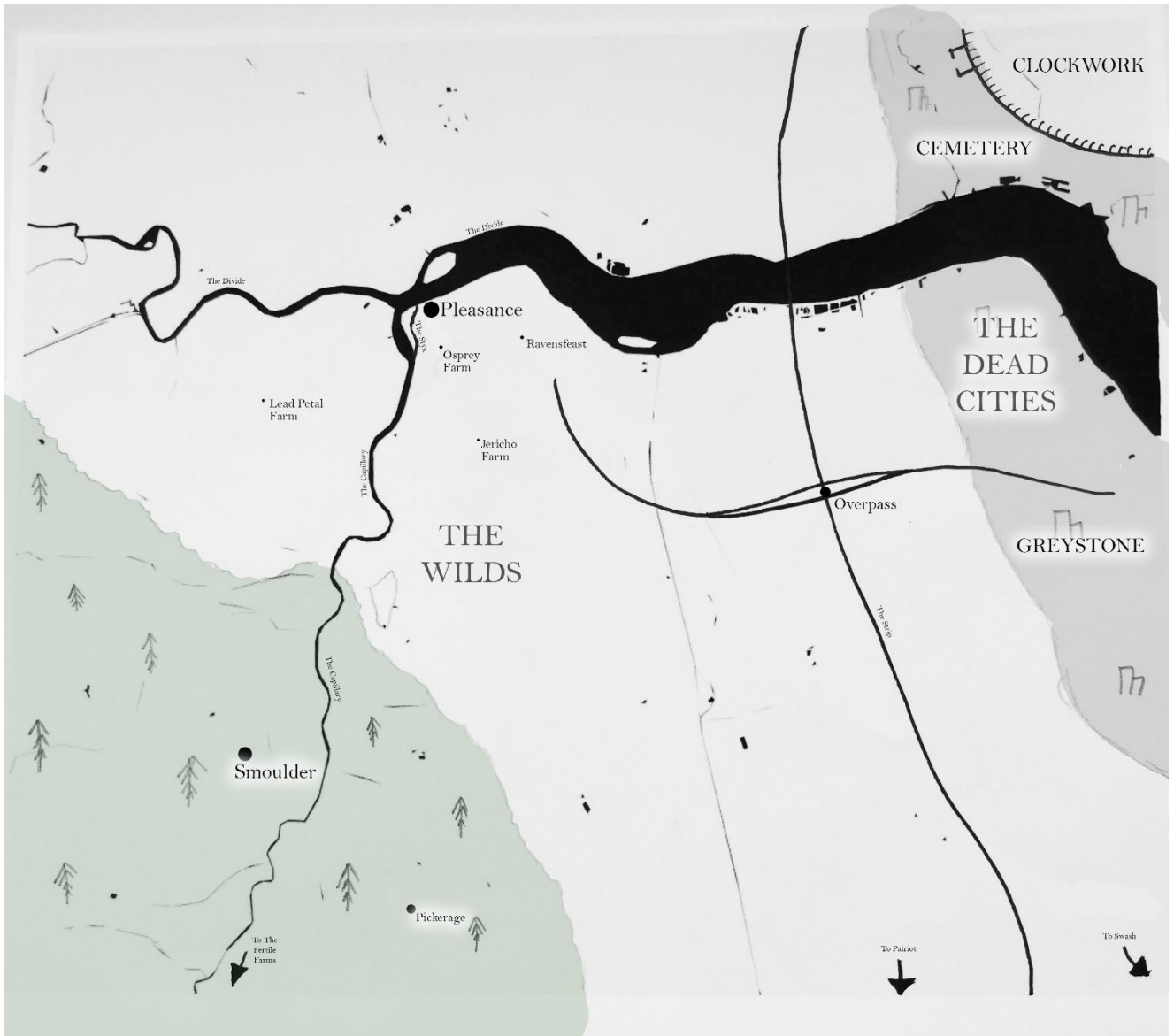


THE DEAD CITIES

Will N Rogers

info@willnrogers.com

07930 262317



Part One – The Missing

Chapter One

Wheat

You didn't live to Wheat's age ignoring strange sounds. Fog was rolling low over the moors, and a sloshing noise from somewhere inside it had made his ears prick up. The cataracts in his right eye made the mist appear even thicker, a white cloud within which nothing could be discerned. Turning his ear towards the sound, he could just make out the rippling of the Styx, hidden within the churning mist to the west. It hadn't been that though. He sat completely still, listening for movement.

In his lap lay his constant companion, the Remington rifle his great-grandfather had bought almost a century ago from scavengers returning from the Dead Cities. The manufacturing details etched into the side of the barrel were worn beyond legibility even before he'd owned it. Old though it was, the Remington never failed, and good weapons were hard to come by these days. The cold metal of the barrel beneath Wheat's fingertips always steadied his nerves.

From atop the wall, he could usually have seen miles of undulating English countryside. Even on a night as dark as this, the raised edges of the marsh around Pleasance would be highlighted by the sterile light that shone from the town's spotlights, and, on a clear night, by the moon itself. A breeze rustled his bushy, white beard. His hair, at least what was left of it, had long ago lost its colour. His legs tired more easily now than in his youth and his skin was sagging, but he could still fire a gun as well as any man, past or present, even with a dodgy eye.

