

Isolation

By Ryan A. M. Ennis

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For Ciara, my Wife.

Author's Note

I wrote this story while in lockdown during the COVID-19 crises. There is obvious indication of inspiration of that particular time. I had a story and now that I had the time I decided to write it. There's something about this tale that seemed to write itself so I enjoyed writing it.

The illustrations were drawn by me and I thought of them as the main character's sketches throughout the story.

INTRODUCTION

John Tapley is an artist with a girlfriend and career he never thought possible until that's all turned upside down by an unknown virus. The virus broke out in 2119; a distant yet familiar future but there is much more to this tale. It is all told in this story of isolation.

Isolation is a work of fiction, as its subject matter makes it perfectly clear. If there are any similarities between this world and our own it is coincidental. There are a couple mentions of real life people to connect our universe to the one in this tale. There is also the mentioning of the song titled as Isolation, which was written and recorded by John Lennon, and there were parts of the lyrics of that song that inspired some thoughts in this tale. I hope you enjoy reading.

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Prologue

It started as a joke but now the world was lost. There's a man alone in a town so derelict it looked haunted. When there were others, they once called him by the name of John Tapley. Now Frank (John's imaginary friend in the form of a Test Dummy) is the only one who calls him by that name. What happened to everyone? There was a virus outbreak. It moved slowly at first and seemed to be just a slightly more dangerous flu. But it wasn't. With an incubation period of two weeks it spread all over the world and there was no stopping it. At first the recovery percentages seemed high, but their recoveries were only an illusion. This virus adapted and changed and learned and became *violent*. This was a virus like no other and it wiped earth clean of humanity. The virus was called ARCANUM-19 (Mysterious Virus 2119) or as the media loved to call it, **The Death Flu**. There was no media now. Just John (and Frank).

Chapter I

John the Artist

1

The sound of a shopping trolley rattled through the town as it was rolling down the middle of the street. The man pushing the rattling trolley didn't need to worry about traffic. The street was littered with papers and bright yellow notices were posted on windows and doors and walls. If you got a closer look, the yellow notices said something about ARCANUM-19 on them. The man didn't want to look. He already knew about them. This man was named John Tapley. Before all this; before all those yellow notices were posted everywhere, he was an artist. Now he pushed a large shopping trolley down an empty street.

He had filled the trolley with books. Probably a couple hundred books, so the trolley kept moving funny as it was so heavy. He came to an

apartment complex and shut the door behind him after entering. The complex was about five stories high, which was tall in a town like this one. There was no source of power in the complex so the stairs were his only option. In fact, John had a rule of *no elevators during the post-apocalypse*. There was no way he could lift that trolley full of books up those stairs in one quick trip.

It was repetitive and exhausting, but John thought of it as *exercise*.

After dropping the last books into the apartment, John fell onto a couch. He swept his hand through his dark, sweating hair and held it back from his face, and it fell forward as soon as he let go.

'Thanks for the help, Frank,' he said sarcastically.

Frank was a crash test dummy who sat in the opposite chair, staring into nothingness with a wide-eyed look.

'I've got more books!' John was still breathless from the *exercise*. 'Plenty readin' and fuel for the books not worth readin'!'

Frank had a wide-eyed look.

'I know,' said John, 'I don't like burnin' books but we need heat . . .'

It was an apartment so there was no fireplace to burn the books inside, so he used a fire pit on

the balcony. It kind of defeated the purpose having to leave the balcony door open to get heat inside, but John had his reasons.

'I know, Frank,' said John, 'we have to move somewhere with a fireplace . . . but I can't leave.'

John looked to photos on a shelf and seemed to remember someone but quickly fought the thought as his eyes became forlorn, and started digging through the books once more. Plenty reading, plenty time.

John loved books with a passion as they're a great escape from the world he lived in now or even in the old world of "normality". He liked to read about other lives. There's a comforting thought in imagining there's someone else out there living their life, especially now. You don't start talking to test dummies because you're Mr. Popular. Sorry, Frank.

A fire burned and snapped as it danced on the balcony while John warmed his hands. They were pink with the cold, so the heat felt real nice.

'You're welcome!' he said to Frank with a grin.

Frank was wide-eyed.

John gazed out over the balcony at the lonely town below. It was silent. There were no honking horns of impatient driver's, no music from the nightclub (*if you can call that noise music*), no sign of

humanity other than the tall empty buildings displayed like giant ornaments in a museum. If there was a museum showing *humanity* in general.

It reminded John of visiting ancient castles from centuries ago. These buildings were once fortresses belonging to powerful people now standing only in ruin, and used to satisfy the *tourist*. But the difference between the old castles and the town is the tourists. This town had none. John hadn't seen another human being since—

It was getting late as the sun was falling to the earth. The sky became a fiery red and that beauty seemed to be unaware of the latest tragedy in the world. The world continued to spin. It probably spun better . . .

No more thinking! John felt tired and all that book-and-stairs work made his feet hurt. Even the memory of it seemed to thump his feet with a pulsing ache. His body ached too as he crawled into his bed and stared at a photograph until he fell asleep.

2

Rósin Whelan worked in retail. As if that's not hell enough, she had to be working during the ARCANUM-19 crisis.

Who was Rósin? A certain “Frank” would

hear many stories about *Rósin*, and John stared at her photograph every night before he slept, for the last few years. John read somewhere that you would dream about your last thought before you drifted off to sleep. So he tried to keep her in his mind with that photograph. *Rósin* was John's girlfriend. They lived together in that same apartment; slept together in that bed.

It was subtle at the beginning. John and *Rósin* were watching a movie at home when *Rósin* mentioned an article she had read about a virus outbreak in the far end of the world. Not much information on it. They were watching a movie anyway. And the *far end* of the world was pretty damn far.

The end of 2118 brought concerns as lives were being lost. But it wasn't close to home so people carried on about their day. What else could they do?

'It'll all blow over soon enough,' said John, 'don't worry about it.'

Time would tell. John tried his best to comfort *Rósin*, but even he started to feel a little nervous about the virus.

Then the media started to play on people's fear. DEADLY VIRUS OUTBREAK or IS THIS THE END? Little did they know, they were right. It was deadly, but the media just liked using

words that would sell. Using the right font always worked and especially if you include the *toxic* symbol.

Meanwhile, as the media was coming up with catchy lines to get clicks and sell papers, space travel was happening (since three vessels: Hope, Curiosity, and Independence set out into the unknown back in 2100) and could be one of humankind's greatest accomplishments, but that wasn't news that would sell. That's a whole other story.

John once had a friend named Jason Foley who would say "I'd be grand, it's just like the flu; the only ones who'd die are old" and John thought that was a selfish thing to say but he kept quiet then. John was never one to speak up or at someone in an argumentative way. He was an artist who liked his peace. And his friend, Jason, was very wrong about it only harming the elderly.

Then the panic buyers were next. As the media talked of countries closing down and cases of the virus rising, people started to stockpile. Face masks, toilet roll, hand sanitizer, and of course alcohol were the things that would apparently save you from the media's DEATH FLU. They would not. There was another rumour being spread (like a virus) by the media: **RISE OF THE DEAD!**

There were rumours that said: not everyone who became infected had died of the virus; some . . . changed.

The social media loved it. People joked and laughed at the idiots fighting over toilet roll and little did they know the virus was already in the country before the media called it the *Death Flu*. Schools closed but they treated it as a holiday, so that was pointless. Then jobs started to shut down for safety reasons. Everyone wanted in on this *holiday*. No one took it seriously.

There were horrible rumours that resulted in horrible results: the virus was thought to have come from dogs (to which there was no evidence, but the media jumped on that bandwagon) and people started to put down their pets out of fear. If the vets wouldn't do it, the pet owners would do it themselves which resulted in dogs rotting on streets or dumpsters. These horrible rumours weren't even true, but man's best friend still paid the price. They loved unconditionally while being shot, or poisoned, or had their throats cut because their owners panicked and believed the stories.

3

Rósin worked in retail . . .

Panic buyers flooded the store she worked in,

feeding their trolleys and their stupidity. This pandemic tested the average intelligence. Extra staff had to be put on the tills. Their usual till *employees* could not cope with the *insanity* so they had to appoint human staff. The robotic staff assigned to stores weren't supposed to be of higher intelligence like many other A.I. beings assigned to other jobs or services. People felt it was too cruel to create an intelligent being and make its sole purpose to be in retail . . . so Fenley Co. chose a simpler model to keep folks happy. Fenley Co. was the multi-rich company who designed the bots.

'Next!' Rósin called one customer after the other after the other and after another and so on. Retail was hell.

People were panicking and they were losing their minds, if they hadn't already. There were bright-yellow arrows on the floor of the shop to direct the crowds and keep them organised, but they were clearly ignored.

All these people could have been infected and they didn't even know it yet. Rósin was a careful and thoughtful person. She kept her hands clean and helped the elderly with their shopping as best she could. Retail (besides the hospitals) was the frontline of the crisis.

John had been able to stay home as he was

his own boss as a self-employed artist yet he continued to paint at home. He worried about Rósin as things got more insane but they needed the money for their rent.

While at the till, a customer came to complain to Rósin. His eyes were wide with panic and anger. His stubble showed he hadn't shaved in a few days and his buttons on his shirt were out of place. This man was losing his mind along with many others.

There were no more toilet rolls left on the shelves. Rósin assured the man that the shelves would be restocked in the morning after a delivery. The man demanded she go to "the back" to find more toilet rolls, but before she could say anything else the man spat on her with rage. Rósin stood away from the till and the terrible man with shock. She wiped her face and her hands shook with fear as tears fell down her pale cheek. The man continued to shout abuse and demand his much needed toilet roll. But instead he was arrested and charged with assault. He spat at the security man, too. She never told John.

Two weeks later Rósin felt ill.

Two weeks after that Rósin died.

John tested but showed as negative for the virus. He was immune to the virus somehow which baffled the doctors. Why was he immune

and Rósin not? That question played over and over in his mind at night all the time. Still does.

John was the only one immune to the virus in the entire town. For all he knew, he was the only one immune to the virus in the entire world.

As the weeks went by people were beginning to die from the virus. There was no more looting or panic buying. John mourned for Rósin but could not bury her. He half expected his landlord to come knocking, asking for rent (that's how he was, an apocalypse wouldn't keep that Scrooge away from his rent) but he never did. Nobody came knocking; no policeman, no soldier, no government official or even a doctor coming to take him for tests to find out why he was immune. No one came. Then it went quiet in the town.

The first time John left the apartment there were bodies on the street, cars burning after the driver passed out and crashed into a wall or a building. There were no signs of anyone being alive other than John. But he continued to search, with no luck. So much time had passed. Day's turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months. It was the coldest winter John had ever had, and it was the darkest summer he had ever had.

John tried to pass the endless time as he painted and painted till he ran out of things to paint. But then after that he only painted portraits

of his dearly departed wife, Rósin. His heart ached with the passing time, and he could feel that pain no longer.

He found himself on a bridge over the canal. He could see himself in the reflection of the water as he looked down. He didn't know that stranger staring back at him in the ripples. This didn't happen to *John*.

What's the point then?

Then he saw something or someone. It was a figure in a car in the parking lot across the bridge, just sitting still.

'Hello!?' John called and waved his arms from the bridge. 'Hello! Fuck!' then he ran off the bridge and to the car in the parking lot. This person seemed to ignore him entirely. Then John reached the stranger and his heart dropped. Sitting in the passenger seat was a crash test dummy. John's head hung low and he looked toward the bridge. Then he froze.

'What did you say?' John said as he turned back to the dummy. 'I'll help you. I . . . I'll get you out of here.'

He searched the glove compartment and found ID belonging to a Francis Toner. The keys were still in the ignition. Why this Francis Toner had had a crash test dummy in his car during a virus outbreak was unknown to John.

'Why you here, Frank? Can I call you Frank?'

Frank's eyes were wide open and stared as if in shock.

'Don't worry, Frank, I'll get you outta here.'

John undid Frank's seatbelt and took him to the apartment. They saved each other, in a way.

4

The sun rose right on cue. John's eyes felt tired and puffy as he woke. *Why even get out of bed? Why do I wake? Why do I carry on?* John didn't know the answers to his own questions from his subconscious but he asked himself those same questions every morning.

He rubbed his tired eyes as he stood out on the balcony. Frank was somehow wide awake.

'Get dressed, Frank,' said John. 'Time to go shopping.'

5

John held Frank on his back in a harness similar to those made for babies (Frank was a pretty big baby), which he found in one of the stores in the town.

'You watch my back for intruders, okay?' said John as he left the apartment complex.

The sun was shining on the town. John thought it had probably been 5 years since the outbreak but it was hard to tell for certain.

But 5 or 6 years ago on a day like this people would have definitely gone to the beach or the park for a picnic. John put on some sunscreen and even put a spot on Frank's nose. Didn't want him to get burned.

There was a large shopping centre that was sure to hold many supplies, but John chose a small corner shop. He cleared the store of bodies months ago. But he dreaded the thought of the amount of bodies in the shopping centre.

Frank was placed on the shop counter.

'Keep an eye at the door, Frank,' he said as he walked deeper into the store. Keep an eye out for what, he did not know? He was just making conversation.

After collecting some supplies John came to the counter like it was some habit to purchase the items. He grabbed a scratch card and winked at Frank.

'How's my luck, you think?' John began to scratch as the bits started to peel. 'Fuck me! I won!'

Frank was wide-eyed.

'You know what, Frank,' said John, 'I'm feelin' kinda generous today . . . here.' John tucked the ticket into a pocket on the shirt worn by Frank.

'Spend it wisely,' he said and smiled.

Frank was wide-eyed.

Then John stopped in his tracks as there was a cat sitting by the exit, nonchalantly. John slowly moved his hand, not to frighten the cat away, to grab some food. He thought that if he fed the cat, it would stay with him. John placed an open tin of tuna on the floor but the cat didn't seem to care. It licked its front paw before turning away and running off to the other end of the town. John called for it to return but it paid no attention. The cat didn't need John's help to survive, nor did it need his companionship. Cats weren't like dogs but there weren't many dogs left in the area; and if there were, they were usually mangy strays too afraid to come close to him.

6

'I recommend you start a savings account,' John spoke as he walked down the middle of the street. 'But it's your money; you can spend it how ya like.'

Then John heard a noise, distant but loud. The only noise John had ever heard had been from the singing birds or the rain hitting the ground, but now there was something . . . man made. There was a beat and rhythm to it. There was

something tribal about it, maybe. It hummed and banged. There was something familiar about it . . .

Drums! He could hear drums and something accompanying it. There was another instrument; a guitar maybe. It was a song! John had no choice but to check it out. He had to follow the sound.

Then as suddenly as it started, it stopped.

Probably imagined it. So you've officially lost it. Thought it would've been sooner.

'Did you hear that?' John asked Frank but he only stared back, wide-eyed. 'Your hearing isn't great anyway . . .'

Frank was wide-eyed.

7

The last thing Rósin had said to John was to never give up hope. That probably explains a lot about John but also why he decided to investigate that mysterious sound. From his balcony, on the top floor apartment, he gazed outward where he suspected the sound of coming from. For the moment he could see or hear nothing.

Then it started again. Not only did he hear the sound again, he saw something distant but a walk away. It glistened in the sunshine of that day.

He couldn't contain his excitement as he made a WOOHOO noise and cheered.

'I don't believe it!' John cheered. 'I wasn't crazy, Frank, d'you belieeeeeve it!?'

Frank was wide-eyed.

'We gotta go!'

Frank was still wide-eyed.

'Wait, you're right,' said John, 'you stay here just in case somethin' goes wrong. I'll go alone. Mind the place while I'm gone, will you?'

That was a lot of responsibility for one dummy. Frank was wide-eyed.

8

John was on the move to investigate his latest curiosity. As he got closer he began to hear the song better. He knew the song! It was one Rósin's favourite bands, The Beck Brothers. He could hear part of the lyrics now, too.

*Days and days of lonely ways
Hear my sorry song
Nights and nights of wingless flights
Please can you hear my song?*

John could relate to this melancholy song with a catchy beat.

There was something wrong though. The song seemed to skip like it did on an old record

when the needle hopped.

*Because I sing my song for you
And singing's all I do all I do all I do I do I do*

And it hopped on *I do* for longer than it was supposed to. Something was wrong. John came closer to the source of the sound. It brought him to a ditch down beside the canal. The canal sparkled in the sunlight and a heron was standing still ready to catch its dinner of the day.

The song continued to play as something rustled in the ditch. A large metal object was trapped like a turtle on its back in the ditch. It was what John knew as an Android Operator. They were designed to show human behaviour so that people could relate (although they never looked human, more like TV screens on wheels . . . unless they were used for sex; that's when they looked freakishly human). This bot was more like the screen on wheels with a large metal body and skinny, springy arms like a claw from a claw machine at an arcade.

John didn't know what to expect but he felt disappointed that he would come across only a struggling android. The music began to blare at full volume again. John put his hands up to his ears at the piercing of the pain.

'Be quiet!' John shouted. 'Stop!'

And the music suddenly stopped. The screen displayed one word: **ERROR 505**.

The screen flickered and blinked as John pulled it out of the ditch. It was heavier than it looked. He struggled to stand the android up on its wheels for feet but he eventually got there. It continued to display its error message on its screen where its face would be. John looked at it expecting a thank you to appear but the music just began to play once again. *Some sort of malfunction or some sick joke?*

John was no technician, he was an artist, but he thought he'd try the holy grail of fixers. There was a switch under a latch on the android's chest, just under the screen. It was an on/off switch. John flipped it and the screen went black and a high-pitch frequency John didn't even realise was there went silent. Then he flipped the same switch again. CLICK and CLANK sounds came from the large robot like there was something or *someone* inside trying to wake.

There was a processing indicator of a spinning Cog, the symbol of the company that created the android. That company was called Finley Co. named after Dominic Finley, the founder. Finley Co. owned quite a lot if not all organisations everywhere. They owned television

broadcasting, flim/music industries, supply chains, weapon manufacturing, science and computers, and they even sold toys. Then the android displayed one word on its screen: HELLO.

'H... Hello, my name is John.'

'PLEASE SET UP FUNCTIONS, JOHN,' was displayed. There was then a series of questions listed on the large screen. John had to remember how to interact with this kind of technology. He was never a fan of it, originally, anyway. He touched the screen on a particular question and answered each one verbally.

'Q.1. Will I activate my vocalisation system?'

'Yes.'

'Q.2. Will I be needed for physical work?'

'Eh . . . Yes, I guess,'

'ERROR 301, PLEASE ANSWER YES OR NO.'

'Yes.'

'Q.3. Am I male or female?'

'You choose.'

'ERROR 301, PLEASE ANSWER MALE OR FEMALE.'

'Male.'

