling shingles and dangling rain gutters were re-inhabited by industrious souls and handymen, happy to patch leaky roofs and fix broken windows; happy to have a home where it was relatively safe for at least half the year. The further north they trekked, the greater number of months of safety they could expect every year.

Eventually, the ghost towns filled-up and space ran out, though. There were just too many people coming from the south, more every year, and tensions ran high as dwellings became scarce. People resorted to living in tents in the winter months, and they could stay relatively warm with fires that burned constantly within, but as spring approached, those families got itchy for sturdier housing. Price gouging and prejudice became a problem. Fights broke out, and increasing numbers of refugees struck out on their own, into the wilderness, looking for remote outposts where they could settle in peace. It was how Katherine and Jack had found this place.

Ivan trudged through the snow and approached the garage. He knocked on the door and shouted.

"Sullivan! I'm coming in. You try anything funny and I'ma take you out! You hear me?" he yelled in his southern drawl.

He turned the doorknob slowly, opened the door just a bit, and peered inside. Sullivan was crumpled on the floor in the middle of the room.

"Goddamn it," Ivan said as he entered the garage and set a thermos on the workbench. He walked over to Sullivan and grabbed him by his hooded parka.

"How many times do I hafta tell you to stay on the rug? Stay by the fire," he scolded.

Sullivan groaned; mumbled something. He was a refugee they'd met before they'd crossed into the country once known as Canada, along the road out of Fargo. Pepper didn't like him from the get-go, and Ivan was reluctant, too, but Sullivan had sold himself as a worker, an extra set of hands to chop wood, an extra set of eyes to stand watch, and Katherine had convinced everyone to allow him to join their party.

There was an improvised, kettle-style fireplace in the corner, and Ivan dragged him onto the bear hide next to the fire. He grabbed two logs and threw them on the fire, then picked up the thermos and dropped it into Sullivan's hands.

"Have some stew," Ivan said. "Get warmed up."

"How long do I gotta stay out here?" Sullivan asked.

"It's Jack's call," Ivan answered.

"I reckon he'll let you come back in when he thinks you can be trusted," he continued, "but if it were me, hell would freeze over before I let you anywhere near the rest of 'em."

Ivan turned to leave, but Sullivan sprang forward and tackled him around the ankles. Ivan wriggled free and made it to his knees before Sullivan tackled him again and the two of them crashed against the garage door. Ivan was the younger man, but Sullivan was a big man, sixty pounds heavier, and he overpowered Ivan. Sullivan raised his fist and was just about to unload a haymaker when Ivan pulled his revolver and cocked the hammer, the barrel pressed to Sullivan's cheek.

"Goddamn it, I told you I'd take you out," Ivan hissed. "Now, back off," he said, his eyes ablaze.

Sullivan raised his hands slowly.

"I'm sorry," Sullivan said. He cautiously backed away, his hands up, palms forward, and sat down by the fire.

"It's OK," he said. "I'm OK, now."

Ivan looked around the room. Sullivan had painted graffiti on the walls of the garage.

APOCALYPSE. END OF DAYS. BURN THE DEAD.

"No, you're not," Ivan said, as he stood to leave.

Sullivan reached out to Ivan.

"Someone heard the horn!" he shouted. "Someone will be coming!"

"Someone will be comin' alright," Ivan said, "but it ain't who you think." He stowed his weapon and locked the deadbolt in the metal door as he left.

Ivan made his way back to the cabin, stepped onto the porch, and passed beneath a thermometer with the 7up logo on it. The temperature read twenty degrees.

The cabin door opened and Jack walked out carrying a chainsaw. It was just before dawn and the 7up thermometer already read thirty-five degrees. He walked through the wet snow, into the woods, and met up with Ivan in front of a frozen zombie, the same zombie his daughter had so boldly touched weeks earlier -- a transgression for which Katherine had grounded Nina indefinitely.

“We should wait a bit,” Ivan said. “Still pretty dark. Best play it safe.”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “Play it safe.” He was deep in thought.

Jack hadn't been present when the trouble began--the confrontation that had landed Pepper in a bed with a head wound and Sullivan a prisoner in the garage--but he had witnessed the end of it.

It had been a warm, mild autumn, and the temps had stayed above freezing well past Halloween. Sullivan had been giving them trouble. He wanted go somewhere, get help somehow, before the snow came, when it would become impossible to travel, but he didn't have a plan. Jack tried to convince him that they were better off to stay where they were because if they left, they just ran the risk of running into desperate refugees. Everyone had been content to follow Jack's lead, except Sullivan. He'd been outvoted, and he didn't like it.

Jack had heard a commotion outside and went to investigate. He saw Sullivan stagger out of the forest near the garage and fall against a metal panel at the base of the tower. It was a firewatch tower, over a hundred feet tall; a remnant of the days before the end came. Rangers stationed in the cabin they now called home had clocked time there, watching for forest fires, ready to sound the alarm.

Jack hadn't understood what was happening at first. Sullivan glanced over his shoulder as he fumbled for a key, and Pepper emerged from the forest soon after, sweating and bloodied. Jack bolted for the tower, but he was too far away to get there in time and could only watch as Sullivan unlocked the hinged cover on the ladder and began to climb.

Pepper raced up the ladder in pursuit. He gained on Sullivan as he yelled.

“Sullivan, don't!”

“They'll hear it!” Sullivan yelled down. “It's only five miles to the base. They'll hear it! They'll come for us!”

Pepper continued to gain on him. They were about thirty feet up when he got ahold of Sullivan's leg.

“*Let me go!*” Sullivan screamed. He kicked his leg and the heel of his boot caught Pepper in the eye, hard. Pepper lost his grip on the ladder and fell. His head smashed against a tower strut on the way down. Jack arrived at the tower a moment later and knelt beside Pepper. His eyes were closed and blood seeped from his ears and pooled beneath his head.

Sullivan continued to climb, reached the top of tower, and a moment later, the fire alert horn began to blare. Sullivan put his fingers in his ears and grinned madly, his teeth bared, as the horn rotated and blasted at one hundred thirty five decibels.

There was a military base five miles away and Sullivan had fixated on the idea that the base personnel had survived, untouched by the plague; that if they could just signal to them somehow, a rescue would come and they would be saved and everything would go back to normal. Jack and Pepper had tried to convince him otherwise, but he wouldn't listen. They were right, and he was wrong.

The fire alert siren blared. In the forest, hundreds of undead, many in the military uniforms of their former lives, turned and began to amble uphill, toward the sound of the horn. Jack and the rest of the survivors had spent most of that night on watch, and had to dispatch half a dozen dead who wandered into camp--the vanguard of a much larger horde--but someone must have been watching out for them. A powerful snowstorm blew in overnight, the kind of storm the weatherman would have called an "Alberta Clipper" before it all came to an end, and brought with it sub-zero temperatures.

That had been November, but it was almost April now, and although the snow would likely take months to melt, the freezing temperatures would soon give way to forties. The dangerous season was coming.

The sun broke the horizon and shone through the forest, and suddenly Jack was back in the present. A ground fog lingered from the melting snow and dozens of frozen human shapes were silhouetted in the forest by the rising sun.

He looked at Ivan and said, "Time for spring cleaning," then pulled the rip-cord on his chainsaw and advanced on a frozen zombie.