No more sounds came. Wheat moved his eyes back to the fog. He returned to unnatural stillness, scanning for change. Nothing. He flinched as a door screeched open behind and someone stepped out onto the wall.

"Didn't mean to startle you, old man," came a cool, crisp voice. The rusted metal door slammed shut, pulled closed by its weight.

"It'll take more than you and squeaky hinges to give me a heart attack," Wheat said. His regional twang, like the 'Penelope' tattoo on his neck, had faded since leaving Patriot all those years ago, but a little remained. "I heard something out there," he said, not taking his eyes off the fog.

Nine stepped into Wheat's peripheral vision, his hair slicked back. Centuries ago, it would have been a style, but style was few people's top priority now. Nine was still a young man, and a handsome one at that; his heavy brow hid bright, clever eyes. Beneath his long, navy trench coat was his standard issue sensuit, its waxy, hard-

leather panels creaking slightly as he moved, the overalls beneath rustling gently. He picked up one of the folded lawn chairs leant beside the door and flicked it open with a motion of his wrist. He joined Wheat staring into the fog from their vantage point some four metres off the ground.

“It would be easy to imagine noises on a night like this,” Nine said, pulling his revolver from the holster on his thigh and cradling it in his hands. “Though if you've heard any moaning floating over from Madison's, that was real,” he added, with a wink.

Wheat relaxed slightly, Nine's boast puncturing his nerves, and leaned back in his chair. “I've been around a might too long to find that impressive. Nothing new, kid.”

A loud splash came from somewhere deep inside the fog. Both Wheat and Nine snapped forwards in their chairs. There were several more hurried splashes, then silence. Out of the corner of Wheat's eye, the fingers on Nine's right hand tightened around the revolver, his middle finger resting on the trigger guard in place of his self-amputated index finger.

“Could be a deer or something. Maybe more traders or scavs from the east? We've had enough of them lately,” Nine said.

The boy had as much optimism as he did arrogance. Half a decade on duty and still he hoped noises in the night were innocent. Naive, that's what Wheat could have called it, but without Nine's kind of optimism the world would seem unbearably dark. Nine had seen things in his time as a sentinel that would make anyone else run for the safety of a locked room. They all had. Wheat tried to cast his mind back to a time when he'd been able to shut out the bad memories and nightmares, but it was decades ago, and many of the good memories were hazy, covered in fog as thick as that which lay before them.

“Not a chance. The ground's still too wet for deer, and you ever known a trader or scav stupid enough to move about in fog like this? They'd get torn apart.”

The wind picked up, bringing with it the sound of hidden trees creaking in the distance and the stench of death. It was a smell Wheat knew too well; the stink of rotting flesh wafting up from the corpses at the foot of the wall. Nine wrinkled his nose and covered the lower half of his face with his sleeve.

“How long until the brushers go out?” he asked, his voice muffled.

“Not 'til tomorrow afternoon,” Wheat replied. “And the smell's only gonna get worse before it gets better. Had a pair of wallbangers along there earlier. Only just had a spear long enou-”

“There.”

Nine leaned forwards and pointed at an area of fog where something was stirring. Wheat's back straightened with a series of clicks as he raised the rifle to his shoulder. Through the Remington's magnifying scope, he scanned the fog for recognisable shapes, identifying some formless darker patch that seemed to be what Nine was pointing at. Beside him, the younger sentinel thumbed back the hammer of his revolver. Click. Nine could hit a moving target dead between the eyes from twenty feet away, but the revolver would be useless beside the Remington at range. Nonetheless, there was something comforting about having a loaded weapon in your hands; everyone alive understood that.

The swirling mist parted, and a stumbling shape materialised, silhouetted against cloud. A man running for his life. His tattered, white shirt was stained with blood across the shoulder and midsection. He held his shoulder with one hand, the arm below hanging limp, forearm flopping this way and that with each uneven stride. His lower half was drenched with a mix of dirty water, mud, and all manner of unsavoury things that flowed along the shallow Styx. He couldn't have been more than eighteen years old. Despite the expression of slack-jawed terror on the boy's face, Wheat recognised him.

“It's one of the Tomlin kids. The younger one.”

“Peter?” Nine was wide eyed. “He's supposed to be at Jericho.”

“Well, he's not.”

“What does that mean for Jericho?”

“Nothing good.”

Behind Peter came a second shape, and a third. Both ran with odd, inhuman movements, their heads bobbing unhealthily as though their necks weren't strong enough to hold them aloft. Peter glanced back over his shoulder and screamed as they lurched out of the fog.

“Lights,” Wheat said.

It took Nine a moment to react, and Wheat had to repeat himself before the younger man got up and pulled a lever beside the door he'd come out of. A generator started rattling nearby, and a powerful spotlight on top of the sentinel outpost behind burst into life. Nine cranked a series of handles, shifting the direction the cone of light was pointing in to better illuminate the boy making slow progress towards Pleasance. A second set of controls

changed the angle of mirrors around the light, focusing the beam. It made the mist behind the trio grow brighter and thicker, like heavy snowfall chasing them down.

Peter stumbled, his foot sucked into the marsh. He swiftly bent down and flicked his boot off with his good hand. A few steps later, he repeated the action for the other foot. Quick thinking. Many in the boy's situation would have taken too long to do the same.