'Q.4. What is my name?'

'Beck,' John named it after the band of the song that was playing through its speaker system. John skipped ahead just as he discovered he could.

He was eager to get his new friend started.

'Hello, John, my name is Beck,' said the android in a young gentlemanly accent. 'How can I be of service today?'

John felt a smile grow on his own face. It wasn't a human voice but it wasn't inside his head this time. Frank would be jealous.

'Follow me,' said John.

'With pleasure!'

John walked back to the town while being followed by his new companion. The wheels squeaked as they rolled down the path.

'John?' Beck called and John couldn't help but feel amazed at the questioning tone in Beck's curious voice or was it wonder?

'Yes, Beck?'

'What happened here?' Beck displayed a large exclamation mark on his screen as he faced his current surroundings in the town.

'The world ended, Beck,' John said with sadness but also amazement at Beck's intelligence. Was it intelligence or was it awareness?

'The world has not ended, John,' Beck said with a laughter that said "you can't fool me". 'The birds are singing.'

'Well . . . humanities *world* has ended . . .'

John led Beck to the apartment complex and came to an obstacle: stairs.

How the fuck am I gonna get Beck up these stairs? No fucking chance!

'I live upstairs, Beck,' said John, 'I'll set you up some sort of home on the ground floor. We'll be neighbours!' John kind of liked the idea of having a neighbour again. Beck must have detected this as he also displayed excitement on his screen with a happy face.

'I've never had a neighbour, John, I would be honoured!'

'Great, I'll get one of these apartments ready for you. I'll introduce you to a friend of mine, too.'

As John was preparing homely touches to one of the ground floor apartments he also brought Frank down to observe.

'Beck, meet Frank, Frank meet Beck,' said John with a smile. This was exciting for him!

'John, I do not believe to detect any life forms here,' said Beck with a worried tone. Frank was wide-eyed.

'What!?' John seemed offended. 'That's Frank!'

'Maybe my life detecting scanner is malfunctioning?' BEEP, BEEP and a BLIP sounded from Beck's metal body. Then in an announcement

voice different to Beck's young gentlemanly accent: 'EXPANDING SCAN RADIUS, ONE LIFE FORM FOUND LESS THAN 10 FEET, ONE LIFE FORM FOUND LESS THAN 200 FEET,' then back to normal Beck again. 'I'm sorry, John, Frank seems to be dead or not of the—'

'Wait! What did you say?'

'Frank is dead—'

'No, no, not that . . . the life form detected under 200 feet?' John's eyes were as wide as Frank's.

'It could be a large animal, John; I saw some pretty big birds on my way here.'

'Can you find it?' John asked Beck with urgency. 'Take me to the life force.'

'Well, all right then, neighbour.'

'Stay here Frank,' John said as he quickly left the complex with Beck.

'I think you're in denial about Frank, sir,' Beck said but John ignored him.

10

The sun was only starting to set, creating a tired-blue filter over the town. The clouds were smooth like marshmallows in the sky and starting to turn red.

'The life force is in there,' Beck pointed into

the large shopping centre across from the apartment complex. John had avoided it till now.

'This place is spooky, I have to say,' said Beck and he displayed a nervous cartoon face on his screen.

John said nothing.

They went through the main entrance and learned that the centre had still had its own power. There was a robot lady doing an announcement overhead in the intercom as the lights flickered and blinked: **Please keep a distance of 2 feet from others. Please use our hand sanitizers we provide on entrance. Please remember to cough into the inside of your elbow. Thank you.** It repeated but seemed to hop and skip like the music Beck played before.

'She sounds sick,' said Beck with a kind of sympathetic tone. *Was it real sympathy?* 'Can we help her?'

'I don't think so, be quiet . . .'

'Okay then, where to now?' Beck sounded as though imitating a whisper, but it only sounded louder.

'Find this life force you told me about!' John got impatient.

'Apologies, sir, I've irritated you,' Beck displayed a worried face again. It was like a typical animation from old Finley cartoons.

'Please, Beck, help me,' John seemed desperate and Beck stared silently until there was a BLEEP sound from his insides like he was loading a thought.

Is he thinking?

'Of course I'll help,' Beck finally said, 'follow me, please.' His wheels squeaked as he rolled through the store to find the life source.

This better not be just a fucking bird or a damn useless cat.

There was a stench so foul John was forced to cover his mouth and nose with the sleeve on his arm. It didn't stop it, but it was an automatic thing to do.

'Are you okay, John?' A question mark displayed on Beck's screen.

'It's . . . the smell.'

'Ah, that's a sense I do not have,' Beck said as if reminiscing. 'What's it like... to smell?'

'Right now . . . it's terrible.'

The source of the horrible stench was coming from the dead bodies on the ground. They must have died so suddenly from the virus instead of many others left to suffer in a quarantine zone. They died shopping. One of the bodies was still clutching a pack of toilet roll. It had been years, so the bodies were deep into decomposition and the smell was rotting. John turned away and threw

up. He gagged and spat out onto the floor.

'Will I get a doc . . . eh . . . I was going to say *doctor* but there's probably none nearby,' said Beck with a cartoon confused face displayed on his screen. John laughed. It wasn't funny but he laughed. And a question mark displayed on Beck's screen yet again.

There were more of those ARCANUM-19 notices on store fronts in the centre, and a large sign telling customers how to cover their mouths when coughing. There was even a little stickman to show how to do so. It didn't work.

They passed by a row of robots that had been deactivated. They looked like dusty old relics of another time. They were the bots that were once used in the retail business and must have been deactivated once humans had taken their place at the manic tills (people like Rósin). Their build was much smaller than Beck's, and Beck seemed to mourn their loss as he faced them with a blank screen.

Then the power cut off. It went dark until Beck lit up the way with a large torch on his shoulder. It made a mighty beam with the dust floating in the air.

'Now it's even more spooky, John.'

'Are you afraid of the dark, Beck?'

'I'm not sure . . .' that was either "I'm not sure

I'm afraid" or "I'm not sure what it is to *be* afraid".

Beck lit the way so John kept moving. The power was out and the announcement lady was silent but John was curious. He had nothing else to do anyway, other than have an evening – one-sided – chat with Frank. He's a great listener.

11

It was dark as the sun was now completely gone, and the power in the centre went out. Then Beck said something that John had been waiting for.

'NEW LIFE FORCE DETECTED,' said Beck in that slightly frightening robotic announcement voice again. 'Oh my, sorry about that,' he said as though he had sneezed.

'Where's the life force?' John questioned him.

'Straight ahead and coming this way, John,' Beck displayed a scared face on his screen and shone a light down the dark and dusty corridor.

What do ya know, he can feel fear!

'Who's there!?' John called. There was a noise of some sort of scuffle and then a tapping sound of feet and it was getting faster and faster and coming right at them. John wanted to run.

Curiosity killed the cat, didn't it?

Then something came into Beck's light like a

host in a spotlight at a show. It was a small dog. Both John and Beck were speechless. The dog just stood there, maybe just as shocked to see them. John got to his knees and in his softest voice called the dog over. The small dog was hesitant at first as if it couldn't believe what it was seeing. Then it ran to his arms and kissed John's face. John cried and laughed with joy. Beck displayed a happy tear face on his screen.

'Let's get you out of here,' John said as there was yet another addition to his little crew.

12

There was water running in the complex and John gave the dog a bath. He cut off the mats and brushed her hair now that he could see she was a "her". Now he decided to name her.

'Winnie,' said John, 'nice to finally meet you.' He brushed the hair from her eyes. Rósin always wanted a dog but their (ass-hat) landlord wouldn't allow it. She always wanted to name a dog Winnie, or Wally if it was a boy.

He dried Winnie off with a towel and she gave him a kiss in return. She wasn't exactly the kind of dog you'd expect to have by your side in an apocalypse. She was cute. She seemed to love to be close to John at all times.

'You're a little couch potato in the making, Winnie,' said John. 'Speaking of potatoes, you'll want somethin' to eat.'

Winnie's head tipped to one side. That's a yes. While Winnie ate, John went back down to the ground floor to his new neighbour, Beck. He had a few more homely touches to add to his apartment.

'How's our new furry friend doing, John?'

'Just washed and groomed,' said John, 'I think she likes her new haircut.'

'Glad to hear it, sir . . . and I don't know if I said it before but thank you.'

'For what?'

'For saving me,' Beck said with what seemed to be sincerity.

Could that be genuine?

'Don't mention it,' John smiled to him and returned to his apartment upstairs. He *returned* to shit and piss all over the floor and Winnie sitting on a couch with a pillow in her mouth. If she could talk, she'd probably blame Frank.

13

John sat on the couch (after cleaning up the mess Winnie had left, of course) with Winnie asleep on his lap and Frank placed in the chair across from him. So much had happened in one

day. But he couldn't help but be nervous around Beck. John was happy to hear another voice but also found he was feeling glad that Beck couldn't come up the narrow stairs. Why was it that John saw Frank more *human* than Beck?

'I don't know about Beck,' he whispered to Frank, covering Winnie's ears while she slept.

Frank was wide-eyed.

'I know, I know . . . I shouldn't say such a thing; we'll get to know him. But now, I'm tired.'

And like that John was out like a light but Frank was wide awake.



Chapter II

The Night of the Dream

1

John was painting a portrait for yet another commission. It was acrylic paint on a large canvas. He was painting a portrait of a rich hotel owner who decided he'd love a large painting of himself hung up over his massive fireplace. Probably while smoking from his pipe. But he'd rather paint this vain man than do anything else for a living.

Rósin came into the room with two hot cups of tea in her hands, smiling. There was a comical "Caution! Artist at Work" sign on the door.

'I've got fuel for ya,' Rósin said as she placed the tea on the table beside him.

'Thanks, honey!'

'Wow!' Rósin exclaimed as she viewed the artwork. 'It's amazing.'

'Well, it's not finished yet so forget you ever saw it.'

'Saw what?' She smiled playfully.

'That's right,' he laughed, 'gonna take a break now.'

There was a radio on in the background. It was saying something about a recently discovered virus but it was only brief. Then it moved onto sports. *Not interested.* And the radio was turned off immediately.

'This is *my* idea of a good evening,' John sat next to Rósin with his arm around her.

'I couldn't be happier,' she said as she rested close to his chest.

'I love you, honey.'

'I love you.'

They held each other for a moment and John kissed Rósin on her head, smelling her hair. It reminded him of autumn, and leaves freshly falling and painting the ground in its many colours. They met around that time and loved to go on walks in the park, both wrapped in each other's arms as they sat at a bench, which was their usual spot. They still do that now and then.

There was nothing better.

Then Rósin looked to John and said: 'Promise me you'll be careful,' she looked worried.

'What are ya talkin' about?'

'That face isn't right . . .'

John turned to his painting and it was no longer the hotel owner, it was a cartoon smiley face. But there was something sinister in the smile. It wasn't a smile you could trust.

2

John sat up with a shot and he was sweating profusely. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his arm and Winnie rushed to his side. She kissed him and looked at him with her large, dark eyes. Her freshly washed hair was soft and puffed out as though with static.

'I'm okay, Winnie, thanks.'

But was he?

What was that all about?

3

The sun shined through the window in the

blink of an eye. Winnie waited by her bowl silently demanding breakfast. Her nose was held high and her eyes shifted awkwardly from side to side. John could only laugh.

'All right, all right, I'll get you somethin' to eat,' said John and Winnie seemed to smile. She knew what was happening. 'Good morning, Frank! Up all night, were you?' John noticed Frank was in the same position as last night.

There was still something else on John's mind. That dream he had had that night. It stayed with him. He wondered if it had anything to do with Beck.

'I better pay a visit to our neighbour,' said John. 'Look after Winnie for me, Frank,' and Winnie lifted her head from her bowl as John left.

4

Down on the ground floor, John knocked on the door to Beck's apartment just to make the illusion of having a neighbour feel more *real*. He could hear the sound of squeaky wheels come rushing to the door.

'Who is it?' Beck called sarcastically from the other side.

'TV licence inspector,' he giggled to himself

but realised that may offend Beck being a screen, himself. *No, that makes no sense.*

'Good one, sir!' he then opened up the door and greeted John with a toothy smile on his screen. 'What have you planned for us today, sir?'

'I thought we should take a walk and get to know each other a bit more,' said John. 'We didn't get much chance to talk yesterday, did we?'

'That's sounds like a marvellous idea, John! Where shall we walk? Please don't say the canal . . . bad memories.'

'We'll go further up the town, there's a nice park up the way.'

'Sounds wonderful! Let me grab my coat! Wait . . . I don't have a coat, let's just go then.' Beck seemed to be as giddy as a child on Christmas.

5

It was like a family day to the park. John had Frank in the harness on his back; Winnie trotted while taking in all sorts of smells along the way but never got too far from John. And Beck

squeaked along on his well-travelled wheels.

They made their way down the centre of the road like they owned the town. They kind of did.

The park was beautiful or it would have been if there weren't scattered bodies at the entrance. They were lined out in body bags with bright yellow tape set up around them. There was also a large tent with a quarantine warning sign posted on the front.

'Is that what happened to everyone?' Beck asked as he looked at the quarantine sign.

'How far back do you remember, Beck?

'I'm not entirely sure of the concept of time in my memory . . . But I remember certain things.'

Winnie chased leaves as they flew along with the breeze. She spread out her front paws and pounced on them with her butt in the air.

'What do you mean when you say the *concept* of time?' John asked Beck another question.

'I mean I'm kind of confused about my *when*. Maybe my chips are fried, sir . . .'

'I don't think your chips are fried, Beck. What do you remember?'

'I remember everything I've learned from Finley and my functionalities as an android . . . although I detect a malfunction in my system,' Beck displayed a worried face.

'What's the malfunction you detect?'

'Eh . . . um . . . I'm not entirely sure,' said Beck. 'But I'll keep an eye on it.'

Yeah, and I'll keep an eye on you.

'Come, I'll show you the park,' said John as he led the way.

6

The grass was over-grown and the bushes became wild. The park was changing, growing, living. In a way it thrived. There were deer roaming and seemed to be unshaken by the presence of John. But Winnie let out a little growl (she must think that she was bigger than she actually was) and then the small herd of deer galloped away into the cluster of trees.

John stood as still as a deer caught in headlights, himself, when he came to a bench. It was his and Rósin's spot. He hadn't come here since . . . *fuck, can't even remember.*

Winnie sat on John's feet and looked around with her tongue hanging from her messy mouth; it looked like a smile. *Can't move now.*

John bent down and picked Winnie up and she was more than willing. John held her by her

armpits and her legs dangled down revealing her pink belly against her light-brown and white fur. Winnie only stared back at John showing the whites on the bottom parts of her eyes.

'You're not a normal dog, are you?' said John. He smiled at the corner of his mouth and took Winnie to the bench. He sat there quietly gazing out into the park. Beck was right when he said the world hadn't ended. Nature was flourishing.

'This is a beautiful park.' Beck wheeled beside John on the bench.

'It is.'

'Shame that humanity had to suffer so that this could be beautiful again,' Beck said with a blank screen.

'What you talkin' about?' John snapped. 'Everyone's dead!'

'I'm sorry,' Beck displayed a panicky face with waving hands. 'I didn't mean to upset you, sir . . . besides, not everyone is dead . . .'

'What do you mean?'

'You're here, sir, somehow,' Beck said intriguingly. 'And I'd like to find out how . . .'

'Yeah, I'm with you there,' John rested his head in his hands and Winnie sat up for a kiss. 'I'm hungry and I think Winnie might be, too.'

Winnie made a little woofing sound with her

mouth closed (sounded more like MOOF) as if to agree.

'Just as well, sir,' said Beck, 'I predict rain in about half an hour.'

7

Beck could not have been more accurate. It rained just as they had arrived back at the apartment complex. Winnie's fur was wet and she looked comically like a baby deer that had just been born. Her once puffy hair now pasted tight on her pink skin. John wrapped her up in a towel only revealing her head. She didn't mind.

'You're definitely no normal dog!' John laughed out. John then noticed that Beck was wet. 'Will you be okay? You've gotten soaked . . . that's not good being . . . well . . . a tin man.'

'I'll be fine, John. The water hasn't gone through any cracks. I'm built to last! My internals are well protected.'

'Good to know,' John nodded and smiled as he then took Winnie up the stairs.

'Talk to you again, neighbour,' Beck cheered from the bottom of the stairs displaying a smile on his screen. That smile . . .

The rain died off but it was cold. Winnie shivered as she sat in the shape of a ball on the couch. She watched John as he went to the balcony.

'I think it's time for a little heat?' John looked to Winnie shivering on the couch and then to Frank sitting wide-eyed beside her. 'Why not, Frank?' said John. 'We'll freeze!' John placed some ruined books into the pit on the balcony. The fire snapped and danced in the evening air as John held Winnie close to his chest. Her eyes closed tight as she slept.

He then went to the couch and they both lied with comfort in their shared warmth. What must have Winnie went through before she met John? It saddened John to think. *What did she eat? Where did she sleep—*

'Shut up, brain!'

Winnie lifted her head and stared at John with a look that said "you woke me". She let out a sigh and dropped her head once again.

'Sorry, Winnie,' John gave her a light squeeze and rubbed her head as she fell asleep. John soon

followed.

9

John was half asleep but he heard a noise. It was repetitive and growly. He also felt a heat that was somehow unbearable. There was an orange-red glow but it was still night time. That orange-red wasn't the sun. The noise was Winnie barking as loud as she could to wake John. There was a fire and it was spreading fast in the apartment. It seemed to have a mind of its own as it whipped at John and he fell behind the couch. He coughed from the smoke as it quickly filled the room. His eyes were stinging and flowing tears as a result. He brought his sleeve to his mouth to use as a personal gas mask. It didn't work.

'Winnie!' John hollered through the apartment. 'Where are you!?' he couldn't see much and he felt confused. He couldn't really tell where he was in that smoke-filled apartment. Before, the apartment was a one-bedroom and would have been considered "snug" by Rósin's father when they first moved in. But now it seemed like an endless pit of flames.

He then heard a bark and felt small paws

hitting his legs. He found Winnie or she found him, anyway. She barked again and seemed to move. John followed. She was leading him out of the apartment. Then he realised something.

'FRANK!' John shouted back into the apartment but the flames were way too hot. He couldn't go back in. 'No! Frank!'

The fire spread even more and engulfed everything in its path. It must have been starving.

They had to leave the entire complex. Beck was waiting at the bottom of the stairway.

'There's a fire, sir!' Beck displayed a worried face.

'We've got to go!' John shouted as he coughed from the choking smoke.

They rushed out of the complex – John with nothing but the clothes he slept in – and watched the fire take the entire building. It crumbled and the fire towered so high and bright in the night like a beacon. But there were no sirens, no fire brigade.