The powerful light better illuminated Peter's condition. His shoulder was a mess, the white of bone visible among the red. Blood streamed down his arm, dripping from his fingertips.

“Focus on the other two,” Wheat commanded, not looking up from the scope. Nine turned the cranks again, refocusing the light on the two humanoids behind Peter. Dark purple veins spidered beneath their flesh. Dry, blackened blood stained much of their otherwise deathly pale skin, mingling with fresh gloop that squeezed from open wounds with every movement they made. Wheat's jaw tightened. He raised a hand and Nine dropped the intensity of the lights.

Peter was still making his way through the marsh. The soup around his feet was getting shallower the closer he got to Pleasance, and the infected were still bogged down in the deeper stuff. The gap between them widened. He was going to reach the wall before they caught him.

Wheat closed his bad eye to rid himself of any distractions. He exhaled, held it for a moment, then squeezed his finger against the trigger. The shot rang out all around them and bounced back off the thick cloud blanket. Half of Pleasance would be awake now. The infected closest to Peter dropped messily to the ground, a large chunk of its chest missing, an even greater portion blackened by dead blood.

Peter gazed up at the wall, taking his wide, hopeful eyes off the ground he was running across. Wheat had a face like steel. He pulled back the bolt on the side of his rifle, sending a scalding hot bullet casing flying out of the chamber. He slammed the bolt back into place and lined up his next shot.

Peter tripped.

The remaining infected gained ground. It reached out and struck at him as he tried to rise, sending them both crashing into the mud.

Wheat exhaled and fired.

The bullet smashed into the monster's shoulder. Not a killing blow. The infected paused on its knees in the mud and glanced at its destroyed shoulder.

Wheat pulled back from his scope and looked sharply at Nine. The younger man's face was a mirror of his own: confused. Infected weren't meant to think. They weren't meant to feel. They didn't stop to examine injuries, they just pressed on until they were put down.

The infected roared at them, another oddity, then seemed to remember Peter and lunged for him as he struggled back to his feet. That the undead creature reached out with its damaged arm bought Peter an extra second, but it made no difference. Before the second bullet casing had even rolled off the wall, Wheat had readied and fired his third shot, this time hitting the monster square in the face. It collapsed to the ground, skull in tatters.

Peter clambered to his feet. He was close enough that his wheezing was audible from Wheat's position on the wall. He'd lost a lot of blood, and was covered up to his chest in mud and streaks of black, but still he smiled through crooked teeth.

Wheat readied a fourth shot.

Exhaled.

And fired.

Chapter Two

Jackson

“Jackson!”

Jackson’s eyes snapped open. He swayed on the spot, trying to remember where he was and why he was leaning against a wall instead of laying in bed with Lauren. Dusty concrete, a pile of broken bricks, shouting from below. He was at the job site, on the second floor, close to where a flimsy railing marked the beginning of the fall into the yard. He-

Something smashed against the wall next to him, showering him in shards of red brick and dust. A heavy metal hook swung away, jerking violently on its rope. He grabbed for it, catching the rope before it swung out of reach.

Norris was stood open-mouthed, watching him from the other side of the U-shaped site, the yard below them.

“Sorry,” Jackson called, raising a hand in apology.

Keeping hold of the rope, he grabbed a canvas sack of tools from the floor and slipped the hook through metal eyelets sewn into the fabric. He let go of the sack and a winch several floors above took the weight of the tools.

“Ready,” he called into the void beyond the railing.

The hook and the sack it carried disappeared upwards.

“Shit,” Jackson said under his breath, his pulse hammering in his neck. Another foot to the left and he’d have cracked a collarbone or been concussed. Or worse.

Norris appeared beside him at the railing, having walked around the bottom of the U-shaped building they were working on. Norris frowned at Jackson, concern clear on his face; he didn’t need to say it. Wordlessly, they turned to look out over the yard, where a dozen people in a line were passing bricks from one side of the construction site to the other.

“You okay?” Norris asked.

Jackson nodded, still angry at himself. It wasn’t like him to be careless.

“Long night?”

“Sort of. Got woken up again by shots from the wall.”

“I heard ‘em too,” Norris said. “You’ve got to keep your wits about you though. Walgrave – or Crofts – taking foreman away from you will be the least of your worries if a hoist knocks your block off.”

“I know, I know,” Jackson said, holding up his hands in admission of his mistake.

“Rumour is it was a kid from Jericho Farm.”

Jackson rubbed at his chin. He'd assumed the shots were just shades at the wall, but come to think of it, that would have been an unusual thing to waste bullets for when spears or pikes would do. “Where’d you hear that?” He watched his people work below, eyes following brick after brick across the yard.

“It’s all over the place. Some loose-lipped sentinel in a bar this morning. Apparently.”

Jackson knew Norris well enough to realise when he wasn’t being truthful. The slight delay before 'apparently' and the scent of beer on his breath told him everything. Drinking before work on-site was dangerous. He should have sent Norris home, but after the way the last few weeks had been, Norris didn't need the added embarrassment of being dismissed. Jackson would just make sure he wasn’t given anything remotely dangerous to do until he was definitively sober. The irony wasn't wasted on Jackson that it was him who'd only just avoided an accident, and Norris who'd scolded him for it.

“There might be a bit of panic if people think Jericho’s gone dark,” he said, trying to sound like he believed Norris's lie.

“Won’t make our lives any easier if this lot are worried about where all their food’s gonna come from.”

“It won’t get to that,” Jackson said, meeting Norris's concerned gaze. “Most food comes up the river through the Witchwood, so there’ll still be plenty to go around, and the council will have the farm staffed again soon enough I’m sure. Anyway, we’re getting ahead of ourselves. We don’t even know it’s been overrun. Could just be one kid ran off on his own.”

Norris raised an eyebrow and let out a short chuckle. “One day you’ll tell me how you stay so sunny.”

“When I figure it out, I’ll let you know.”

Both men looked down into the yard again as a comfortable silence grew between them.

This was the fourth site Jackson had overseen in the last year, and it was coming along faster than any of the others. He figured they’d have the shell of the building done in another two weeks, especially if the night team

kept compacting and cooking bricks at the rate they were. After that would come inner walls, then plastering, detailing, and furnishing.

It would be a school eventually, replacing the chapel-come-schoolhouse that had been educating Pleasance's children since life stabilised after the Fall. The number of kids born each year was only going up, and – according to Walgrave – the pre-Fall, stone-built chapel was simply too small to hold them all. This new building would be far bigger, and far nicer. Already a cherry blossom had been transplanted into the centre of the yard, its pink and white blossoms occasionally coming loose to drift in the wind, and Jackson had been authorised to use everything at his disposal to make the new school a visually engaging place. No expense spared. Most of that would come later though.

For now, the firing and drying tents were in full operation. The bricks passed across the yard were being loaded into a heavy-duty, metal-bottomed hoist in the far corner. On the topmost floor was a team of people cementing earlier loads into place, pausing every so often to fit circular windows that had been scavenged from narrow boats up the Divide some months ago. Everything was running like clockwork. The only hiccup had been Jackson's near miss with a three-kilo hook, and the dent it had left in the brick. At least he was wide awake now.

He hadn't noticed when, but at some point, the silence between him and Norris had grown from comfortable to pregnant. Norris shifted on his feet. To anyone else it would have seemed natural, but Jackson had known him since their own days learning in the chapel; something was eating his friend.

“What's wrong?”

“Kate,” Norris said, already looking like he regretted bringing her up.

Jackson breathed in deep. What phrasing could he use that wouldn't hit Norris like the hook had almost hit him? “I know you care for her, and that you want her back, but it's been months. You need to move on.”

“I'm trying.” Norris's voice was suddenly thicker than it had been. “I miss her, sure, but that's not what's on my mind. A friend of hers from the market collared me this morning in the... on the street. Asked if I'd seen her. Apparently, Kate's not been 'round in a week. It ain't like her to miss visiting friends and not tell 'em why.”

Jackson had shared a few dinners with Norris and Kate during the months they'd been together. Though he couldn't have claimed to know her well, disappearing like that did seem odd.

“You want to go check on her?” It was a bad idea for Norris's sake, but the idea of getting him off-site without sending him away made a slight smile creep into Jackson's voice.

“No chance. I told her I’d stay away, and I meant it.” Norris dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand, his actions exaggerated by the alcohol in his blood. “But I was wonderin’ whether you’d stop by her place later? Just to check she’s okay?”

Jackson pursed his lips. Not what he’d been expecting. He could perhaps persuade Lauren to make a quick visit with him on the way to the Hendersons’ for their weekly meal-share. In and out. Five minutes. She wouldn’t like it, but once he’d explained she’d understand, even if she wasn’t the biggest fan of Norris.

“Alright,” Jackson said. “But no more pre-work pub visits, okay?”

The air was unusually crisp for a late-April evening as Jackson and Lauren left their apartment. They were bringing fresh vegetables – bought from the market that afternoon – to the Hendersons’ hovel; it was the Hendersons’ turn to supply the meat and carbs.

“What about a room in there?” Lauren said, pointing at a three-storey building halfway along Ronson Avenue. The building was made of dusky red bricks, with ivy, lichen, and moss covering good third of its frontage, and, like most in Pleasance, it had been hastily erected.

“Needs a lot of work,” Jackson said, pointing at a patch of crumbling brick, barely visible beneath the ivy. There were gaps around the windows too, meaning it would get cold in winter. “But don’t worry about it. Derren promised to find a place for us and I trust him to.”

He smiled warmly at Lauren, who placed her hand on her lightly-rounded belly. They had another six months to prepare, but Jackson had vowed to find them a new place to live well before Lauren’s due date. They needed to be further from the wall and its gunshots, closer to the market, in a building with smooth, fresh-painted floors that wouldn’t tear through one-year-old knees.

“I know what Crofts said.” Lauren tucked a lock of her light brown hair back behind her ear as they walked. “He’s just so busy with Walgrave ill, I doubt he’ll find the time for us.”

“Okay, how about this,” Jackson said, pausing and turning to face her. “If he can’t find us something by the end of the month, we’ll start asking around ourselves?”

“Deal,” Lauren said, returning his smile. Their hand holding morphed into a kind of staccato handshake, then relaxed again as they started forward.