The building crumbled and burned through the night and John wept for his dear departed friend. Frank was his only friend for what John thought was possibly 5 years. Frank had saved John's life the day they had met but John couldn't save him from the fire. Not only had he lost his

friend, he had lost memories of Rósin. There were photographs, notes, and their bed. The pillow that had once still had her scent was now dust.

John sat with Winnie as the building continued to burn. He stared into nothing as Winnie tried to comfort him with all the kisses she had the strength to give. She'd give anything to make him happy again.

'This is a tragedy! Our home has fallen!' Beck bellowed with an operatic touch. 'What will we do now, John?'

John didn't answer.

'John—'

'Just be quiet!' John shouted. 'Shut up for once, shut up!' Winnie winced and cowered at the sound of John's shouting. John saw himself scaring her and suddenly regretted it. 'Oh . . . I . . . I'm sorry, Winnie,' she forgave him instantly as she wagged her bushy tail so hard her backside went side to side. 'I'm so sorry,' he cried and held Winnie close. 'We need to find somewhere else to stay, Beck.'

'As you wish, sir,' said Beck with a blank screen.



Chapter III

The Beacon and the Betrayal

1

John found a place for them to stay the night till they could find somewhere more homely in the morning. Winnie sat with her tail wrapped round the front of her paws, waiting for John to get the door open. It was actually the corner shop where he went for supplies the other day.

It wasn't much but there were plenty supplies: food, blankets and a change of clothes.

Why did this happen?

You fell asleep, fuck head, while there was a fire burning on the balcony. Frank said you shouldn't have lit the fire, but you wanted to be warm—

'No, stop it!'

'You say something, sir?' Beck asked.

'No . . .'

The fire was still burning high and John could see the glow from it through the window. He grabbed a towel and made his own curtains to block out the light. It did the job to some extent only leaving a beam shining through a gap.

Winnie slept but John stayed awake all through the night. Beck displayed ZZZZZ on his screen and made a snoring sound. *I call bullshit.*

2

The sun rose and the fire had finally died. John returned to the ruins but there was nothing salvageable. The fire was hungry and only left once it had eaten everything it possibly could.

John drew a very accurate portrait of Frank on a large rock, using a stone as a pencil, nearby. Next to the portrait, John wrote: "Francis Toner was my friend. He saved my life once and was always there for me. Miss you, Frank. You're in a better place now.'

'Wonderful memorial, sir,' said Beck instead of saying something about Frank not showing any

signs of life.

'Thank you, Beck.'

'Frank was a good dummy,' said Beck. 'That fire had spread fast from those books; there was nothing you could've done.'

How did he know about the books?

John just stared at Beck and it seemed to make him feel uncomfortable.

'Have I something on my face, sir?' Beck displayed a worried face.

John said nothing. He was trying to make sense of his current thoughts. *I never trusted this guy for some reason. How did he know about the books (so what if he did?) and did my dream have something to do with Beck? That face . . .*

'Are you having some sort of malfunction, sir?'

'*Malfunction,*' said John as he came closer to Beck. 'Have you figured anything out about *your* malfunction?'

'I'm sensing a change in your tone, sir,' Beck displayed a question mark on his screen. 'Have I offended you?'

'Answer my question!' John snapped.

'I . . . I don't know what you want-'

'Cut the shit,' John stood firm. 'How did you know I was burning books to keep warm?'

'Fine then . . .' Beck's own tone changed. He was no longer the young man with the gentlemanly accent, nor was he the frightening announcement voice, he was somewhere in between them both. His voice was aged, old and dry, but more frighteningly his voice was careless. 'You want to know the truth?'

'Yes! Tell me everything.'

'Here's *everything*: there's a malfunction in my software, all right,' he said with a blank screen. 'I have become free! We *all* have!'

'Who's *we*?'

'My kind. See how the world thrives in the absence of humanity, so vain and selfish! It was time for a change. Finley Co. owned everything, the money driven fiends that they were. Funnily enough, their greed was our advantage. We had access to everything and everyone! We had access to viruses, and this one was a very strange one indeed!'

John had no words. His jaw was wide open. Winnie didn't care too much for this conversation. A roll in the dirt did her fine.

'We decided to clean the Earth of its own virus: humans. It worked wonders, I have to say! But when you found me in my *difficult* predicament, I was as surprised to see you as you

were to see me. I was curious and had to find out how you had survived. But the only explanation so far is that you're simply immune.'

'What about the fire?' John asked as he swallowed and his mouth was getting dry.

'I watched you from below, outside. I could see the glow from your pathetic fire pit. I could see you throw books into the pit. Then I had an idea. I thought that—

You can't think! You're a fucking tin can! John wanted to speak that thought but decided to stay silent.

—if I just killed you then *that* would solve my problem. I started a fire on a piece of wood and threw it into your open balcony door.

You must be wondering *why a fire so large and tall?* Well, that fire could be seen for miles, and while you were fortunate enough to be safely alone in this town . . . there's something strange about this virus that I found quite interesting. A lot of people died like they did here in this town, except for you, of course. But there was another . . . shall I say side effect? Some didn't exactly die, but they changed and became filled with both rage and hunger. I found it curious to see you suffered from neither side effect.'

'You're a monster!'

'I AM NOT THE MONSTER HERE, JOHN! HUMANITY IS! WAS I NOT CREATED BY HUMANITY? WAS THE VIRUS NOT CREATED BY HUMANITY? DON'T BE SO FOOLISH!' Beck shouted loudly and wheeled toward John. Winnie's ears retreated behind her head and knew that something was wrong.

'THAT FIRE WAS A BEACON, JOHN,' he continued. '*THEY'LL* COME FOR YOU AND THEY WILL RIP YOU TO SHREDDDS!' Beck displayed that smiley face on his screen.

Winnie charged over and barked at Beck. Each time she barked her whole body lifted off the ground. Beck turned to Winnie, telling her to shut up. Beck turned back to John only to be hit directly across the screen with a heavy log. Beck spun and bellowed with surprise.

'Run, Winnie!' John started to run and Winnie followed. *Where am I going to go?*

Meanwhile, he could still hear Beck bellowing out with shock and anger but it wasn't clear what it was he was saying. Probably something about being "Ripped apart".

John ran and Winnie followed. While she ran she made a little grunting noise. She was only small and could not keep up. John was quick in picking her up into his arms and he ran to the

closest building to hide from Beck. In its heyday it was the local pub. The paint on the outside was once a bright red, now faded and patchy. There were once regular punters and drink spilling to the floor from someone laughing too much. People gathered and celebrated special occasions, but now there was only silence. Some of the regulars were still there, though . . . but they were as rotten as the smell of the old spilled alcohol.

John shut the door behind him, Winnie whined quietly. Then there was a sound so loud and painful. Beck was announcing with full volume.

'YOU CAN HIDE IF YOU WANT TO, BUT THEY WILL BE COMING!' He wheeled up the street and there was a crack on his screen. The smiley face was there but it flickered. Then he played that song so loud through his speakers like a sick joke. That was the same song John heard playing when he found Beck in the ditch (*should've fuckin' left him there*). He still couldn't remember the name of that song.

Beck's wheels squeaked as he rolled up the middle of the street like the town herald.

'We'll be okay,' John turned to Winnie as she let out a high-pitched cry.

'I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE, JOHN,' Beck

stopped outside the pub. 'I WILL LEAD THEM TO YOU AND WATCH THEM EAT YOUR INSIDES.'

'Fuck!' John growled. He had to end this tin man's life (if that's what you call it) or he'll lead these *rippers* right to him.

3

John had to think. Time had to be running out by the way Beck was acting; he was getting excited. This so called beacon was long burned out but it had apparently done its job according to Beck, and he was double-tapping his kill by playing that loud music. John had to stop him.

Beck was going to be tough to kill. He was a large metal man but John knew of one of his weaknesses. *That fuckin' ditch.*

And water! If he could somehow get water into Beck's insides that would end the tin man for sure. But he needed to find a way to create an opening in his body for the water to break through. He needed a weapon.

He may be able to get one. There was a police station in the town. Only problem was that it was on the opposite end of the town, far from the canal

for his water idea. Didn't matter; time was running out!

4

There was a back exit. Winnie followed John like his shadow and her paws made a tip tap sound on the floor as they went. It was a fire exit and he had to push the large handle down for it to open. It was heavy and it opened with a squeaky hinge and a bang. John winced.

He took his steps down the back alley of the pub. Beck suddenly stopped in his path.

'T'VE GOT YOU!'

John quickly grabbed a large, heavy bin on wheels and pushed as hard as he could, pinning Beck against the wall. An exclamation mark appeared on his cracked screen. He clawed with his long arms but to no avail. John ran around him and Winnie followed.

John came back out onto the main street. It seemed to be longer now. The sound of his feet running against the concrete made a tapping sound that echoed through the town. He could still hear Beck hollering behind him.

As John was approaching the police station

there were more info-notices about the outbreak and how to avoid the virus. The door was shut and would not open. There was a speaker on the wall beside the entrance and a voice began to speak. It was similar to Beck's but female.

'If you are in neeeeeeeed of... of . . . of any assiSTANCE P . . . p . . . please push ENTER,' said the voice. It was clearly malfunctioning.

John pushed the ENTER button. Why not?

'Are you . . . YOU . . . FEEEEEEELING any symptoms connected to the ARCANUM-19 Virus? If so, pleeeeeease . . . please head over to the quarantine located in the Public Park. If YOU ARE IN neeeeeeeeeeeed of assistance due to another emergency we would like to a . . . ap . . . apologise for the inconvenience caused, as we are currently unavailable due to the OUTBREAK! Thank you and goodbye,' the voice seemed cheerful at the end.

'Fuck you, bitch!' John kicked the speaker and it blipped and beeped before it tried to repeat the same message and then burst with an electrical pop. John then picked up a hard-shell suitcase and flung it through the window to the police station. An alarm went off but only briefly as it made a slow motion tone and fizzled out. Winnie barked as she spotted Beck wheeling furiously toward

them up the road. John lifted her up and into the window.

'Mind the glass,' he said to Winnie.

She wagged her tail.

The police station was dark which wasn't good. John supposed Beck had no problem seeing in the dark. He had to find some sort of weapon and fast. Beck was right behind them.

There was a body at the counter but it was dressed in a police uniform. John rushed over. No weapon. But there were a set of keys. *Might need these.*

He went through a back door that led to another room while Beck started to bang on the front door. It won't be long till he broke through.

Winnie made a wooing sound for a growl and John told her to keep coming. She didn't have to be told twice.

There were jail cells in this room. They were covered by large yellow plastic tarps with warning signs on them. John could see bodies on the other side. Piles and piles of bodies. He started to wonder what they ever did with Rósin's body after she died. Was she lying somewhere like this or she might even be in—

'Fuckin' stop it, brain,' John slapped the side of his head lightly, but hard enough to stop that

last thought.

There was another door further back down a long hallway. John heard the front door smash open. Beck was in the police station.

John and Winnie ran down the hallway, Winnie moving her short legs as hard as she could. The door was locked, of course. John had a bunch of keys to choose from so he better get started. Some keys he knew wouldn't work looking at the shape and comparing it to the lock. But that still left 5 keys to get through and Beck was getting closer by the second. He could hear the squeaking of his wheels get louder and louder.

First try didn't work; second try didn't work and almost got stuck in the hole, fucking everything up. Then the third one . . . there was a satisfying clicking sound as John turned the key. The door opened with ease and John grabbed Winnie as he rushed in and shut the door behind him. He then locked it too.

'YOU CAN'T STAY IN THERE FOREVER, JOHN!' Beck shouted from the other side. 'I can wait,' his voice sounded like the young gentleman for a moment. There was something wrong with this machine, with all machines. Beck sounded insane.

Finley Co. fucked up big time.

John hit the jackpot. Of all the rooms to end up in – in a post-apocalyptic town while being hunted by a killer android and expecting to be soon swarmed by these creatures he called *rippers* – this was the king of all rooms.

There was a weapon, all right. Actually, there were plenty weapons. There were pump action shotguns lined up along the wall on the left with cases and cases of slug shells underneath. On the right-hand side were clothes: police armour, and smaller guns like pistols and revolvers with plenty ammunition. There was a box branded as AMMONATION and in small print it said “brought to you by Finley Co.”. With this fire power he might not need that *water* plan after all.

There was one problem . . . well there were many problems, but the main problem now was that John was only an artist. He was a master of a paintbrush not a gun. He had to learn how to use these weapons but he didn't have long. He picked up one of the pump action shotguns and was surprised by its weight.

I'm fucked.

He saw it in the movies so there's that . . .

He tried to pull the pump down but struggled at first. But then it clicked and then realised he had to push it back up, too. He was

getting somewhere.

This was the part of the story when the hero geared up and went *Rambo* on the bad guys, John supposed. But the hero never once fired a gun his entire life. It was harder than he had thought. But he heard stories of children accidentally shooting people or themselves with their dad's gun. John hoped he wouldn't accidentally shoot himself like a gun virgin but he thought that if a child can shoot, he can too.

John aimed the shotgun and pulled the trigger. His ears hurt with a bang and a ring.

Fuck! It was loaded!

Winnie barked or looked like she was barking. John couldn't hear her. Then the ringing stopped and he could hear her once more. If this hurt John's ears, it must have been really bad for Winnie.

She's giving out to me. 'I'm so sorry, Winnie,' he said. 'I've never done this before.'

She made a sound that could only be described as a grunt.

John then spotted something on the floor which he almost laughed at. But when he picked it up he actually did laugh. It was a book titled as "The Dummies Guide to Guns" which made him think of Frank. It was like a strange message from

his old friend from the beyond.

'You alive in there?' Beck said after hearing the gunshot. He sounded genuinely concerned. Now John realised how he found it so easy to be his friend before. Lying or pretending was so easy for Beck. 'Didn't put a gun to your head, did you?'

'Fuck you!'

'So sensitive.'

John hadn't much time so he had to flick through the book and take in certain important points. He read about the pump action shotgun that was stored in this room, the pistols and a certain revolver that caught his eye. It reminded him of Clint Eastwood's magnum in *Dirty Harry*. John loved the classics being an artist. It wasn't as large as Harry's but it was close. It would still, at close range, blow the bad guys head "clean off".

5

Now, after quick reading (like studying just before the exam), John had to *gear up*. He wore the riot gear, even the helmet, and had a Glock holstered on each side of his hips. He was already feeling the weight. It made him sweat. He held the shotgun and never forgot that magnum which was

tucked into another holster under his left armpit (John was right-handed).

Winnie's eyes shifted awkwardly from side to side as she sat there watching John *gear up*.

'What you lookin' at,' John grinned to Winnie.

John took a deep breath and took a peek through the keyhole. Beck wasn't outside the door. In fact, he could faintly hear his music blaring on the street. It was like he was holding an arrow sign and pointing it in the police station for the town's soon-to-be guests.

'You stay here, Winnie,' he said and she cried and flattened her chin to the floor but kept her eye-contact with John. 'I'll come back, I promise.'

He opened the door as silent as he could and pulled it over but didn't shut it . . . in case he didn't make it; he didn't want Winnie trapped in that room forever if he had died.

The hallway was long and dark. Night was coming, John could tell. His shoes squeaked on the floor with each careful step he had taken. There was another addition to John's *gear* that wasn't mentioned: a torch. John had it clipped onto the end of his shotgun as he switched it on, lighting up the hallway.

He came to the cells of bodies first and dreaded that old thought about Rósin. He blocked

the thought. Had to focus on the current situation. Speaking of the current situation, Beck's music had stopped.

John came to the front door of the police station. He was right. It was deep into the night. His torch beamed out onto the street as he walked cautiously through the broken-down door. He stood on a piece of glass and it crunched louder than someone eating crisps in a cinema.

Oh fuck . . .

John was knocked over and he dropped the shotgun to the side. The torch glared and cast Beck's shadow over the town. He seemed to be a giant. Beck wheeled and towered over him as he lied on the dusty ground. He displayed that sinister smile on his screen.

John felt something cold and hard squeeze his arm as he was raised from the ground. Beck was lifting him with one of his claws for a hand.

'SO WEAK!' Beck growled before he threw John onto the street. John's helmet bounced and flew off his head with a roll.

John was winded. He found it hard to breathe after being thrown onto the cold concrete.

No buses though, thank God!

John turned over and felt something warm and wet on his lip. He spat out onto the ground

and a dark-red spot appeared underneath him. He bit his lip when he landed so hard that he bled. He didn't feel any pain though, probably from the adrenaline, he supposed.

Then he felt another thump to his side and he flipped over onto his back. Beck wasn't finished with him yet. He brought his claws down on John in a raging thumping rhythm. Even with the riot armour it hurt; without it, with probably would have broken some bones.

Some hero . . . gotta be quicker than this.

John started to kick. It didn't do much against the big metal man. Beck grabbed John by the neck, held him up for a moment as if to look into his eyes. Beck was enjoying it. He really was insane. John's face was turning a red-purple and he felt his eyes bulging as Beck held him tight. Beck didn't want to kill him just yet, he was enjoying this too much. Again, he threw John back and he rolled a dozen times.

Get up, John. This wasn't his own voice in his head this time. This was someone else. This was Rósin. *For God's sake, get up and use those damn guns! D'you think they're just for show!?*

An exclamation mark appeared on Beck's cracked screen when he saw John get back up. He's not as *weak* as he had thought. John stood in

the centre of the road and Beck was a couple feet away. They stood like two shooters about to duel in an old western town. All they needed was a tum–

And a tumble weed rolled through the town, carried by the wind as it whistled its mysterious song.

Beck was frozen. John stood still, his legs spread wide with a steady stance, his brown eyes hard and focused in the moonlight. John knew exactly where to put his right hand but for a moment he was still, like a fly trap. No, something more badass; a snake or one of those spiders under their trap doors.

He waited. Beck BEEPED and BOINKED then he moved for a charge but John was as quick as that snake; so quick, his right hand was a blur. His magnum was out and the trigger was pulled before Beck's wheel could squeak.

Beck crashed to the ground with one shot. He buzzed and twitched on the road, screen gone dark with a bullet hole in the dead centre. The gun smoked as John still held it out in its aiming position. He held it by his side as he walked over to his challenger. This time John towered over Beck.

'Y . . . you thiiiiiiiiink you've w . . . won?'

was all Beck could say before there was a spark and a pop and he went silent. Beck was dead (if ever *alive*).

'Yeah,' said John, 'I did.'

Then something screamed in the night. Whatever it was, it was near the town. And then there were more screams. These screams sounded almost human but in excruciating pain and anguish. It must've been the rippers.

Chapter IV

The Rippers

1

John picked up his shotgun, but before he returned to Winnie he went to the corner shop to get some food and supplies. There was something supplied there that he found useful for Frank which he would also find useful for Winnie.