The name Pleasance was nothing if not ironic. It was better than many places, certainly, and building projects like the new school were improving things, but pleasant was not a word anyone would have used. In the centuries since its founding, it had grown from a small village, barely more than a church, a chapel, and few dozen houses one side of a river, into a large, walled settlement housing around five thousand people. The buildings from before the Fall still remained, close to the Divide, and some of the main streets were now lined with elms, oaks, grass, and greenery, but the rest of the town was a mix of ramshackle, quickly-raised housing and salvage. Crews like Jackson's had been working for more than a century to better living conditions, but it was slow going, and there were areas of town that remained overcrowded and under-loved, where everything was grey and brown, rusty and broken. Kate's shared hovel was in one such area. A place called the Hive.

The further Jackson and Lauren got from Ronson Avenue, the narrower the streets became. Soon they had to walk single file, him in front of her in case any unsavoury types appeared. The overhanging rooftops grew so close together that the sky was nothing more than a sliver of darkening blue.

"I shouldn't have come here," Lauren said, fingers tightening around his.

"Not much further." He squeezed back in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. This was beginning to feel like a bad idea. He hadn't been to Kate's place before, but Norris's directions had sounded easy enough. A quick little detour off Ronson, a minute or two in the Hive, then back out onto wider streets as soon as they saw that Kate was fine.

Reality was much different.

It was dark, and the narrow alleys funnelled wind so that it cut sharply through their clothes.

Norris's directions eventually led them into a wider alley with doors dotted along both sides. Jackson let go of Lauren's hand and knocked loudly against the third one on the left. It flew open almost instantly, leaving him eye-to-eye with a woman whose face was so lined that he only identified her mouth when it opened.

"Whadda you want?" Her voice made his throat feel sore. She was short, but the doorstep she stood on left her beady, suspicious eyes peering into his. Behind her were six people sat around a large table. Their ill-fitting tunics were dirty, their faces gaunt, all illuminated by a guttering, yellow lantern on the table. They clutched playing cards to their chests, as though Jackson might want to take them. He felt suddenly overdressed, as though his simple, hole-free shirt was a boast.

"Is Kate here?"

The woman flinched at the name, then her face deflated, and her dark eyes closed. “No.”

Jackson shared a concerned look with Lauren, then glanced back to the old woman. “Then, where is she?”

“Please don’t talk of it. We’ll be next.” The woman’s bottom lip was trembling.

“Next for what?”

The woman started to close the door. Jackson instinctively reached out to hold it open, but Lauren caught his wrist.

“They’re hurting,” she said, as the door shut and a lock clicked. “And they’re scared.”

“Yes, but why? What’s happened?”

The door didn’t fit its frame properly, and Jackson could see light from the room beyond glowing around two of its edges. One good push would probably force it open.

“Keep asking questions and it might be you that’s next,” said a voice behind them. Jackson and Lauren turned as one to find a man sat on a doorstep at the far end of the alley. He was dressed in all grey and blended in with the background so thoroughly that Jackson suspected he’d been sat there all along.

“Next for what?” Lauren asked, her hand back in Jackson’s.

The man leaned forward, elbows on his knees, yellow teeth visible between plump, sore lips.

“Next to be taken.”

Chapter Three

Wheat

“I’m telling you, it reacted to being shot. It was angry,” Wheat said, raising his voice more than he’d meant to.

“Bollocks did it,” said Mane, bald head shining under the pale mess hall lights.

“I know what I saw.”

“Then you saw something no one in four hundred years has seen.” There was a hint of a smile on Mane’s face, like Wheat was an amusement. “They’re just machines, old man. They hunt and they eat and their only goal is make more of themselves. That’s it.”

Wheat tried to keep his temper in check, but a vein was beginning to throb in his neck and his cheeks were warming. Just as he was about to fail at biting his tongue, Nine walked in and joined them at their table in the middle of the room. There were fifty or so sentinels present – Pleasance’s full contingent, save maybe ten who were out on duty, the half-dozen recruits, and Chief, who had yet to arrive. The mess hall could barely hold so many people, but it was the biggest room they had, and circumstances called for an outpost-wide meeting.

“Nine, you were there. Tell ‘em about that infected that screamed at us.”

Nine looked first to Wheat, then to Mane, then down at the table. “I don’t know what we saw. It was weird, sure, but everything happened so quickly. It’s probably nothing. They’re easy to humanise.”

“I’ve been on duty thirty-six years, kid. I’m a few decades beyond humanising those things.” Wheat opened his mouth to continue, but just then Chief walked in. She was a red-haired woman in her fifties who could do kindness when she needed to but usually wore a stern grimace. She seemed harsh to outsiders, but was just the kind of leader the sentinels needed if they were going to continue keeping Pleasance safe from the horrors outside.

“Quiet,” she called as she walked between the tables, though everyone had stopped talking the moment she entered. She reached the far end of the room and turned back to face them all. Unusually, she was wearing her sensuit under her jacket and a pistol on her hip; she meant business. “Who are we missing? Where are my elders and up-and-comers? Wheat’s here, April, Crooked, Needles, Nine. Where’s Blues?”

“Here,” called a voice from what was now the back of the room. A tall woman stood up with her hand raised. She had blonde hair, slightly longer than shoulder-length, and bright blue eyes that were her namesake. The same bright blue eyes Wheat himself had. His granddaughter. Though of course, he wasn’t supposed to dwell on

that. The fewer connections a sentinel had, the better they could do their job. Fighting off infected while worrying about your family tended to make it more likely that you'd get killed, making it more likely that they did too.