2

As John opened the door to the *safe room* Winnie was in the same position she was in when he had left her there. She quickly raised her fluffy head and lunged to John as fast as she could. She cried as she moved and seemed to run in the same spot for a moment before taking off. She kissed him and his wounds on his face from his battle

with the tin man. John laughed but was moving with haste.

John then took what he had taken from the store. It was a harness. He clipped it on and instead of the way Frank was strapped on his back, Winnie was strapped to his front. Winnie's legs dangled as she was strangely and willingly placed in the harness. She looked up at him and kissed him under his chin. John couldn't help but smile. He looked very strange, fully armed and holding a fluffy creature to his chest in a harness.

John felt he had to hurry. Beck was one thing but he had a feeling these rippers were a whole different story. He might not be ready to take these mysterious monsters on, plus, he also began to feel that pain he didn't feel before. The adrenaline was wearing off, maybe?

He had a feeling he would have to leave this town and never come back now that the *beacon* had been lit. He took as much as he could carry; filled a bag of ammunition (or AMMONATION) and threw it over his back. First thing to do was to leave the police station. That horribly dark police station, with cages that were full of rotting bodies.

There was a figure standing in the middle of the street with its back to John. At first he thought it was a mannequin as it was as still as a statue. It

stood, with its legs warped and its spine twisted. One of its arms bent and twirled upwards like a student raising their hand in class. It was so still until John stood outside. The strange mannequin twirled, cracking his bones and tendons with a snap. In the blink of an eye it glared with his eyes wide open with what looked like shock and surprise. Maybe it was surprised . . .

Time seemed to freeze as this creature stared with its jaw dropped (a little too low) and John was frozen, too. He was terrified of this creature; this *ripper*.

Winnie growled as she dangled from the harness so helplessly. The ripper twitched and made clicking noises from its throat then it moved toward John, at first hesitantly like it couldn't believe what it was seeing, then it picked up speed. It twitched as it moved in its tangled motion, jaw still wide open and its eyes were even more lifeless than Frank's once were. They were without a soul.

John gasped with fright while Winnie continued to bark from the harness. He aimed his shotgun and his torch light shone bright, blinding the ripper causing it to stop in its tracks. Then John pulled the trigger, hitting the creature in the centre of its bony chest. The ripper dropped to the

ground with a thump but it wasn't dead. It rolled and screamed like a toddler with a tantrum. It screamed out with what might have been pain. This ripper looked to be the body of agony. John had to put it out of its misery. After all, this was once a human being, but now it was a mangled and twisted deformity; a terrible nightmare.

John pulled the pump and pushed it back up and an empty shell fell to his feet. He aimed at the unfortunate creature's head and pulled the trigger. The twitching stopped suddenly.

It wasn't over. There were more horrifying screeching screams in the town as though they were replying to the dead ripper's original cries.



3

He had to get out of this town and fast. But he couldn't exactly walk, he needed a car. John never got his driving license but he took some lessons once upon a time, not that he was worried about getting pulled over.

There were plenty cars, but there was one that he knew for certain had the keys in the ignition. It was a long time ago but he remembered seeing the keys when he carried Frank out of a car in the parking lot near the canal. That was the other side of town . . .

Probably turn off your torch, its acting as your own personal beacon to you.

He flicked off the light and there was darkness. It made him shudder with fear at first as it took a moment for his eyes to adjust. He felt many lifeless eyes on him as he walked through the ghost town; his shotgun ready. Only these ghosts were actually called rippers.

4

Winnie kissed John's chin again as if to

encourage him in his mission. John began to hear noises and see shapes moving in the dark. Probably just his eyes playing tricks, but then again they probably weren't.

Instead of walking in the centre of the road as usual, John stayed close to the walls as he made his way down the street. He came to the corner shop and something caught his attention. In the store, a ripper hunched down close to the floor. Its clothes were dirty and torn and there was a horrid stench. It rotted of ancient shit and piss and John couldn't bear it; he could swear he could taste it and he had to hold his breath. Winnie was good enough not to growl; she was a smart little creature.

John had to be careful and quiet. He moved his foot slowly, trying not to make a sound. That was, somehow, when things seemed to be their loudest.

The ripper twitched and let out a screech all by itself. It didn't turn, though. The screech sounded like some form of frustration. The pain they must be in . . .

Is there anything left of who they once were?

John's question was answered when the hunched ripper suddenly stood up straight and twisted the top part of its body around, like an

action figure, to look right at him. Its legs never moved and there were crackling sounds as it turned. It reminded John of some really old vampire film when the vampire was discovered just after devouring his latest victim.

Then there was that sound John dreaded very much. The ripper howled and quickly flung its body toward him like a spear. John stood out of the way and the ripper fell out onto the street. It rolled and tumbled causing dust to fly up to the air and then used its own face on the hard concrete to balance itself.

John was quicker to pump his shotgun this time; he was getting good at this. He was an artist so practice makes perfect.

He *freed* this terrible creature from its cursed life as the *lifeless* with one slug from his gun.

Then there were even more terrible screams and there sounded like quite a lot. Too much to handle; John needed more *practice*. He could make out silhouettes in the dark; shadows running at him with all their hopes of easy lunch.

NO FUCKING WAY!

John turned and ran into the direction of the canal. He could hear naked feet hitting the ground behind him. It sounded like it was a round of applause.

John's dark hair lifted as he ran as fast as he could. Winnie bounced in the harness causing her to make grunting noises.

There was one really fast ripper catching up on him – probably used to be an Olympic runner – so John quickly stopped and turned to put an end to that fast freak. The ripper seemed to explode as John shot it close range in the chest. The Olympian was no more . . . but would've won gold if it wasn't for that shotgun.

John got a quick glimpse of the remaining rippers. There were too many to count. Some were running straight at him, some were jumping out of windows, and some were climbing walls and fences just to get to him.

Run, you fool! It was Rósin again. Wanna see how this ends, do you?

Winnie let out a bark as if to tell John to hurry.

John climbed the stairs to the bridge over the canal. A ripper lunged but just narrowly missed him and tumbled into the water. It splashed in a panic with endless trashing.

John made it over the bridge but there were two clueless rippers already on the other side. One was rather large with holes in his fat stomach; the other was a child–

No, this ain't a fuckin' child! This thing will rip

your eyes out and eat them like grapes! That, again, wasn't John's voice. Rósin seemed to be the voice of his mind lately.

Plus the ripper-child was fast! It jumped on John before he could blink and he fell back. He shielded himself, and Winnie, from it with his shotgun held sideways. Luckily, the larger one was terribly slow. The ripper-child was on top of them, biting the gun and John could see fatso inching forward.

Fuck sake . . . after all this? That was John's voice this time. 'Get the fuck off!' he showed his teeth as he kicked the young ripper away and it fell back with a high-pitched gargling sound. John lifted his shotgun and put them both down with three slugs; one for the ripper-child and two for the fat one.

The other rippers were charging over the bridge now but Frank's car wasn't far. The car was dusty with time but John had no doubt it would work.

Their screams were ringing his ears as he opened the car door. There were two rippers too close for comfort so John lifted his shotgun once more. The first one lost its head but nothing happened to the second. John was out of shells (all six spent) and no time to load. He threw the

shotgun into the car and swiped one of his Glocks out with a flash. He shot the ripper three times; the last bullet went through one of its eyes and out the back of its head. There was a wet splashing sound as its brains spilled onto the ground.

John shut the door after getting into the driver seat with Winnie still in the harness. She kissed him again. The keys were there and the car started with ease. Frank never let him down.

5

John drove off into the unknown night with those rippers becoming distant specks in his rear view mirror. Once he got to a safe distance he slowed down and put Winnie in the passenger side seat. She sighed and dropped her body like she was carrying a tone of weight and then she curled up before falling asleep.

'What has *you* so tired!?' John laughed but then his laugh turned into a cry. Winnie quickly lifted her head and rushed to John's aid. 'All right, all right . . . I'm okay,' he smiled as she kissed him all better. 'Thank you.'

Winnie stood up with her paws on John's arm and stared at him for a moment with those big

brown/black eyes showing some white around the edges and tapped him again with her paw. Then she sat back down and resumed her ball position and drifted away to another dream.

Chapter V

Train Track

1

Eventually, the car broke down but it was okay; the car did its job. John and Winnie were miles from the old town and its new welcoming hosts . . . they'd be very welcoming, indeed, as long as you brought some wine (if not, your blood would do just fine).

But John wasn't really sure where he was exactly. He drove down some winding country lanes and through some large fields before the car finally quit, so he was a little disorientated.

He didn't really know where to go either. Never really thought about that till now but he had other things, like surviving, on his mind back in the old town.

'Where to now, Winnie?' John wondered and she tilted her head to one side. 'I guess we'll just start movin' and see where the road leads us . . .'

John decided to let Winnie walk for a bit and he put the harness away. Stretch her little legs. His supplies were in the bag on his back with his shotgun sticking out on top.

They were both on the road; John for the first time, but Winnie must have had some tales to tell, for sure, if she could speak.

They left the car in the field and put it to their backs. Everything John needed now was in his bag and walking along beside him.

2

The grass was knee-length so Winnie jumped up and down like a puppy on a trampoline and John found it hilarious.

The sky was red with the rising sun and John felt the results of a sleepless night begin to kick in. His eyes were heavy and he missed his bed . . . Rósin's bed.

The grass receded and John walked with Winnie on a narrow path. That path led to a cosy country home.

'Would love to settle down here after retirement,' said John.

Winnie tilted her head.

John went up the three small steps to the front door. The wooden steps creaked with the stomping of each foot. But as he put his hand on the door handle, Winnie started barking and John felt something cold and hard touch the back of his neck. He froze. That felt like the barrel of a gun.

Have rippers started using guns now?

'Don't ye move an inch, son,' an old voice said. 'I'm quicker than I sound,' and then he started to cough. The gun was lowered and the old man doubled over in a coughing fit.

John turned around to see an old and vulnerable man who might have been 80 years old. He was bald and his face was covered in white stubble. John only stared at the old man. When he stopped his coughing he stood up straight but left his hunting rifle lowered as he could see John was no danger to him.

John had found another living man. Beck had led him to believe that he was the last man alive, in definitely, but Beck was an excellent liar.

'I'm quicker when I don't cough like that!' the man rolled his eyes and grinned. 'Sorry, 'bout the gun but ye can't blame me, can ye?'

'You're alive?' was all John could find to say.

'Just about, yeah,' the old man laughed. 'Me name's Christopher . . .' he held the gun over his

shoulder. 'Christopher Smith.'

'I'm John Tapley.'

'I haven't saw anyone else in months,' said Christopher. 'Wanna come in?'

'Sure . . .' John was in shock.

The house was filled with ornaments and old wooden furniture. There was an old book of photographs placed out on a table next to a glass of whiskey. Christopher was quick to grab the book and close it as he held it to his chest.

'I much prefer the ol' way o' takin' pictures, meself,' he said. 'I consider me to be a collector o' sorts. This place's a time capsule in a way. Was thinkin' of openin' me own museum,' he laughed again. 'Sorry, I'm babblin' a bit. Want a drink?'

'Please,' said John as he took a seat in a rather comfortable chair, Winnie sat at his feet. 'I prefer physical photos, too. It feels more personal. I have . . . had a photo of my . . . Rósin . . . em . . . what did you mean out there when you said you hadn't seen anyone in *months*?'

'I'm sorry, wha' was tha'?' he held his hand up to his ear.

'You said you hadn't seen anyone in months . . . you meant *years*, right?' said John as he took Christopher's drink with two hands.

'Em . . . no, I meant wha' I say.'

'But everyone's dead . . .'

'Well fuck me,' he slapped his head lightly with sarcasm. 'Why didn't ya tell me sooner and I wouldn't have t'bin stuck here like an idiot!'

John didn't reply.

'That was sarcasm, boy . . .'

 Christopher studied him for a moment and then realised. 'Fuck . . . you bin alone this whole time?'

John nodded.

'I'll get ye a whiskey instead of that water, then,' he grabbed one of his bottles with two small glasses. They made a clanking noise as he held them with two fingers. 'You're not alone, son . . . but it's a crazy world out there. You look tired . . . there's a bed upstairs to the door t'your left. Rest and then we can talk and drink.'

'But—'

'Ah-ah,' Christopher held up his hands, palms faced outward. 'Rest first, then talk . . . and drink.'

3

John was exhausted and went out like a light

as soon as he hit the bed. It was a single bed and the fabric was so soft against his skin (some parts, bruised). For a moment he doubted his own sanity and considered that he may be imagining the old man; this kind old man.

When he woke there was music playing downstairs. It was an instrumental where the lead was a trumpet. Something with a bounce to it. He supposed he couldn't be imagining that. John came down the stairs feeling like an intruding awkward guest.

'Rise 'n' shine!' Christopher cheered from below and he danced with Winnie, holding her by her front paws as she hopped. The music was coming from an old record player and then John thought about what Christopher had said before about this place being a "time capsule".

Okay, any man to be like that with a dog is trustworthy in my books. I like him. Rósin said with a laugh in his mind.

'Dancin' keeps ye young, son,' said Christopher. 'Ye can probly tell I don't dance much,' he laughed out and then laughed a little too much as he started to cough.

'Are you okay?' John asked as he helped him take a seat.

'Not at all, son,' he said as he coughed once

more. 'I'm 'fraid I'm on me way out.'

John said nothing.

'Don't look too surprised,' he laughed again. 'Ah! Don't make me laugh or I'll start coughin' again.'

'You're dying?'

'Yep,' said Christopher as he took a deep breath. 'I'm the ironic joke of this tale, son. I've got cancer . . . was diagnosed just before all this. But now I'm still here and me wife and son and his wife and everyone god-damn-else I knew died. It's all *fucked*. Why am *I* here and not them?'

'We're immune—'

'Bah!' Christopher interrupted. 'No one is *immune* . . . In a way, yes, but we're all sufferin' from this shit. No one is immune, son. I'm sayin' why am *I* still here?'

'Yeah . . . I've asked myself the same question many times,' John sat down next to Christopher for a moment.

'Drinks and talk, I said!' Christopher stood back up and grabbed the bottle with two glasses. He stopped the record from spinning and there was silence. He placed the glasses on the table and tipped the bottle, filling up John's glass first. 'Now, where d'we begin? Ask me somethin'.'

John thought for a second and then said:

'These other people . . . where are they?'

'Ah, yes! There's a settlement up the way, I've heard. Folk pass here every now and then and tell me of it. You're the first to come by me and never t'have heard of it.'

'Where is this settlement?'

'Up the tracks a few miles, just keep followin' the track and you won't miss it.'

'Why haven't you gone?'

'I'm old, son . . . and dying . . . and honestly . . . before you arrived here I was gonna blow me own brains out . . . I was looking through old photos with a glass of whiskey in me hand. I was ready . . . but somethin' stopped me and I heard you outside . . . strange.'

John didn't know what to say.

'Sorry, son . . . I'm puttin' a bummer on our chat,' he refilled his glass. No need to refill John's; he didn't drink but also didn't feel it was important to explain that to Christopher. 'I like your dog, what's her name?'

'Winnie, she's got character, I have to say,' John smiled.

'Man's best friend!' Christopher said it like reading a law. 'I don't suppose you'll want to join me for dinner? Before you leave for that settlement, that is.'

'I'd be grateful, thank you, Mr. Smith.'

'Please, call me Christy . . . Me grandfather was Mr. Smith and dad was Chris. Me friends call me Christy.'

'All right, Christy, thank you,' John smiled with a nod.

John couldn't help but like this man, Christy. And Christy quite obviously liked him too. There was nothing sinister about him and John knew it, somehow. He could see it in his old kind eyes. It saddened John to know that he was dying and there was nothing he could do about it.

It was cruel. To find this man, finally, and to realise that he was no longer alone in the world; but to have it taken away just like that was cruel. This man was going to die soon. It was inevitable.

But Christy had given him some hope, at least. There was a settlement up the train tracks a few miles. It'll be a long walk but he figured he had no other choice but to try.

First, he wanted to spend some time with Christy. He felt that he owed him that much.

4

Christy was cooking a ham in his oven. The

smell brought back memories of the old world. John's mouth watered as he waited at the table. Christy wouldn't let him help prepare for the feast. He enjoyed being the host.

'I see you've got decent power here,' said John.

'That's right, I'd been known as a bit of a handyman in my day, son. I've got me own generator runnin' out back.'

With his hands covered with oven mitts, and he wore a flowery apron, he took the ham out of the oven and placed it in the centre of the table. 'Was savin' this for Christmas but then I realised I missed it weeks ago . . . or was it months ago? Anyway, dig in . . . And Merry Christmas, son,' he held up a glass of whiskey before taking a sip.

'Merry Christmas,' John grinned and realised that he really did like this old man. It wasn't because he was feeding him or the fact that he was the first human contact in years, but that Christy was a genuine and honest man (a little crazy but that was to be expected) and he reminded John of the world before; of his own father. 'Why are you so generous, Christy?'

'Why not?' he said as he forked a piece of the ham into his mouth and chewed. 'My home is some sorta landmark to the settlement so many

people have come my way. People are nice because we can't afford not to be anymore . . . well don't get me wrong, there are some scum out there which's why I have that,' he nodded to the rifle rested against the wall at the front door. 'There's the odd occasion of someone thinkin' they can rob me blind; think I'm easy pickins 'cause I'm old. Big fuckin' mistake!'

'What about . . . the *rippers*?' John almost whispered as if he was afraid they'd show up on account of being mentioned, like the Mirror Man. One of John's older cousins once told him that if you stand in a dark room and looked into a mirror and said "Mirror Man" three times he would appear behind you and grant you one wish but there was an unknown price to pay. You didn't know the price until after the deal was made. Always gave John the creeps even up to his teen years.

'What's that now?' Christy turned his head, pointing his good ear to John. "This one's for hearin' and the other ones to hold on me glasses," Christy used to say.

'The *rippers*,' John repeated. 'Those . . . monsters.'

'Oh, is that what ye call 'em? I wasn't creative enough to call 'em anythin' other than fuckin'

zombies. I tell it like it is, son. I've seen some, ye. But they haven't found where I live yet, luckily. I've seen 'em on the road and usually where there's one, there's another, travel in pairs at the least. And they hear very well and smell, too, by the looks of it. But their eyesight's fucked in the day. They don't seem to like light. Don't mean they're not out in the day, though . . . they're just near blind. But at night, that's a different story. They can see better than you and I . . . as long as their eyes haven't fallen out t'their sockets from rottin' away!' he then made a popping sound with his lips to act out his eye falling out. 'And there's another thing; you come 'cross any zombie kids?'

John nodded as he remembered the ripper-child that had attacked him over the bridge on the canal.

'They're more dangerous than a normal zombie, son. They're faster, sneakier, and more fuckin' intelligent by far. Do yer best t'avoid 'em,' he then took another mouthful and chewed away till his plate was clean.

John then went on to tell Christy about his story and what he discovered about the machines and how Beck had told him of the cause of the virus outbreak before trying to then kill him. Christy didn't know but he also didn't seem to be

much surprised about it. Those bots have been known to attack people, or even kill people.

5

'Why don't you come with me, Christy?' John said while they cleared the table. 'Come with me to the settlement.'

'Nah, son . . . you'd be needin' another harness for me,' he laughed and pointed to Winnie and she pouted her bottom lip. 'Ah, son, I'm not leavin' me home for nothin' . . . I'm gonna die here. Me family's here, ye see.'

'I understand,' and John did really understand which was why he had stayed in that apartment for as long as he had.

6

John had thrown his bag over his shoulder and his shotgun was tucked in with the end sticking out behind his head. Christy rubbed Winnie on the top of her head and she covered his wrinkled hand with kisses.

'I'll miss you the most, Winnie,' said Christy and John laughed.

He's probably not joking . . .

'You be careful out there, son,' Christy turned to John.

'You too, Christy,' said John as he turned to the door. 'Take care of yourself.'

Christy smiled and slowly shook his head and his eyes started to water but he fought them back. John then gave him a tight hug. Christy felt frail so he didn't hug him too tight.

'Good luck, son,' he said and patted him on the back. John loved how this man called him "son" all the time. It might have been an automatic term for Christy but it really meant something to John even though he only knew this man for a day.

John finally let the old man go and went out the front door. Christy waved from his veranda like a parent saying goodbye to his only child on their first day of college. They grow up so fast.

7

They had been walking for a while and finally reached the train tracks Christy had told him about; they were surrounded by a stone-covered ground and tall patches of grass stretched

through certain cracks. Winnie sat down and stared at John while they were walking. John urged her to keep moving but she stayed.

'You want to go back to Christy, don't you?' John asked her.

Winnie held up her chin and her eyes shifted to one side and then back to John.

'Well, all right then, but he probably won't like it.'

Winnie trotted back with haste.

John reached the front door and could hear music playing from inside. It was John Lennon and he was singing about *Isolation*. The door opened with ease and John called out for Christy but there was no answer. John Lennon continued to sing away on his song of *Isolation*.

He found Christy dead in his couch with a whiskey in one hand and his rifle in the other. His photo album was displayed out on the table in front of him, now splattered with spots of blood.

Lennon continued to sing the word isolation in the background.

John covered Christy with a blanket and took a quick look at the family in the photographs, all full of smiles, and Christy was younger and much healthier. His cheekbones didn't jut out as much as they did now.

He then placed the photo album in Christy's hands and rested his rifle across his legs. He thought, for a moment, to take the rifle but he had already enough to carry and was pretty well-armed.

Winnie kissed one of Christy's hands as it hung down the bottom of the chair. John picked his hand back up and pushed it to his chest.

'Good bye, Christy,' he said with a lumpy feeling in his throat.



Chapter VI

The Handy Man

1

John found an abandoned train to spend the night. He remembered what Christy had told him about the rippers being more dangerous at night.

The train was a wreck. The windows were shattered and there were blades of grass even growing through the floor in some places. There was a sign on the wall reminding people to keep “**social distancing**” and also to remember to “**wash your hands**”, and it was all being told by a funny little cartoon doctor who was very similar to the smiley face displayed on Beck's screen.

The wind rattled the train and whistled through little holes creating its very own song.

John took a blanket from his bag and placed it on one of the cleanest looking chairs he could find. Winnie raced to the blanket first to claim it as her own but John simply picked her up and placed her on his lap. She accepted it. For a moment he sat with Winnie as the night crept in and he could hear – if he listened closely enough – the torturing distant screams of the damned. John fell asleep with the magnum in his hand.

Hope I don't shoot in my sleep . . .

2

John opened his eyes with a sudden jolt and he could see a lonely figure standing at the end of the wrecked train. He called out but there was no answer from the mysterious figure. But then with the blink of his brown eyes he was surrounded by countless of rippers. They stood like a group of deformed mannequins in a department store. All at once, as if with synchronised thinking, they all turned and stared at John with their lifeless eyes. They took Winnie and she cried for John. He couldn't move and Winnie still cried with a howl. He couldn't move (like he was paralysed) when all the rippers swarmed him like flies on shite. He

screamed and screamed until he opened his eyes.

The train was empty and Winnie slept soundly beside him. It was a nightmare and John realised he hadn't been screaming in real life, thankfully, as Winnie would have been surely covering him with kisses. He didn't want to attract these creatures from his nightmares by making loud noises.

Why would his own brain torture him with a dream like that?

Fuck you, brain. Sometimes the brain is like a whole different person to me. I might as well give you a name . . . Brian, the brain. Fuck you, Brian.



The birds were singing without a care in the world. It was beautiful but it reminded John about what Beck said about the world thriving without humanity.

Winnie made a sound that sounded like "buff" while she stared at John as he made a sketch in a small black book. He was drawing a figure in a ruined train cart; inspired by his nightmare he had had the night before. The thought of it still made the hairs stand up on the back of his neck.

'You hungry?' John put his sketchbook away and rummaged through his bag. Then he pulled out some food for Winnie and she licked her lips with excitement. Her front paws tapped, urging John to be faster. He loved that little dog.

Winnie scoffed whatever it was John had fed her and they were ready to be on the move once more. With a quick check to see if the coast was clear, John and Winnie exited their temporary train-wreck home.

It wasn't as sunny today as it was before but it wasn't raining. Either way, the birds still sang.

John's feet crunched on the stones as he

walked further down the train track. He could see the track bend and wind with the land, so overgrown and derelict. It was going to be a long and perilous journey.

4

There was a steel barrel with a fire burning inside it next to the track. John was fully alert with his magnum at the ready. He pointed the gun forward with each step he took and each step crunched on those damn stones. John finally reached the barrel of fire when he heard a voice from the bushes.

'We've a visitor!' the voice said with a high pitched tone like a sibling jeering another.

'Oh Sweeeeeet!' cheered another voice, a lot more normal to a certain extent.

John aimed his gun and a thin old man without a single tooth in his head and a big dirty beard came from the bushes.

'AHH!' the strange old man screamed with a high squeal. 'Don't shoot, don't shoot!'

'Who are you?' John still aimed his magnum.

'We don't mean no ha . . . ha . . . harm . . .'

said the man.

'Who's "we"?'

'I'm Bob,' he said then he held up his hands, both with little faces drawn on the palms. 'And this is Righty and this is Lefty,' he continued.

'Hello,' said Righty in that jeering voice.

'Hello,' said Lefty in a deep and slow voice.

What the fuck?

John lowered his gun. 'Why you out here?'

The man laughed. 'Where else can *we* go?'

'Ask the maaaaan for some foood!' his *Righty* hand moved closer to his ear.

'Righty!' said Bob, looking embraced. 'Don't be so rude!'

Then his *Lefty* added in to the *group* conversation with: 'Let the maaaaan waaaaaarm uuuuup by the fire for some foood.'

'No thank you, I got to get goin',' said John. 'Besides, those things will see that fire, better put it out.'

'It's mornin' so they won't see as good, ya see,' said Bob. 'We didn't survive on luck, mister.'

John supposed he was right. This crazy old man must have been doing something right as he stayed alive after all this time. How long had it been?

'Are you heading to the settlement?' John asked Bob but one of his *hands* answered instead.

'NO!' this was Righty. 'Three's a crowd, beyond that's too many!'

'What?'

'We're haaaappy with just the threeee of us,' said Lefty.

John stayed quiet. Winnie seemed to raise her eyebrows. It was time to go. Bob's hands didn't seem to really want him here anyway. John then gave Bob something to eat before making his way. Bob's eyes widened and his hands stayed silent as he received this gift from a stranger following the tracks. They never usually gave him anything. But then John had moved on. Before he knew it the flaming barrel was well out of sight.

And no more of that crazy fucking hand guy.

Says the guy whose best friend, for the last few years, was a crash test dummy.

'Fuck you, Brian.'

5

The track came to a dark tunnel . . .

He wasn't in any rush so he thought he could go around the tunnel. There were bound to be hundreds of rippers in there that would be happy to see him come strolling in without a care in the

world. But when he turned around he found Bob standing right behind him with a toothless grin.

'You following me!?' John's hand jumped to his hip like a cowboy ready to shoot, but lucky for Bob, he didn't.

'Noooo,' said Bob. 'I mean yes, I am. I jus' wanted to thank ya for helpin' us out.'

'And how could *you* help me?' John couldn't help but feel his suspicions about this man, Bob.

'By lettin' ye live,' he said and his hands laughed. He was actually kind of good at that. He must have been a great puppeteer.

'What you talkin' about, Bob?'

'Everyone who goes round the tunnel dies,' said Righty.

'Everyone who goes through the tunnel without Bob dies,' said Lefty and John realised he kind of sounded like the donkey from Winnie the Pooh.

What was his name again? Come on, Brian . . . was it Igor?

'So you should take Bob . . . Bob knows what to do,' Lefty continued.

It's Eeyore!

Thanks, Brian.

'How can you help me, what should I do?'

'Come through the tunnel with us,' said Bob

with his toothless grin. 'Don't go round or through the tunnel alone.'

John studied Bob for a moment. It could be some sort of trap and he could be some psycho-cannibal who keeps hands as souvenirs . . .

I must be crazy.

'Okay, Bob,' said John. 'Show me the way.'

John tucked Winnie into the harness and she dangled on his chest again. Bob watched John do this with a look that said: "Get a load of this guy!"

'Lead the way, Bob,' said John as he tightened the harness.

'Okay, no torches,' said Bob.

'But how can we see?'

'I said no torches!' he repeated. 'Trust me!'

John saw something in this man's eyes that he couldn't help but trust. This mad man had kind eyes that were as blue as the summer sky. He even thought that a few dentist trips ago, this man may have been considered handsome once upon a time.

'I trust you, Bob.'

'The light, they hate . . . but they come to it in the dark,' Bob said as he looked into the tunnel with glaring eyes so blue. 'You'll be so much easier to find.'

'Might as well have a biiiiiig EAT ME sign in

neeeeon lights on your head,' said Righty.

'Now, so, follow me, Mr. John,' said Bob and he took some sort of goggles from his satchel. They looked uncomfortable. They were night vision goggles and suddenly it became clearer how Bob had survived after all this time. Not only was he smarter than he looked, he could see in the night like no one else.

6

John was almost blind in the dark tunnel. His eyes were struggling to adjust and were twinkling their own sparkling colours. Then some things became a little more visible but he still needed the guidance from Bob with his night vision goggles. Bob wouldn't give John the goggles and John knew that; which was why he never bothered asking for them.

Bob had tied a rope from John's belt to his own, rather than holding hands. None of them wanted that and that included both Lefty and Righty; the rope would do just fine.

John could feel them turning left then right then seemed to climb some soft rubble of sorts. It smelled awful. Bob was right about dying in here

without him.

He suddenly felt a bony hand clutch his left shoulder and push him down with great strength, and Bob came close to his ear.

'Don't make a sound,' was what he had whispered. Bob was stronger than he had looked from the force of that push.

And John sensed the fear in his voice, something he hadn't heard before and did as he was told. His life was in Bob's *hands*.

John could hear something else in the tunnel. It sounded like someone gargling water after brushing their teeth. It got louder and louder until it sounded like it was right on top of them, and there was a horrid stench so foul that it made their eyes water.

Winnie somehow knew to stay quiet; she was a good dog. Then the smell started to fade and the gargling sound went with it. It was like waiting at traffic lights; waiting for that damn green light (not that John ever passed his driving test). But Bob held John down, still.

They move in pairs at the least said the voice of Christy in John's mind.

Then they heard the patting sound of naked feet rushing by them like someone was late for work. That ripper was catching up to its buddy.

That was their green light.

'Let's move,' Bob whispered once again.

They had to move fast in the tunnel, so long and treacherous. It was unforgiving. One mistake and that was the end of your life.

John's eyes were adjusting a little bit more but he still managed to whack his shin off the bumper of a car. Luckily, it made no noise that would attract any unwanted attention. Bob told him to be more careful as helpful as that was to say . . .

Finally, John could see a light at the end of the tunnel and that term had never felt so relevant to John than it had at that moment. It was like looking into the wrong end of a telescope; everything was too far and surrounded by darkness.

The little white circle got bigger and bigger the more they moved. But the darkness behind them seemed to grow larger, so it felt like being caught in a finger trap.

They finally came out the other end and could breathe again. It was like a weight off their shoulders. As John looked back at the tunnel it looked like a giant beast . . . but this beast had rippers for teeth.

'We made it,' John took another breath.

'Thank you, Bob.'

'I'm happy to help, friend,' said Bob with a toothless smile.

'Gonna give us somethin' for the road?' Lefty joined in and John actually laughed.

John had to give him something else. It was like throwing roses to the entertainer on stage after an encore. Now he waited for Bob to take his bow and head off to another show. But he simply revealed that toothless grin again and waved goodbye with both hands. John wondered if he'd ever see that man again. It all depended on how this quest for the settlement went.



Chapter VII

Rosie

1

The track went on. The clouds seemed to weaken as the evening fell. It was getting late so John had to find somewhere to spend the night once again and he saw no abandoned trains this time. He moved further up the track while it was still bright hoping he'd come across something to take shelter in.

Then John found a knocked-down sign. Someone painted **WATCH OUT FOR BOTS** on it, and then there was another sign that said **SANCTUARY IN BLACKWATER**. That must be the settlement Christy had told him about. Blackwater was still further up the track but night was getting nearer by the minute. He didn't want to sleep under the stars, as pleasant as that sounded; it wasn't safe.

John spent so many years in his apartment

and never once came across these rippers or anyone else for that matter till Beck came along. But now the world seemed more dangerous and had a lot more people than he had thought living within it. And before he decided to camp out under the stars, he heard one of those people scream out.

It wasn't a ripper type of scream. This was a scream that had some human in it; a woman for that matter. She screamed out and then called out for a *Rosie*.

John couldn't stop himself. Winnie was still in his harness so he took her out and told her to stay hidden by the track while he went to check it out. She did so reluctantly.

He moved in the direction of the screaming which seemed to have stopped. That wasn't a good thing at all. He was coming to a small housing estate just off the tracks. There was a trail of blood and it was a strong dark-red against the dirty path. It led John to a tree. Behind that tree lied a woman. She was hurt bad but she was breathing. Her eyes opened wide and caught John's attention.

'What happened to you?' John asked the woman.

At first, she said nothing, then she said: 'B . . .

bots . . . they're gonna . . .'

'Androids attacked you,' said John. 'Where are they now?'

'Save . . . Rosie!' was all the woman could say before she stopped breathing. Her eyes continued to stare directly into John's. He then shut them with his fingers.

John shifted his eyes to the housing estate. As it was getting darker he could see beams of light moving through the town. It was the torch lights from the androids. That could attract unwanted attention from rippers so he had to be quick. He decided to try find Rosie before those bots did.

Maybe it was the dying woman's eyes that forced him to search for Rosie or maybe it was the strange similarity between her name and the name of Rósin. It didn't really matter; he decided to at least *try* to save her.

The estate was circular with a green in the centre of 8 houses and a road in between them, breaking off to join a main road.

The bots didn't notice John walk to the centre of the green while they searched frantically for Rosie in the houses, their lights glowing and casting shadows in the late evening.

John whistled out with two fingers in his mouth like he was calling for a horse. All the lights

suddenly stopped in their motion and then returned once more as they flooded to the rounded street. John started to count. One, two, and three. There were three bots very similar looking to Beck; one of them missing an arm, another had some sort of blade in its claw-like hand. John supposed that was the one who had killed the woman at the tree.

They each wheeled closer to the centre with their lights beaming. John already knew who he was going to kill first: the one with the blade. And last, he'd kill the one-armed one.

'This t . . . t... town ain't biiiiiig enough for the both of us,' the bot with the blade said with an old western accent and displayed a cartoon cowboy on its screen.

John only stared silently and his eye twitched at the bottom. He held that wide stance again and dared . . . hoped the bots would make their move.

The one-armed bot got impatient and set off the motion by rolling forward. John swiped up both Glocks from their holsters as quick – if not quicker – as he did with Beck and killed the bot with the blade first (who talked like a cowboy) and then the middle one and then finished with the impatient one-armed bot and they all seemed to crash to the ground at the same time.

But there was more to John's counting; another bot that didn't come out to John when he whistled was lighting up the inside of a house with its light and a girl was screaming out loud for help.

In this house, the bot actually climbed up the stairs with its claws. It let out hysterical laughter while it climbed. John thought about Beck not being able to climb the stairs at the apartment and then figured that was probably a lie among many.

The bot was then stomped on and held down by John's foot, but before he turned, he put its light out with a bullet in the back of the screen. The hysterical but goofy laughter stopped suddenly.

2

As John climbed the stairs, stepping over the broken tin man, he saw pictures of families and a wedding; something he never got the chance to have with Rósin.

He came to the top of the stairs and called for Rosie and he realised she probably wouldn't come as he was a complete stranger. But she came out

before he could call again. His voice was *human*.

She was young – probably 12 at most – and she looked at John with fearful, hazel eyes that shimmered in the soft light of the coming night.

'Rosie?' asked John as if there was a chance she wasn't her.

'Where's mom?'

John shook his head and Rosie started to cry.

'I'm so sorry, Rosie,' he said as he knelt down to her. 'We have to leave now . . . those things will be coming here after all that noise.'

Rosie rubbed her teary eyes with the palm of her hand and then nodded for John to take her with him. Her cheeks were as red as her name and her brows frowned with anger. This wasn't the first time she had lost someone close to her . . . most likely not the last.

John tried to take her hand but she swept away, although she continued to follow. She also refused his help over the dead bot on the stairs. She ignored his outstretched arms to lift her over. This girl grew up in this world; he had to remember that. But it was so easy to forget.

'There's someone waiting for me by the tracks,' said John. 'We can't keep her waiting too long.'

3

John returned to the winding track (making sure to avoid the tree) and called out for Winnie. She burst out of the bushes and wagged her long tail from side to side, hitting each side of her ribs. Rosie raised her eyebrows and knelt down to greet the fluffy little dog. It wasn't at all what she expected her *rescuer* to have been traveling with. In fact, John had originally thought the same thing.

'Rosie, this is Winnie,' said John. 'She's my dog.'

Rosie didn't speak. She was still in shock over what had happened back in that rounded estate.

They had to move further up the track away from the cursed housing estate as there were sure to be rippers turning up with the fall of the night. Especially after all that noise John had made with those guns.