She'd joined the barracks seven years ago and done unusually well in her short time as a sentinel. No doubt she'd end up running some town's outpost in the decades to come, though she'd need to win over a good portion of her fellow sentinels first. Standing up all goody-two-shoes wasn't going to help; even now there were people staring up at her with thinly veiled disgust. She was too good too young. And she'd seen fit to wear her sensuit too, which was a wise idea, but also the kind of forward thinking sure to make her lesser-brained peers envious. Her suit was still new and shiny, the waxy, overlapping leather panels catching even in the low light of the mess hall.

"Good," Chief said. "Down to business." Blues took her seat again as Chief clapped her hands together to signal the start of the meeting proper. "I'm sure by now most of you will know it was a kid from Jericho Farm who came running at us last night."

Several around the room let out murmurs of assent. Others looked to Wheat, knowing it was him who put the boy down. All of them would have done the same, but that didn't make 'kid killer' any easier. Still, it wasn't the worst decision he'd ever had to make. Such was the life of a sentinel.

"What none of us knows is the state that leaves Jericho in. Last count, they had eleven people there. Nine adults, the teen that was killed, and a child. If the others are okay, there's not much to worry about. If they're not... well, we need to know. Councillors suggested sending a runner, but in the event the farm did go dark, we'll need sentinel heads there to clear it out, so a runner doesn't make sense." Chief raised her chin to peer over the assembled sentinels. "Blues, you'll lead the trip."

A murmur rippled through the room like a wave. Wheat hadn't expected that, and suddenly had mixed feelings. A swell of pride had blossomed in his chest, but he was wary. Blues was skilled and accomplished, but this was an important mission, and she had less experience than most others in the room. *She* could do it, of that Wheat was sure, but any senior sentinels sent along with her might question her command, making the whole thing more dangerous.

"What about the journey to Smoulder?" Blues asked. "I'm due there in a week or so with Needles and the exchange kids. Leaving tomorrow." She stood again to make herself heard over the fidgeting and whispering of other sentinels.

“You’ll check on Jericho on the way, then send a runner back from Smoulder to tell us the status of the farm. I’m increasing the size of your group. As well as Needles, you’ll take Crooked and Nine. That should be enough manpower to both clear out Jericho – if needed – and protect the exchanges. You still leave tomorrow.”

“Understood,” Blues said.

She glanced towards Wheat as she sat down. It was a tiny look, more to check he was there than anything else, but he felt its impact. She was anxious, and that made him anxious. Nine was easy enough to get along with, but it was no secret he himself preferred to lead; he’d even led the last mission the two of them had been on together. He was immature in casual conversation, sure, but he switched that off when he needed too. Wheat hoped he could turn off his ego in the same way.

Needles was fine. He was a good sentinel and the best medic of all of them. Certainly not a leader, but sometimes that was for the best. Crooked was a worry, though. He was the second most experienced sentinel in Pleasance, a few years behind Wheat himself, and had a temperament mean and sarcastic enough that he’d been passed over for command more times than Wheat could count. Despite that, he was well respected, and very good in the field. Blues was being given a deliberately tough group. Perhaps this was Chief’s way of testing her.

“That deals with Jericho for the time being.” Chief leaned back against the nearest table as she spoke. “While Blues and her team investigate the farm, those of us left here will be coordinating with the council to gather supplies and identify candidates in case we need to fill it out again. Let’s hope we don’t need them, but be ready in case we do. Mane, I’d like you to take the lead on that. Do it subtly, no undue panic until we know what’s happened. You know what people are like. One whiff of a dead farm and they’ll start throttling each other over loaves of bread.” One side of Chief’s mouth quirked up in a kind of twisted smile. That was her version of light-hearted. “Other movements. Jigsaw and Nest headed out for Greystone this morning on a pilgrimage with a trio of new recruits. They’ll be gone a few weeks, maybe a month.”

The murmuring started again; pilgrimages usually had more signposting than that.

“I know, I know, but these recruits show a lot of promise and Jigsaw didn’t want to delay testing them. I’m sure we’ll all cope without my second for a few weeks, and when he gets back, we’ll have some new, fully-fledged sentinels to share duties.” The murmuring continued but gained a warmer, more pleased tone. “And finally, as you all know, Overpass has been asking for help expanding for months now. I think we’re finally in a position to be able to assist, so I’m sending Wheat and April to help oversee their efforts.”

What reaction there might have been in the room was drowned out by a sudden pounding in Wheat's head. His face flushed hot, and he found himself talking before he even knew what he was going to say.

“You want me to help *Caleb*?”

The rest of the room might as well have faded away. It was just him talking to Chief now, the memory of former-sentinel Caleb Prince hovering over him like a storm cloud.

“This town damn near starved because of him,” Wheat said, spit on his lips.

“I understand why you're pissed off, and you've got every right to be, but I need you and April to do this.” Chief's tone had softened, but Wheat had no intention of following suit.

“Why me? You know Stick - or Caleb, or Prince, whatever he goes by these days – you know we have history. Send Nine, he can sit on a wall as well as I can.”