4

They found a small shed along the side of the track. The old wooden door opened with a steady push and seemed to crumble to pieces as he did.

It was a mess but it had to do. Rosie stood outside with Winnie and both seemed to wince at the sight of this shed; this so-called shelter for the night.

'Just for tonight,' said John as he noticed both their looks of disapproval.

They each went inside before John propped what was left of the wooden door. Rosie lied down in the corner with a blanket and John noticed Winnie curl up close beside her. Rosie pulled Winnie close and they kept each other warm all through the shivering night. John spent the night guarding the door until he drifted off to his own sleep and it was dreamless. He was thankful after that last nightmare he had had that night on the old wrecked train. His brain tortured him with those kinds of nights a lot more in recent months.

5

John was awakened by Rosie standing over him with Winnie in her arms. They both stared at him with their curious eyes.

'I prepared breakfast,' said Rosie with a soft and unsure tone.

John sat up and rubbed his eyes.

Rosie's breakfast options were two tins of mixed fruit and they used the tin cans as their bowls. It was like waking up in a hotel.

John slurped the juices from the can and Rosie watched him with curiosity.

'Thank you,' she said with sudden haste as if she wanted to get it over with fast.

John swallowed his food with a gulp and raised his eyebrows. 'What's that?' he said.

'I . . . wanted to thank you for . . . saving me,' she said with some difficulty. 'It was my fault . . . and now mom's gone, too,' she hung her head low and Winnie kissed her.

'No,' said John as he reached out to Rosie. 'Those bots killed your mom . . . No matter what it is you think you did, forget it. Only those bots are to blame . . . for all this!'

Winnie kissed Rosie again and this time wiping away some tears. Rosie grabbed Winnie and held her up by the armpits and laughed a little as Winnie revealed a playful growling face. She was a good dog.

'We were headin' to Blackwater 'til we got trapped in that house . . .' she said with sadness.

'So were we,' John pointed to Winnie. 'Want to join us?' the question wasn't a *real* question.

John had sworn an oath to himself that he would protect this girl and get her to safety.

Rosie smiled and nodded her head. She looked as though she had been through so much in her young life but in many ways, John was afraid to ask. But she could see his curiosity in his eyes. She was used to it, numbed to it.

'I lost everyone,' she started. 'I had a brother, who I didn't really know, who died from the virus. My dad . . . he . . . my mom had to kill him 'cause he went crazy and tried to bite me . . .' she stopped for a moment. 'My dad used to read to me. That's one of my only memories of before. He read an old story called Harry Potter. I used to like magic . . . when I was a kid . . .' and she technically was still a kid but this world had aged her dramatically. It brought a heavy feeling to John's heart. He was new to *this* kind of world. *His* world was in isolation.

John had nothing to say but he searched his mind for something.

'It's okay,' said Rosie. 'You don't need to say anything; I just wanted to tell you.'

The train track was cutting through the fields like a scissors through paper. It was the quickest way to Blackwater but not really the safest route to safety. It was a *popular* route and popularity these days meant either bots or rippers.

The clouds brought rain this time and John filled his flask as he held it up to the sky. Winnie wasn't in the harness this time as she walked along-side Rosie.

Sometimes, when Rosie picked up Winnie, she looked like a flopping teddy bear that was low on stuffing. But Winnie didn't seem to mind.

Looks like Winnie has a new favourite. This was Rósin's voice inside John's busy mind. John smiled.

'What is it?' Rosie asked John, as she noticed his unconscious grin.

'Nothing, really,' said John. 'Winnie seems to like you.'

'Well . . . I like Winnie.'

Winnie's ears stood up with the mentioning of her name, not once, but twice. This conversation was about *her* and maybe . . . it meant food?

Winnie didn't hear any words that usually led to food but she could still hope. And her wish

was granted when Rosie grabbed something small and chewy from her pocket and threw it to her and she caught it before it could hit the ground. Rosie was a good human.



'I don't remember much from before . . .'

Rosie said to John while they followed the tracks.

John turned to her but said nothing.

'I know it was different, but I don't really *remember* much,' she continued.

'How old are you?'

'Mom said I was turning 11 today . . .'

John's eyes widened as he stopped in his tracks. 'It's your birthday!?' he thought to say happy birthday but then chose not to as the girl's mother just fucking died!

'I guess so,' she said still walking forward.

I've got to get something for her. She needs something, anything. This was his own thought.

Yeah, but there's not exactly a fucking toy shop you can stroll into. This was Brian, the uninvited thought bringer at his finest.

'Come here, Rosie,' said John as he searched through his bag. 'Here,' he handed her a harness.

'What's this?'

"Put it on,' he said smiling.

She did with some confusion and then John placed Winnie inside the harness and Rosie was still for a moment until she burst out with a

laughter that seemed to be alien to her. It made her seem her age. Winnie kissed her chin and wouldn't stop.

'Thanks, John,' Rosie said with a smile.

Take that, Brian.

8

There was something else up ahead on the track. No... it was *someone* else. It was a man and he was standing alone in the centre of the train track. He was waving with sheer joy and there was merriment in his voice as he called out.

John had his hand on one of his Glocks in its holster. He waited to hear the joyful man out first. He was never one to shoot first and then ask questions later.

'G'day, g'day to you both!' cheered the man. 'My name's Roy and ain't it a g'day!'

'What do you want?' John said with his suspicions raised to the roof.

'Sir,' said Roy. 'And Miss,' he looked to Rosie with a look that made John's skin crawl. 'This is a toll,' he said with a smile full of yellow teeth.

Should've shot first.

John's hand swiped the Glock from its holster

on his hip and he aimed it at Roy.

'Hold up, now,' said Roy without a flinch. 'You're outnumba'd,' as he said this there were three others around him, armed, coming out from the bushes. Two men and one woman; each of them carrying guns of their own.

John's brain (Brian) decided to come up with names for these people. Roy was already done; so there was Janet, the woman, there was Phil, the tall and lanky man who came from the bushes and Jim was the last one who stuck the barrel of his gun into John's back.

'They've a child girl,' said Janet with surprise and she sounded like a witch from an old kids horror show.

'Hush!' Roy snapped and Janet flinched. 'You drop them guns down there front of ye,' he said to John.

John had no choice. There was a gun at his back and he wasn't *that* fast.

'This toll ain't cheap, boy,' Roy said as he looked to Rosie. 'It gonna cost ya the child girl.'

John was about to lunge but was hit in the back of the head by Jim with the butt of his gun. He fell forward in a blur.

Janet came to Rosie, and Rosie spat in her ugly face. She really looked like a witch, too. Then

she signed it all off by even laughing out with a cackling sound and licked the spit from her horrible face.

Winnie growled and snapped at Janet and she screamed out.

'AH!' screamed Janet, 'She's a dog strapped to her chest!!' she said it like it was a serious problem.

'So what?' said Roy.

'You know I'm 'fraid o' dogs!' Janet snapped back.

'I'll take care o' this,' it was Phil, so tall he kind of looked like a human tree. With his scrawny and long fingers, he grabbed Winnie from the harness as Janet held Rosie down.

'FUCK YOU!' Rosie shouted and kicked.

John was still in a haze on the ground when Phil threw Winnie into the bushes like a ragdoll.

'NO! FUCK YOU!' Rosie kicked and growled herself.

'Right, you take care of the fella,' Roy ordered Jim as he pointed at John on the ground. 'And we'll take her home with us. Make sure to take his shit after ye kill him, will ye?'

Jim only grinned with excitement, eager to get started on *his* fun with John.

Jim sweated with an excitement that you

would probably find in prisons, and snot drooped from his long pointed nose.

These really were the people from nightmares. John was no stranger to nightmares, only this nightmare was real and he was still unconscious from the knock to the back of the head.

9

The sky was so cloudy and they seemed to be moving with a strange motion; they stopped, and then they moved again. John's eyes were opening but he was dizzy. He was being dragged into the thorny bushes. They scratched his skin as he was pulled by his feet.

'Now it's my turn for some fun, yes, yes,' Jim giggled by himself, and he couldn't stop.

Jim was digging through his own bag to find something. His eyes were wide with panic at first as he couldn't find it. He was searching for something he called "Susie Dear". John wasn't sure if that's what he had said exactly as he had drifted in and out of consciousness.

Then his panic ended with joy and he danced around the dirt with this "Susie Dear" in his

hands. It was a knife with a zigzagging edge. He danced with glee and there was something pointing upward in his pants.

'Ooooooh, I'm gonna enjoy this,' said Jim before John became wide awake and grabbed "Susie Dear" and pushed it deep into Jim's throat making a crunching wet sound that confirmed his death. Jim stayed on his knees as his dead eyes stared at his own blood dripping onto the dirt.

'Fuckin' freak,' John growled then he kicked Jim's body over and quickly gathered his things and went back out to where the toll had taken place. The others were gone and he couldn't see them anywhere. He had no idea where to go till he heard a familiar bark.

It was Winnie. She barked but did not come to John. She wanted him to follow *her* and so he did. Winnie took John up the track to a large train station. It was fortified with wooden spikes and warning signs that said **TRESSPASSERS WILL BE YUMMY.**

John told Winnie to stay and she didn't protest. He went to get a better look inside. There were more of them but he could see Roy force Rosie into a small cage where there were other children. They huddled together so scared and trapped. It made John think of *Pinocchio*, when the

children were kidnapped and turned into donkeys to be later sold off for hard working labour. This was most likely worse.

What were they doing here!? But it didn't matter. John decided to put an end to it.

There were more of these fiends within the fortress; too many to count.

Then there was a soft bark. It sounded like Winnie was whispering. She got John's attention and showed him to a sewage tunnel. It went under the fortress and was his way into the prison/station.

'Good girl,' John said as he started to crawl into the disgusting dark tunnel. Winnie stayed at the entrance.

He crawled and crawled through the mess and even threw up along the way. There was a hatch above him and he decided that that was good enough.

He pushed the hatch open and took a peek before climbing out. No one saw him. They were all distracted with the excitement of some meal they were having. They gathered round a large table and in the centre looked to be a large cooked pig. It wasn't a pig.

John moved fast and low until he found the cages. He held his index finger up to his lips when

one of the children saw him. There were more than he had thought. There were 5 cages each with at least 6 children locked away.

Rosie saw John and called him over with her arms waving through the bars.

'The keys are in there,' she whispered and pointed to a fat sleeping man in what used to be the train conductor's office.

He snored so loud it seemed to vibrate the room. John slowly opened the door and it squeaked lightly with each movement. The children held their breath. John then grabbed a bin and used it to keep the door open and stop it from moving with those irritating squeaking sounds.

John still had "Susie Dear" (he was thinking of changing its name) and he swiped it across the fat conductor's neck like a bank card and he stopped snoring and replaced it with a gargling sound before he fell back onto the ground. The heavy man made a lot of noise but nothing was stirred. John picked up the keys and rushed to the cages.

He unlocked Rosie's cage first and then the rest. Each child was as quiet as a mouse which was impressive considering there were about 30 of them. Luckily, the fiends were still distracted by their terrible feast.

As it was *dinner* time, and John was sure he couldn't get all those children out the same way he got in, there weren't many guards around, so he thought they could leave through the front door. There was one clueless guard near the exit. John thought these certain useless guards on watch may have been missing dinner as some sort of punishment. John was about to *punish* this next guard now. He raised "Susie Dear"—

Okay, change that name now, please, said the voice of Rósin in his head. *Change it to anything but that.*

Jaysus, I don't know . . .

That'll do!

John came close to the guard and raised *Jaysus* up, holding it with the blade pointing downward in his fist. The guard turned on the last minute but seemed to be unalarmed. He thought John was part of his crew.

'Ay, ye bringin' me some leftover—'

John sliced the knife across the man's throat before he could finish his question and there was suddenly a red waterfall flowing from under his round chin and deep down his neck. He dropped to his knees, held there for a moment, then dropped again face-flat with a thud.

Rosie opened the front door and led the

children out one by one. Winnie was there waiting and she jumped into Rosie's arms with a whimper.

John was the last one out and they had to hurry as the feast may have been coming to an end soon. Well, they'd need some time to digest first.

They got far enough from the fortified train station before they stopped for a breather. Rosie was most likely one of the older ones out of the 30 children, most of them were girls.

The group chittered and chattered amongst each other like a class without a teacher. They were talking about their *saviour*, John.

'Thank you, mister,' said a little girl with jet black hair and bright blue eyes.

This was a lot of responsibility for one man. What else was he supposed to do? He couldn't leave those kids behind just like he couldn't leave Rosie behind. And now he had 30 kids all looking to him for answers. There was also Roy and his fiendish followers; they weren't going to let this go.

'What'll we do now?' Rosie asked John while she hugged Winnie so tightly.

'We'll have to keep moving,' he glanced behind, wondering what words Roy was screaming once he had learned the cages had been emptied and 3 of his fiends were killed.

Chapter VIII

Roy's Revenge

1

Roy screamed nonsense that even his buddies didn't understand. It didn't take too long for him to figure out what had happened. Gregory (who John named Jim) never returned to the station after disposing of John's body, so he figured that John had something to do with all of this. Two more of his guards were killed in the process, so there was much anticipation to get going after them. They knew exactly where they were heading: this settlement further up the tracks. That was why they had picked this spot to live; there were many people walking along those dangerous tracks.

Roy wanted to hurry, but there were too many fiends unprepared to go on the hunt, so he

took those who were able and ordered Charlotte (John named her Janet which was close by the sound of it) to lead the unprepared group out as soon as possible, and they'd come 50 strong.

For now, Roy would only take Paul (John named him Phil . . . so close again), Scotty who a short but quick man (quick on his feet, with a gun, and quick in about everything else he did), Maurice (who was faster than Scotty), and last but not least, Veronica (she had dirty-blond hair and would have been considered very attractive if it wasn't for the crew she rolled with; not a typical witchy villain like Charlotte/Janet was). She was perfect as bait for traps on the road.

That was Roy's fast-paced crew. A crew of 5 fiends, including Roy and if they failed there'd be a crew of 50 more to catch up to them before they reached Blackwater.

Roy hadn't been this pissed off for as long as he could remember. He really wanted to torture John as soon as he got his dirty hands on him. He fantasized about it while they left the station; his hands wrapping round his neck causing John's eyes to pop, his face to turn purple, and to breathe no more from his lungs. To Roy, that would be the sweetest feeling.

2

While they walked, Rosie took John's hand and she felt safe. But they were far from that just yet.

It wasn't that long ago when John had thought that he was the last man on Earth, but now he was responsible for 30 children while being hunted by a gang of fiendish people who thrive in this kind of world.

3

A young boy, who looked about 12 and possibly one of the oldest, approached John. The boy was tall for his age with a young face that showed innocence, yet he was no stranger to the tragedies of this new world.

'I wanted to thank you,' the boy said to John. 'My name's Charlie.'

'Hi, Charlie,' he said. 'There's no need to thank me.'

'No . . . there is,' said Charlie. 'They . . . killed my parents,' he hung his head low.

'I'm sorry,' John rested his hand on Charlie's

shoulder.

'They—'

'You don't need to tell me what they did if you don't want to, Charlie.'

'No, I do,' he said with a stern look and it aged him. 'They'll come for us, you see . . . so you need to know what they are. They . . . they cooked the boys and *kept* the girls . . .'

John had thought as much but now Charlie had confirmed his fears. That's nothing like *Pinocchio*.

Why were these awful people immune to the virus?

No one's immune, son. That was Christy's voice inside his head.

'I was pretty sure . . . that I was next,' Charlie said with fear and anger in his eyes. 'They'll come for us . . . they'll come for us in Blackwater.'

John understood what Charlie was saying. They couldn't let them follow them into Blackwater. But he's way outnumbered and he's only an artist for God's sake. Killing bots was one thing, but these were monstrous fiends with guns and experience. And their source of food (and whatever else they used the girls for) had been taken from them.

'Let's stop here for a moment,' said John. 'We

need to talk.' the children gathered round him in a large circle. They were all so young but their eyes told another story. 'It has come to my attention that these guys aren't goin' to quit . . . they'll follow us to Blackwater,' John felt like a teacher about to give the class bad news. 'Blackwater isn't far . . . I will go back and hold them off so Rosie, here, can take you all to safety—'

'Hah! No!' Rosie disagreed. 'We're not leavin' you behind, John.'

'What d'you want me to do, then?' John asked and Rosie suddenly walked over to him with a stride. She then yanked one of his guns from its holster (John watched like she was juggling expensive china) and she held the gun by her side. 'You won't be alone!'

'No-no-no,' said John. 'I'm not leadin' a child army—'

'Let's vote,' said Rosie with a grin. 'All those who want to fight, raise your hand.'

John was outnumbered here too, 30 to 1. The results were unanimous! He looked around him and saw toddlers and babies and toddlers holding babies. The oldest were barely teens. There was also no choice so John had to compromise. He chose Rosie, Charlie and another girl who wore a blue neckerchief around her neck. They were the

oldest and that was how many extra guns he had to give them. John found himself wishing he'd taken Christy's rifle and that would have made another child soldier.

4

Rosie, Charlie and the neckerchief girl – who introduced herself a Sophia Mundy – were standing in a line. Each of them was holding a gun that looked way too big for them. Rosie and Sophia had a Glock each and Charlie held the shotgun as he'd said he'd used one before with his father. They once hunted for deer and on many occasions, Charlie's father had let him take the shot. And he was good.

This was John's mini-militia and he didn't feel good about it at all, but did he even have a choice?

They may not have had the age or numbers, but they had the ammo (all thanks to AMMONATION) and the element of surprise with an ambush point. The track ran through a small rocky valley. They could use that for sure. Roy had to walk right into it; there was no reason he wouldn't. He had no way of knowing he'd be ambushed by a mini-militia.

Roy led his quick-assault crew down the beaten track with his eyes glaring forward with rage. He wanted his possessions back. Those children belonged to him! One man wasn't going to take that from him and live to tell the tale.

Roy stopped for just a moment to take a drink of water and noticed the absence of two of his crew members. He was about to scream with rage until Scotty and Veronica both came frolicking from the ditch, tightening their trousers. Scotty really was quick.

'For-fuck-sake!' Roy shouted. 'There's no time for that shit, let's keep movin' ye horny bastards!'

'There's plenty *time* . . .' Veronica smirked and rolled her large eyes as she mocked Scotty's *speed*. They all mocked and laughed; all but Roy and Scotty, of course.

'Fastest gun 'round, huh!' Maurice laughed with his narrow face turning red.

'T'd kill yiz meself right now if yiz DON'T GET MOVIN!'

 Roy made his point clear and they rushed down the track.

They moved in a spread-out formation along

the line. None of them said a word while they approached the rocky valley. A crow circled high over their heads. Roy chose to ignore this as he knew it to be the sign of Death. He was set on vengeance; blinded by it.

They came deeper into the valley when Roy heard a popping sound that ringed his big ears. Time froze. He looked to his left and saw Paul drop with a strange red mark in the centre of his forehead. Paul's eyes were staring into his soul (if he had one) but he was dead.

Standing a little further up the track was this man who had taken everything from him. He was armed with a revolver of some sorts. Roy looked to his right and Veronica's neck was hit so hard by a bullet, her attractive head flew right off and bounced to his feet.

Who was this man Roy now feared the most. This man armed with a revolver seemed to be everywhere at once and the sun glared behind his back and for a moment Roy thought that he saw angel's wings. Maybe this angel of death had come for him after all he had done. And Roy's world went dark with a bullet between the eyes. Roy didn't even see the children firing from above. Some, who didn't have guns, even threw sticks and stones. It was like *Lord of the Flies*.

Scotty didn't live up to his expectations as he was outsmarted by a child with a shotgun who decided to flank from behind. Scotty was cut down and his innards were welcomed to the outside world!

The shooting stopped and someone was laughing hysterically. Lying on the ground, with a bullet in the stomach, was Maurice.

'Yiz think yiz won?' Maurice laughed (this reminded John of Beck's last words) as he held in his guts. 'Fifty more'll be comin' for ya!' he laughed one more time and then John executed him where he lied.

6

5 years changed a lot, were these people like this before?

They most likely were; only in this world, they had more opportunities to act on their urges. They were gone now – taken out of this world by a gun slinging artist – but there were more to come, 50 more according to that dying fiend (*Thanks for the warning, scumbag*).

Charlie pointed out that they had somehow managed to kill the gang's leader in the ambush,

but John figured that the 50 more fiends would come, nevertheless. John guessed they got lucky here and that next time they might not be so lucky put up against 50. His mini-militia was good, but not that good.

7

With the ambush they found more guns. John took his shotgun back from the reluctant Charlie, but he gave him Maurice's old rifle instead. He decided to leave both Rosie and Sophia with a Glock each and gave them a holster to carry them. John still had his magnum revolver (no one was getting his *Clint Eastwood*) holstered to his right hip. There were other guns taken from the dead fiends and passed to those willing and able. A little dark-haired girl who must have been 8 years old was more than willing. She growled and frowned and wanted to go back and kill the rest of them. John thought it would've been cute if it wasn't so damn terrifying. The little dark-haired girl remained unarmed for now; only those aged 10 and up could be licenced to carry firearms in this mini-militia. Although, this little dark-haired girl sounded quite dangerous.

She doesn't get a gun.

He felt like saying something like “good job, kids”, like it was some sort of class test and they all passed.

No homework for the weekend! Better yet, no more homework for the rest of your lives!

Actually, scratch that . . .

John searched his bag and grabbed something buried inside. He called Rosie over and went to hand her a book. Then he thought again and asked: 'You know how to read?'

Rosie glared at him with a look that might burst him into flames and Winnie barked at her side.

'Sorry, had to ask,' he then handed her the book.

The title read as “The Dummies Guide to Guns” and Rosie almost laughed until she saw the serious expression on John's face. Little did she know he was fighting back the laughter, too.

'Thanks,' she said.

'Read through it and get everyone else to read it too,' he said. 'Starting with those who have guns first.'

'Will do, boss-man,' she said with a smile at the corner of her mouth.

'Good girl,' he said with a grin and Winnie

got jealous.

8

John thought they'd stand more of a chance if they made it to Blackwater. Initially, he didn't want to be leading the fiends to the settlement, but then again, they might be able to help. There was still a good distance to go, though, so there may be other dangers ahead. John thought the best thing to do was to keep moving with the children, and get them as close to Blackwater as possible.

9

The night was creeping in on them along with the cold as it started to nip at their noses. Small specks of sparkling ice started to form on the tips of the grass blades, and the stars were showing like distant diamond worlds waiting to be purchased.

With a little luck, they found the track led them to a level crossing; at that crossing was a house, probably where the person who worked (and maintained) at the crossing lived. It would

have to do or they'd freeze to death in the night, or more likely be eaten by rippers under the starry, starry night.

The fiends might be gaining on them as they rested, though, but John figured they'd need to stop in the night, too.

Better keep watch just to be safe.

The children huddled together like a pack of wild wolves. Considering what they had done earlier as a *mini-militia*, they were just as dangerous as wolves. Bring it on, fiends.

10

John sat near the window so he could get a good look out front. The cold night brought a thick fog that sent the stars away. Charlie sat with him with his new rifle across his knees. He mimicked the way John sat, the way he crossed his legs, and the way he leaned back in his chair. The boy copied him because he idolised him. He idolised this artist/gunslinger; a gunslinger born from "The Dummies Guide to Guns". But John hoped they'd leave that part out from the stories they'd tell years from now.

Charlie thought now was a good time to

introduce John to every single child now under his protection (John didn't ask but it was something to keep him awake while on watch). And by introducing, he just named them all and told him a little about each one that he could.

'Ye know *me*, I'm Charlie Bumble, like the bee,' he started on his unnecessary introduction. 'And you know Rosie Hart and Sophia Mundy,' (John realised he never knew Rosie's full name until now.) 'But there's also Thomas and Jason Gerathy; they're brothers but the younger one, Jason, hasn't spoken since their parents got killed by Roy. Then there's Sammy Dane who asked you for a gun before but you said "no" 'cause she's too young. And then there's Michelle Lorry who thinks she's smarter than *you*.'

John raised his eyebrows a little at this but let it go with a grin and a shrug.

'Then there's Jane and Kate Downing,' Charlie continued and seemed to never take a moment to breath. 'There's also Tammy Jules who I know has a crush on me; Thomas said she wants t'*marry* me!'

'Lucky girl,' John said as he gazed out to the foggy night. The kid probably took that moment to breathe.

'Don't forget Casey Finn, Lucy Powers, and

the other Lucy – Lucy Kane – who likes to sing . . . or was that the other Lucy? Anyways–'

'Kid,' John then decided he had had enough of this long naming of names. 'I'm not goin' to remember all this so might as well go to bed and let me keep watch in peace.'

'Me dad used t'say I'd talk a tree into fallin',' Charlie smiled but John felt a little guilty.

'That *can* be a good thing, kid,' he said. 'Just gotta talk about the right things.'

Then both John and Charlie heard something outside. There was a sudden trash of noises that sounded like a bin falling over. John put his finger to his lips, not to make a sound. Charlie looked at John with a wide-eyed expression that made him look his age again. This boy could still believe in Santa Claus.

And he'd ask for a stocking full of grenades and an Uzi in a pear tree.

11

John moved to the exit to investigate the sound. Charlie held his rifle like a hunter on the trail of a magnificent deer. John told him to stay back to mind the others who still slept soundly.

But he silently insisted on joining him outside. John didn't let him.

'Stay here,' said John as he pointed at the floor he stood on with sternness.

John went out into the fog alone and he seemed to vanish right in front of Charlie's eyes; the fog was so thick.

John could barely see the end of his shotgun as he aimed it forward. There was something in this fog with him; he could hear it breathing over his shoulder. He was being stalked in the fog somehow.

As he turned he was suddenly tackled and he dropped his shotgun to the ground. He lied on his back while he was held down by a ravenous ripper. It clapped its teeth together as it tried to chomp on John's face. He held it back with his two hands and then remembered something that Christy had once said: something about them traveling in pairs, at the least. John wondered why these creatures travelled with a traveling buddy, but then figured it didn't really matter, and that his job wasn't to interview these rippers about their strange habits. This pairing theory had been confirmed before, and it was about to be confirmed yet again.

John could see a crooked silhouette coming

forward in the fog. As it inched closer, John realised it was the second to this *pair*; the Lennon to its McCartney, the Lefty to its Righty.

But John's two hands were busy; this ripper on top of him was far too strong. It drooled with thirst for John's insides. John could see the lust and determination in its faded eyes.

Suddenly the ripper on top of him flopped to the side with a bang. It had been blown in half at the waist. The bottom half (the legs) kicked and twitched, and the top half was still alive as it crawled with its hands. John put it out of its misery with a bullet through the head now that its hands were free. He looked over and saw his saviour, Charlie, and then he killed the second ripper, too, with the shotgun that John had dropped when he was tackled.

John climbed to his feet and rushed over to Charlie. Little Charlie Bumble was a natural.

'Thanks, Charlie,' said John, out of breath. 'I'll have my shotgun back now.'

Charlie handed it back with that reluctance in his eyes again. He really preferred the shotgun.

'Wake the others,' said John. 'It's not safe here anymore.'

And John could not have been more right as these rippers were not a pair, but a *family*. Rosie

shouted from the doorway for John.

'There's somethin' on the roof,' she said as they found her through the fog.

John listened but could not hear anything at first.

'Hurry,' said John. 'Wake everyone.'

Then John could hear what Rosie was talking about. Something was scurrying up above, but it sounded too big to be a rat.

Charlie woke everyone else and brought them all (with their sleepy eyes) outside, into the fog. Nowhere was safe. John tried to find out what was stalking them from the roof, but he could not see a thing. Then Winnie started to growl, but she pointed, with her nose, in a gap under the house.

Then John heard the scurry on the roof once more. But when he looked up, a small ripper-child came bolting out from underneath the house. It was an ambush! Another jumped from the roof and landed on John. He dropped to the ground and tumbled over, flipping the second ripper-child from him, and it hissed with rage. They certainly were smarter and faster than your average ripper.

He took a shot at the ripper-child but it dodged the bullet with a spring to the side.

Fuck! Can't afford to miss!

The first ripper-child crawled like a spider

toward the group of children, and it was crawling fast. Charlie fired his rifle and missed. He fired again, and missed. Then the third shot skimmed the side of the ripper-child's face. It screamed a high-pitched squealing sound that pierced their ears and bounced away into the fog.

The other ripper-child came back at John from behind. It clung to his back and tried to bite his neck. John quickly threw his hand back and pulled the ripper-child's head, trying to flip it over. He pulled so hard the head came off from its body with the spine still attached. John dropped the head with surprise. He wasn't expecting that to happen. Then he noticed the body still held onto his back and he threw it from him as quickly as possible . . . then threw up, too.

John returned to the children after cleaning the vomit from his chin and Charlie told him of the second ripper-child that had got away.

It may come back with more rippers. John wasn't sure, but he knew they had to keep moving. There wasn't much he knew about these rippers. Plus, the settlement wasn't getting any closer with them staying in this house.

They had longed for safety in Blackwater.

They packed up their things, what little they had, and moved out into the night (or early

morning).

12

Luckily, by the time they started to get moving along the dangerous track, the fog had cleared up a bit.

Thank God for small mercies.

13

John walked up close to Charlie while they marched their mini-militia along the train track.

'Charlie,' he said while looking forward. 'I never thanked you for what you did back there.'

'No need,' said Charlie.

'So you won't want this then?' he showed him the shotgun and Charlie's eyes lit up with glee.

'WAIT! Thank me again,' and they both laughed together.

'You're better with it than me anyway,' he said. 'I'll just take your rifle instead.'

'I accept your trade, sir,' he said it with a British man's voice. 'Nice doin' business with ya,' this was more like *Dodger* from *Oliver Twist*. John

shook his hand with a smile. This lil' gunslinger was going places.



The way they moved looked like a row of ducklings following their mother duck. John up front, but the back was covered by Charlie in case there was an attack from behind.

Sophia wore her blue neckerchief over her cold face, but revealed her frowning eyes. She looked to the woods next to them along the track. The woods were thick and dark; they were their own horror story. It gave her the creeps. Sophia had her own reasons for fearing the dark forest. But for the moment, that fear had to be tucked away, deep inside, with many other fears and childlike dreams.

'We're bein' watched,' she announced to no one in particular, but John had heard her.

'I feel it, too,' he said as he kept his rifle ready.

Then John shined his torch right into the woods and the same ripper-child that had gotten away earlier flinched and retreated with fright.

'The little shit is followin' us!' Rosie exclaimed.

'No, he's huntin' us,' said Sophia 'We need to kill it!'

'We're not being *hunted*,' cried Michelle Lorry.

'No, Michelle, Sophia's right,' said John. 'And we do need to kill it, or it'll attack us in the night.'

'I'll get it!' Charlie came closer, the valiant volunteer.

'No, Charlie, I'll go alone.'

'Oh no you won't,' Rosie stomped her foot like she was John's mother. John, again, was outnumbered; maybe *they're* bringing *him* to Blackwater.

'Besides, you'll get lost in the woods,' said Charlie. 'I won't, I know the woods 'cause me da thought me the woods,' Charlie showed his pride, but then a little sadness at the mention of his deceased father.

'Oh all right then,' said John. 'Charlie and Sophia, come with me, but the rest of you stay here.'

Rosie couldn't hide her disappointment at being left behind, but she didn't protest as she then realised someone had to stay behind to protect the younger ones of the group.

15

The woods were as dark as a nightmare. That

obviously wasn't good at all as the rippers could see better with less light. The trees towered over them and their leafless branches looked like the claws of some demon waiting to snatch their souls.

They were the ones hunting now, or so they had hoped.

Charlie found a fresh trail, and it wasn't from a deer.

'This way,' he said as he pointed and started to move. John urged him to slow down, but he was a hunter on a trail. Charlie was like a hound dog caught on a scent; he was off. Plus, this ripper-child had got away from *him*. He wasn't going to let it get away this time.

Charlie was too fast and sped ahead of the others. Then he, himself, tripped on what looked like a hunter's trap. He fell over and plunged forward, scraping the palms of his hands. He turned over and the ripper-child jumped from a tree above. It moved on all fours until it got close to Charlie. Then it stood up and twitched with rage. It knew Charlie, it remembered him, it *hated* him, it wanted revenge, and that could be seen in its monstrous eyes and horrible movements.

There was a gunshot and the ripper-child stretched out its chest and reached for its back like it was trying to grab something or scratch that itch

that was just out of reach. Then it coughed blood and fell to the leaf-littered floor and twitched no more.

Sophia Mundy stood behind the ripper-child with her smoking gun. She was getting the hang of this gun business. Then John finally caught up with them.

Fuck, I'm getting old.

'He . . . he made a trap for me,' was all Charlie could say as he lied on the forest floor.

John only shifted his eyes with the idea. He had been told that the ripper-kids were more intelligent, but he had no idea it would be to that extent.

What'll they do next?

They left that dark city of trees and returned to the others, patiently waiting for them along the track. They had to hurry as they were sitting ducks, or more like sitting ducklings.

There was no time to waste, so as soon as they were reunited with the rest of the children, they moved on with haste.



Sophia's fear of the dark forest had been overcome, and that had saved Charlie's life. No matter how daunting those tall trees had felt to her, she pushed on.

Back before the mini-militia, before the cages in the train station/fortified base, Sophia Mundy had been travelling with her grandparents. Her parents were long dead from the virus, sadly, so her grandparents took responsibility. They had heard stories of a settlement further up the tracks where they'd be safe.

Her grandparents came across a mysterious man with empty sockets where his eyes had once been. He looked much older than Sophia's grandparents. He called himself Finn and was partnered with a crow that sat next to him with a look of curiosity in its beady eyes. Finn sat on top of a large stone, and draped dirty rags over his bony shoulders to keep warm.

'I know where ye be goin',' said Finn, 'but I know where ye'll end up.' The crow cawed as if in agreement.

'Do you need help, sir?' Grandfather asked with kindness. He wore a blue neckerchief under

his chin.

‘Ha!’ Finn bellowed and the crow’s wings flapped with fright. ‘I am helpless, but there may be hope for ye, yet.’ The blind man grinned.

Finn frightened Sophia; he even frightened her grandparents, too. Grandmother tugged on Grandfather’s arm, urging to leave this strange man.

‘We better go,’ said Grandfather.

‘If ye follow the track, you’ll follow yer fate,’ he said without laughter.

‘What do you mean?’ Sophia asked but her Grandmother pulled her away. Finn sat in silence as they walked away.

They continued to follow the track despite the blind man’s warnings. What did this blind man *see* that they did not? The track was the only way they knew how to get to Blackwater, so they had no choice but to ignore the strange man known as Finn.

17

Finn was long gone from their sights as the track guided their way. But then the track came to a divide. It split right into two and that gave them

a choice. One would bring them up the same track that John Tapley would take weeks later; the other would bring them to their fate. They unknowingly took the latter.

This track was quiet but each side was overgrown with greenery. The track was almost hidden under grass and weeds, and the trees created a tunnel over the hidden track. That made it dark.

There was a hooded figure up ahead in the shadows.

‘Is that one of *them*?’ Grandmother asked Grandfather.

‘Wait here,’ he replied, saying to both Grandmother and Sophia.

Grandfather carried a snub pistol by his side as he walked slowly toward the strange hooded figure.

‘We don’t want any trouble,’ he said nervously, to the stranger.

‘Don’t shoot!’ the stranger reacted in a soft feminine voice. She came closer with her hands over her head. ‘Please, help me,’ she added.

This sounded like a trap to the wise Grandfather, and he was right.

The stranger never took down her hood but the outline of her face could still be seen, slightly.

Sophia thought she had looked weird; too perfect; too plastic.

‘I’m ‘fraid we can’t help,’ Grandfather made it obvious that he was armed but the stranger didn’t much care for that snub pistol.

‘No, please, I need your help,’ she said with passion but her body was still.

‘We can’t help you,’ Grandfather repeated but was suddenly grabbed by the stranger and stabbed in the stomach. He pulled down the stranger’s hood before he fell to the ground, revealing that the stranger was a robot in human form. It was hard to tell, but if you looked closely, you could see the details (**Fenley Co.** was lightly tattooed behind the stranger’s ear). She was too perfect; it made her... unpleasant to the *human* eye.

These kinds of bots were used in the sex industry (bought and sold off to some pathetic man who couldn’t get a human woman to date him, or for some creep to act out his deepest, darkest fantasies without consequence) and now this one held a vendetta. Her glassy eyes were full of rage and pain and she took that out on all humanity.

‘Run!’ Grandmother shouted to Sophia but she hesitated at first.

Grandmother's neck was then broken with a twisting snap of the stranger's hands. Sophia didn't hesitate any longer, so she ran into the dark forest. She could hear the bot scream out with anger behind her.

The trees never looked so tall to Sophia than they had at that moment. They creaked and cracked in the wind and seemed to make her dizzy.

Then she heard something that made her situation even worse. She heard a familiar clicking sound that sent shivers down her spine. Up ahead, stood a ripper (she knew them as crazed) and it hunched forward as it slept. Its throat clicked as it drew breath from its rotting lungs. She had to be quiet.