“I need you to go *because* of your history. Relations with Overpass have always been rocky. If you and Caleb can make peace, perhaps the townsfolk will follow suit. Nine could sit a wall as well as you, sure, but you couldn't walk to Smoulder or Jericho in his stead. And April's a fresh face, someone Caleb doesn't know, so I'd hope if things get heated, he'll step in and calm it down.”

Wheat became aware of a big sentinel stood to one side of the room. “Ask no more, I'll gladly do it.” April smiled wide.

“April might go, but you can forget about me. I ain't forgotten the mess that bastard caused, and I won't go and help him now as if nothing's-”

“Enough!” Chief snapped, pushing off the table she'd been leaning against to stand up straight. “You'll go, or I'll find a younger man to fill your boots, permanently.”

Wheat's blood was still thundering around his ears, but he knew when a fight wasn't worth continuing. He realised then that he was standing. Mane sneered up at him. The other sentinels around the room had fallen silent. Blues looked horror-struck.

“Go,” Chief said, the word cutting through him like a knife.

Out in the hallway, he leaned against the wall and exhaled slowly. The sound of the meeting continuing without him filled the air as the pounding in his ears subsided.

If Chief expected him to go to Overpass, she had another thing coming. Caleb had betrayed Pleasance in its most desperate hour, and now he wanted help? Not a chance.

Wheat's pulse began to quicken again, so he pushed off the wall and climbed the stairs to the next floor. A door led outside, onto the wall that ringed most of Pleasance. The wall was horseshoe shaped, the Divide forming a kind of rear wall whilst also providing a good source of fresh water and fish.

There were two massive gates, one east and one west, both left closed most of the time. They were made of scrap metal welded and bolted together, and were controlled by chunky, failsafe-crankes within gatehouses just inside Pleasance's walls. Each took a few minutes to open, and large metal rods had to be wedged into the cranks to keep them that way. As soon as they were removed, the weight of the gates would start pulling them shut.

The shallow Styx flowed into the Divide a little way west. Both rivers were higher now than they had been before the Fall, nearly four hundred years ago. By all accounts it had taken the undead only two years to overrun the planet, but a combination of automated processes and the extreme-countermeasures deployed during those two years had kept everything warming up long after. Something about big bits of ice melting somewhere. Wheat didn't understand it. All he knew was that everything had gone to shit, but then, from the mulch grew hardy towns like Pleasance, and a semblance of normality. Of course, that's all it was, a semblance. Fragile. Precarious. Though you wouldn't have known that hearing how some people talked.

Between the two rivers, the land around Pleasance was soft and malleable almost half the year. It was an imperfect environment to live and build and thrive in, but the muck kept the infected slow. It was also the perfect environment for midges. Thousands of them.

A breeze drifted past, cooling Wheat's forehead. He'd been sweating a lot, apparently. He wafted a midge away from his ear, then began walking. It was still a few hours until his watch was due to begin, but duty helped distract him.

It was more than just anger at the thought of seeing Caleb again that had his temperature raised; he was also embarrassed about behaving that way in front of Blues. He shouldn't have been. It was a feeling he should have quashed. She was meant to be just another sentinel to him, but there was a connection there, one that even thirty-six years of experience couldn't quite sever.

Wheat passed by the place he'd been sitting the night before when he shot the Tomlin kid. With the fog gone, sorry-looking trees were visible in the middle-distance, close to a decrepit old farmhouse that had been empty since the Fall, the land around it too wet to be of use. A sentinel recruit called Patches – so named for the blue and purple bruises that littered his torso after every stave training session – was sat there, in the same chair Wheat had

been in when he took the boy's life. Patches had a rifle cradled in his hands, reminding Wheat that he'd forgotten his Remington. In his anger he hadn't thought to grab it.

When he was a little further along the wall, a cough from below drew his attention. It wasn't the kind of cough brought on by illness or a tickled throat, but one designed to announce one's presence. A middle-aged woman was stood at the foot of the wall inside Pleasance. She was close enough to it that most of her acne-scarred face was in shadow. Helen? Was that her name? He never intended to learn the names of those he protected – it made their passing more difficult; maybe even more likely – but a few of the more annoying ones slipped through. She was stood in the gap between the wall and the nearest building, a tailor shop with flats above. A little way away, hidden from view, someone – probably a Dead Cities scavenger – was loudly telling a story. There certainly had been a lot of scavs coming in recently.

“What do you want?” Wheat asked. He already knew the answer. People had been giving him the same look all day. For a moment, Helen didn't speak, and Wheat hoped she might leave it at that and walk away, but she didn't. Of course she didn't.

“Peter. Was he badly hurt?”

“They'd torn a fair chunk out of the boy. Blood everywhere,” Wheat grumbled. He got the sense that a long chain of tiresome questions had only just begun. A few decades without a major incident and everyone started forgetting how dangerous it was beyond the wall, and how tenuous life was within it.

“Peter. His name was Peter,” Helen said, her face like she'd tasted sour cider. “What if he'd simply cut himself? He was from a farm, maybe an accident.”

“And the two dead folk on his heels were a coincidence?”

“Drawn in by the smell of blood.”

“He had their blood on him too. One fell on him.”

“What if he was immune?”

Wheat rolled his eyes.

This again? Communication between settlements was almost solely through word of mouth, so stories got twisted as they passed from person to person. Almost every week a new tale would pop up about someone from a far-flung town performing some heroic feat, or about a village surviving attack by the skin of its teeth, or about someone paying a visit to the long-abandoned city of Clockwork, with its high, solemn, impenetrable walls. The

most unbelievable tales concerned immunity. Those always went the same way though: the immune people think themselves heroes and sacrifice their lives to save everyone else, or something equally noble and suicidal.

Fools.

If an immune man walked into Pleasance tomorrow, he'd tell that man to put a baby in every woman's belly, then send the women to every town and farm from here to Greystone. Immunity would be a thing to spread, not squander. It was far too much of a coincidence that all these so-called immune people died in their stories. Wheat had never met anyone with immunity, nor had he heard of any such person from a trustworthy source. It was best only to rely on what you saw with your own two eyes... or one good eye, in his case.

“Have you ever seen one of these immune folk, Helen?” Wheat asked, a deliberate edge to his voice. A tiny part of him regretted that she was about to bear the brunt of the anger from the meeting, but he ignored it.

“Yvette from South Bark said-”

“Have you ever seen one?” She was silent but continued to stare at him. “Heard of Osprey Farm?” Helen's face became stony. She had, clearly; she was old enough. He sniffed and wrinkled his chin, remembering. It was never far from his thoughts, but was especially fresh then. “Almost twenty years back there was fourth farm close by Pleasance. Osprey Farm. It was a safe place, with thick walls and a nice big gate, painted green, made from cut tree trunks. Trunks girthier than the biggest bull Yvette from South Bark has ever seen. You can rely on that information. I saw it for myself. It was a gate that took a half dozen strong men to open.

“One evening, I was on the wall up here when a runner from Osprey turned up and told us they'd taken in an injured woman. The woman claimed she'd been bitten by a wild dog and the farm folk believed her; this runner didn't. It was too late to send sentinels out, but we noticed an orange glow in the darkness. Faded by morning. By the time we reached Osprey the next day, everyone inside was dying, dead, or undead.

“We found one survivor, a kid who'd been bitten. He told us what had happened, before we helped him pass. That injured woman had turned in the night. They hadn't had anyone watching her. No quarantine. Then half the farmhands were infected, and it cascaded from there. Always does.”

Even years later, Wheat could still smell the stench of that farm. A mix of smoke, decaying flesh, and stale blood. “When normal people see the undead,” he continued, “they always turn to fire. They know fire kills the infection, so they set bodies alight as soon as they're dead, sometimes before. People at Osprey put down the infected farmhands and set them alight, but they didn't get all of them. Then they had infected and fire to deal with.

When we opened that big, heavy gate, almost everyone was gone. The gate was stained red and black where people had scraped their hands raw trying to claw their way out before being burned alive or eaten. Fire spread beyond the walls, took out the crops and fences around the fields. The entire farm, gone. And you're old enough to remember what happened after that, and what it led to." Helen's eyes were wide enough that the whites of them were visible all the way around. Wheat looked up, at the sprawling town of Pleasance that him and his order had been protecting for centuries. "So, if you want to know why I wasn't keen on giving *Peter* the benefit of the doubt, that's why. It only took one mistake to lose Osprey, and what's one life compared to thousands?"

Wheat peered down at Helen. He wasn't quite sure what he'd expected to see on her face, perhaps nausea or a humbled expression, but all he found was anger and resentment.

"Peter was human," she said, "not one of them. He couldn't have been that far gone if shades were still after him. He deserved a goodbye, at least. There was time." Helen spat at the wall. "You loveless cynics will be the death of us all."

With that said, she turned away and stalked off through the shadows, leaving Wheat with his memories.

People like Helen would never understand. She'd never see what he'd seen. The boy who'd told them how Osprey fell had believed himself saved when the sentinels found him. He'd known he was infected, but the hope hadn't vanished from his eyes until Wheat pulled the trigger, just like with the Tomlin kid. It had been years since he'd recounted that story, and he wished he didn't have a dozen more like it. He'd lived too long and seen too many places get overconfident.

Perhaps Overpass did need him after all. Caleb was a fool. What he'd done after Osprey had nearly ended Pleasance. It was unforgivable, and Wheat had no desire to reconcile with the man, but if his being there at Overpass could prevent more decisions like the one that killed Osprey, it would be worth it.

He straightened up, his spine clicking, and walked back to the outpost. The meeting was over, and Chief was in her office, poring over a map. It was an old plastic-coated one from before the Fall. Chief and her predecessors had scrawled all over it, changing the names of places, adding new settlements, crossing out old ones. The map only covered a square fifty miles or so; no one knew much about what lay beyond that. There were other maps, sure, but the world had changed so much, and was so hard to travel, that they weren't much use.

"I'm-" he began, meaning to apologise.

"Here," Chief said, holding out a rolled-up piece of paper without taking her eyes off the map.

Wheat took it from her and unravelled it. He began reading, but he'd barely managed two words before she spoke again. "Don't ever talk back to me like that again. People around here respect you, and you'd have made a damn fine chief if you'd wanted it, but you chose to follow, not lead. If you have an issue, you know how to raise it."

"Sorry, Chief," Wheat said.

She sighed, meeting his gaze. "It's alright. I should have known to expect an explosion and shown you this first. That letter is the real reason you're going to Overpass. Pin-Point thinks something is going on. He asked for you by name."