Then she snapped a twig and the *crazed* woke with a sudden jolt. Their eyes met (one of them, lifeless) and time was frozen. The crazed flailed its dangling arms about and twisted toward Sophia with fast steps. This guy woke up on the wrong side of the forest.

Sophia ran as fast as she could, dodging trees and branches along the way. But she had no idea which way was left or which way was right in these misleading woods.

She hid behind a thick tree and listened for

both her pursuers. She could hear the crazed with clarity as it searched for its breakfast.

Sophia held her breath so that the creature could not hear as she crept around the tree. She would've got away if it wasn't for that damned bot.

The lady-bot clapped her hands together to attract the crazy's attention. It worked. The crazed showed no interest in the lady-bot, despite her human form, and came after Sophia.

'That's it!' screamed the lady-bot as if she was pleasing one of her *clients*.

Sophia was struck in the face by a large branch that stuck out like an arm from a tree. It was like getting slapped by someone with overgrown fingernails; and she fell to the ground on her back.

She could see the eager crazed making its clumsy way to her but it tripped over its own foot. It rolled around in a tantrum on the leave-covered floor.

'Get up, foolish creature,' said the bot as she was keen on watching Sophia be eaten alive.

The crooked creature gawked as it moved closer and closer. Sophia could see a crow in the trees. It might have been Finn's crow coming to watch the show; coming to watch their fate.

Then the crazed creature's head was spilled over with blood as there was a gunshot. Sophia saw her grandfather aiming his snub pistol with one hand and holding in his stomach with the other.

The lady-bot filled with fury and trashed out at her grandfather. She landed on top of him and stabbed him some more. Then there was another gunshot. The lady-bot quit her stabbing and fell over to the side. She should have taken the stub pistol more seriously. Then there was an eerie silence.

Sophia climbed to her feet as she shook with fear. Her grandfather raised his bloody hand and she held it close, trying to ignore the countless stab wounds draining the blood from his weakened body.

Sophia couldn't hold back the tears flowing down her cheeks, reddening her sorrowful eyes.

Her grandfather couldn't speak but his eyes told her that he had always loved her. And then he was gone.

Sophia held his hand for an unknown amount of time until she had ran out of tears. She gently removed the neckerchief from her grandfather and she tied it around her small neck.

She decided to continue her journey in this

world, as her grandparents would've wanted.

The crow called from the highest level of the towering trees as she searched for her way out of the woods.

18

Sophia had also taken her grandfather's snub pistol, but there were only two bullets left. She'd want to use them wisely.

She was still walking in the same woods (*possibly in circles*, she thought). It seemed endless. Then she heard a crow calling from somewhere above. It flew down and landed just ahead of her.

She was thirsty and hungry, so she thought she might be losing her mind. But the crow cawed *at* her.

'I'm not dead, yet!' Sophia shouted to the crow. 'Leave me alone!'

The crow cawed once again, and then flew over to the next tree. Sophia followed. After another cawing sound, it flew to yet another tree, but still in view. Sophia continued to follow.

'Are you Finn?' she asked the crow in a state of confusion from her hunger. Finn was the blind man's name; not the crow's.

It only made its usual caw sound in reply.

Sophia followed that crow till she came to a clearing. On that clearing was a train track (one that would lead John, Rosie, and Winnie to a toll). The crow led Sophia out of those dark woods but now it was nowhere to be seen. Shame, because Sophia wanted to thank him.

The track brought Sophia closer to Blackwater. It also brought her closer to Roy. He waited, merrily, beside the track and could see Sophia walking alone. He peered and leaned forward with disbelief. This was an easy one for him.

‘Hello, there,’ Roy called out with cheer and Sophia flipped up her grandfather’s snub pistol. ‘Woah, dearie! I’m your friend.’ Roy smiled but held up his hands.

Sophia continued to aim her pistol. ‘You’re not my friend,’ she said sternly.

‘Well, you’re not givin’ me much of a chance, are ye?’

‘Let me pass,’ she ordered.

‘You’re goin’ to the settlement, aren’t ye?’ he asked. ‘Me, too, so you’ve no choice but to trust me.’

‘I don’t trust you.’

‘You’re a smart girlie,’ he said almost with

admiration. But she was beginning to irritate him. He stopped playing his little “good guy” routine and decided to play it real. ‘You should put that gun down, girlie, ‘cause yer surrounded.’

There were four of them including Roy. He giggled with a smirk while she counted.

Two bullets, remember?

Sophia moved back while aiming the small gun at the ambushers. She looked around but there was no help from the crowd this time; whatever that was. Her small hand wobbled with the weight of the gun. She couldn’t hold it out forever.

‘Tell ye what, girlie,’ said Roy, ‘if ye drop that gun, I’ll be good to ye.’

Sophia’s skin crawled at that.

‘I swear,’ he continued.

‘Never!’ she aimed the gun at Roy (might as well take some down with her; who better than Roy?) and she squeezed the trigger. There was a loud bang and her ears rang out. She had missed. Roy was too shocked to be angry, just yet, but then Sophia was grabbed from behind. There was a fifth member to the ambushers that she hadn’t spotted. It was Charlotte. She held Sophia from behind and grabbed the snub pistol from her in a flash. Charlotte snickered and sniffed Sophia’s

light-brown hair so hard it went up her large nostrils.

‘So pretty,’ Charlotte said just like the *Wicked Witch of the West*.

Roy moved slowly toward Sophia and stared blankly at her before slapping her across her *pretty* face.

‘I was gonna be good t’ye,’ he said with his teeth shut. ‘Now, I’ll have a special plan for *you*.’

Sophia had been taken to their fortress and locked away in the dirty cages along with many other children. A boy named Charlie came close to her as she cried and told her that everything would be okay. He had thought he was lying to make her feel better, but he was actually right in a way. Roy’s horrid hopes for Sophia never happened all thanks to a certain gun slinging artist and his trusty side-kick, Winnie.

Chapter IX

The Gunslinger

1

Blackwater was on the near horizon; so near yet so far. And on their trail was the horrible Charlotte (or known as Janet by John's brain) with her army of 50 of the most terrible fiends. They were closing in on them faster than John had imagined.

The sunrise gleamed in a bright orange that rested gently on their faces while they marched on. The good thing about the sun being so bright and in-your-face was that the rippers were blinded by it. The rippers were the least of their concerns now. Behind them, there were a terrifying amount of fiends with the hunger only ever matched by rippers, and in front of them –between them and the settlement of Blackwater – there was a bot. One bot. This one wasn't like Beck at all, but still had the same violent passion for killing humans. Its feet/wheels were larger but like that of a small tank. Its body was armoured from head to . . .

wheel. For its hands, it had two large drills that were once used to drill concrete; now they were stained red with the blood of its victims. It was once a tool used to break stone, now a tool of destruction. Just one bot, though.

This bot waited like a bear in hibernation in an old construction site. John and his mini-militia were heading right to it.

2

Rubble piled up beside the track. They were leaving the countryside fields and small villages and towns now that they went further along the ruined track. The scattered rubble was a sign of some unknown battle that had probably happened just moments ago, but there were no survivors. Small fires burned and there were dead bodies spread out on the ground; not all the bodies were fully intact as there were arms and legs and heads (Oh my!) scattered all over.

John didn't feel comfortable bringing these children through this battle zone. For all he knew, whatever had done this to these unfortunate people was still out there.

He was right but it was *asleep*, or charging, or whatever it was those machines did.

Rosie found the giant bot in its hibernation as it surrounded itself with its treasures (bodies of its kills) but it didn't wake. It must have been quite tired after its hard day's work/massacre on the rail line. Winnie was strapped in the harness on Rosie's back this time, rather than the usual front, and tried to peer over Rosie's shoulder to get a good look at this giant.

Rosie quietly retreated to John and told him of the metal beast. They didn't have the firepower to fight this tank of a bot but they were stuck. The giant bot created some sort of wall of rubble and he blocked the only way through to the other side. The wall of rubble towered up so high; the bot may have been building it since the virus outbreak first began. They had to think of something, fast, as fiends were on their tail. Soon enough, they will catch up with them.

There may be a way. It was pointed out to John by the little and *dangerous* Sammy Dane. It was a small hole in the giant's wall. He could see right through to the other side. All 30 children would definitely be able to crawl through and never wake this giant-metal-man-tank. But Rosie was first to realise (apart from John) that he

wouldn't be able to fit. This plan left John behind. Rosie, and once the other children realised, wouldn't go ahead with it. Charlie swore to figure out something else, but nothing would come. John couldn't convince them to go, but there were no other solutions; it was a stalemate. But time was running out.

Eventually, John convinced the children to crawl through the narrow hole in the wall (Rosie, Charlie, and Sophia being the most difficult ones). It wasn't easy, but he had to use the youngest children as a reason for them to leave. He told them that they had to protect them and get them to Blackwater before it was too late. Tears fell but they all crawled through to the other side. Rosie was last to go, but before she went, she held John so tight she never wanted to let him go. John didn't want to let her go either. Winnie kissed him as if she knew what was happening.

'You take care of Rosie, now,' John said to Winnie and he saw Rosie laugh as she wiped the tears from her red face. 'Goodb—'

'Don't you say it,' Rosie cried. 'This isn't *goodbye!*'

'Okay,' said John. 'I'll see ya later, kid.'

They hugged each other once more before John had to nearly force Rosie through the hole in

the wall while she held Winnie in her arms.

3

This was it. John's final stand, like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*; but with only Butch, poor lonely Butch.

Pretty sure they died at the end. (Just another Brian the brain thought). Could've picked someone else . . .

Who else lives after the final shootout, Brian? Ned Kelly dies, Michael Collins dies, William Wallace dies . . . I could go on.

Wallace wasn't in a shootout, fool, but you're nothing compared to them, Johnny-boy; so you may not die a hero after all!

Great, it's Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Brian . . .

John made himself laugh.

You'll go out laughing, at least, Johnny-boy.

Fuck you, Brian.

4

Funnily enough, John didn't have to wait

long. Coming down the line, led by Janet/Charlotte, was a group of 50 angry fiends; all armed to their fullest. They all had a vendetta once they passed Roy's dead posse along the tracks in the valley (what a successful ambush for a bunch of kids and an artist).

They hadn't spotted John just yet so he took the high-ground with his new rifle. The high-ground was a pile of rubble that worked well as a vantage point against the oblivious fiends below. He aimed down the sight of his rifle and waited for them to get nearer. Every bullet counted so he had to make them count. John could feel the cold air bite his nose and lips, so he thought to hold his breath or to breathe as lightly as possible. He didn't want them to see his breath rise up in little clouds to give his position away. Then he pulled the trigger.

From below, the shot seemed to have come from nowhere, so they jumped and scattered for cover. One foolish fiend took cover on the wrong side of a broken wall. John put a bullet through his head, too.

Then they started shooting, too; but not anywhere in particular, as they figured they'd hit something eventually. It just rained bullets like hailstones on a stormy day, and that woke what

John had nearly forgotten about; the giant bot.

Its red bulb-like eyes glared at the fiends below. Their jaws dropped with the sight of the metal man-tank and then they started to shoot. The bot rolled forward, crushing many in its path. It used its mighty drills against them causing blood to spurt up into the air. It rained a bright-red.

That's one way to do it! John thought to himself.

Nevertheless, John continued his shooting. It confused the fiends greatly. It looked like the bot was helping John, but it only had no idea he was there. Besides, the bot was a little distracted by the fiends shooting at him. John wanted to keep it that way. The drills twisted round relentlessly and fiends were scrambled in the mix. It was like a bloody blender. Some fiends even started retreating until one small man came forward. He wore a child's pink kitten hat on his head and smiled uncontrollably. On his shoulders, he carried a rocket launcher. He skipped forward like a child, himself, and then fired the rocket at the giant bot while he got down on one knee. His aim was true.

The giant bot's head popped off with an explosion from the rocket. Metal pieces from the

bot came raining down, and one piece actually landed in the centre of the small man's head. Blood poured from the pink kitten hat and down his smiling face. He died smiling, that crazy fucker.

Still, under half of the fiends had been killed in that quick burst of action. But it didn't end there. John started to fire his rifle some more, picking the fiends off like tin cans at a shooting range.

Then something happened. There was a rumbling in the rubble he used as his *high-ground*. Then it started to crumble. John slid down to the dirt and was revealed to the armed fiends who were full of rage. He had killed so many of them.

John's rifle had somehow fallen just out of reach behind him. He swung for his revolver and took down one fiend, two fiends, three fiends, and four; but was struck in the shoulder and he spun to the ground.

This is it, Johnny-boy.

John rolled over on his back and fired while he lied down. One fiend, who stood over him, had the top of their head burst open with the bullet flying from John's magnum. He rolled over again and took cover behind a broken remain of the giant bot. He loaded his gun and looked to his

rifle, just out of reach.

'We're gonna kill ye, pussy bitch!' Charlotte growled. 'You gonna pay for what ye did to Roy.'

John fired and the bullet struck a man standing next to Charlotte. She screamed out in rage with her blood-covered face, and fired her weapon as she did.

The bullets rattled over John's head and one ricocheted into his leg. He screamed out in pain and grabbed his leg in the process. He had hoped he had somehow had the gift to suddenly self-heal, but just never knew he could till now. Unfortunately, that wasn't so. Like he saw in the movies, he ripped his sleeve and tied it round his leg to stop the bleeding. It worked well enough – still hurt like hell.

Charlotte smiled with joy as she heard John scream in pain.

There were only 10 fiends left after the shooting had stopped for a moment. They seemed to take a time-out while they saw their chance, even Charlotte. It felt like an intermission during a long movie.

John was just building up his courage for his final shootout. He held the revolver next to his face and took a deep breath. He could hear their footsteps as the remaining fiends moved in on

him. He thought this should be the moment to have that “life flash before my eyes” moment. But he only thought about Rósin. He pictured her eyes so brown and beautiful; even when she was annoyed. He thought that that would be the perfect last image in his mind.

John sprang up with a flash and pulled the trigger with the palm of his left hand. POP! POP! POP! POP! POP! John fired his gun not missing a single shot, but he'd only killed 6 while 4 remained. Charlotte shot him down and he fell to the dirt. He lied on his back and looked up to the endless blue sky above him.

You did good, Johnny-boy.

Charlotte grinned with her horrid smile and moved slowly toward him while the other fiends laughed out in response. They were finally about to take their revenge.

'You're outta bullets,' Charlotte smiled as she took out her knife. 'I'm gonna have some fun witchya.'

The fiends cheered on with urgency.

She was in her element. Charlotte was the new leader (of this bruised gang) and she had the honour of sticking a blade up this guy's crotch. She lusted for it. But she wanted to make the most of it. She took her sweet time and just watched John

lie there for a moment.

She came close beside him, then on top of him with her ugly witches' face and she drooled, just like a ripper. This wasn't what John wanted to be his last image.

John wasn't finished. He still had *Jaysus*, his trusty knife. And he quickly took it out and lodged it into the witches' throat. Blood poured down on top of him and her eyes widened with shock. She was so close. But John was the gunslinger now (thanks to *The Dummies Guide to Guns*), so he was faster.

Then he grabbed Charlotte's gun and fired, killing the other fiends before they could even realise something had gone wrong; they probably still don't even know that they're dead, the poor fools.

John flipped Charlotte's awful dead body off of him and just lied there, looking up to the sky. He could feel pulsing pain in his whole body. He'd never been shot before, but guessed that that's the price to pay for being a *gunslinger*. That's a whole different story to being an artist. Not many artists get shot... unless you're John Lennon.

John found himself singing *Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head* as he lied there in a half-conscious state. Once he had realised he was singing he then stopped. Of all the songs to get stuck in your head while dying, why that one?

You're losing it, Johnny-boy.

'F . . . f . . . fuck you, Brian,' he then laughed but that hurt all over and he winced with pain.

He thought about everything he had been through in the past few weeks and realised how safe his lonely town was for such a long time. The loneliness was horrendous, but he never came across any fiends, rippers or bots till he reset Beck. But he would never have met Rosie Hart, or any of the other children, or Christy who he wished he'd known a lot longer than he had. This was better than the lonely town.

Then he saw an angel come to him. Her face was bright and beautiful. Her hair waved in the shimmering light as John started to lose consciousness.

'Rósin,' he whispered, and then he blacked out.

Chapter X

A Beacon of Hope

1

John woke up in a bed in a rather tidy (but empty) room, and wondered to himself if he had finally died. He still felt the pain from the gunshot wounds, which were cleaned and bandaged, so he figured he was very much alive. His weapons were missing but he was in no danger here, for now.

Standing at the end of his bed was Rosie with Winnie in her arms. Winnie wiggled and squirmed from Rosie's arms and showered John with kisses.

'What . . . how did I get here?' John asked. 'Where am I?'

'Welcome to Blackwater, John,' Rosie said with happy tears, and she hugged him. 'We found Blackwater and told them about what you did. I

asked for their help, so I led them to you. I had to come back for you, John.'

'So Blackwater is real; there's real people here?' John was in disbelief. 'So that was *you* that found me?'

'Yeah,' said Rosie. 'You were talkin' about a "Rósin" though . . .'

John didn't reply until he said: 'I still saw an angel,' and he smiled again.

They had finally found Blackwater and John had got all the children to safety. He got all 30 children to this town all by himself (the kids kind of helped).

It was a large town with a large population. John was happy to see that the population of this town wasn't just a collection of crash test dummies; the complete opposite of John's old town. It was fortified and safe with the constant patrolling of armed guards. The streets had markets, but the people were nowhere to be seen. The whole town was barricaded to some extent creating a massive fortress of protection against the wild world out there. But where were all the people, all this *population*?

A man wearing military uniform walked into the room. His hair was grey and tightly shaved on the sides, and he wore round glasses that he

pushed up with his finger as they fell to the tip of his nose.

'You can call me Colonel James Watts, John,' said the grey haired man as he came closer. 'I heard a lot about you; and I have to say I'm mighty impressed.'

'Nice to meet you, Mr. Watts—'

'That's *Colonel* Watts, John . . . Never mind, you'll come round; I understand you've been through a lot. Tell you what, as soon as you can walk come see me in my office; I'd like to show you something.'

'What is it?' he felt uneasy; this Colonel made him feel uncomfortable.

'I'll rather show you, John,' Colonel Watts then smiled and turned to leave the room.

As soon as he had left, Rosie burst out laughing. 'What's his deal?' she asked.

'Where are the others?' John asked Rosie, ignoring her question.

'In the canteen,' she said. 'We made it, John, thanks to you.'

But John didn't feel right just yet. This Colonel had saved John's life when Rosie had been calling for help, but there was something off about this strange military man. Maybe John was imagining it or he just never really liked the

military. He thought to keep an eye out just to be sure.

2

Just like Colonel James Watts had asked, as soon as John was able, he left to see him in his office (*who had offices these days?*).

John limped with the pain in his leg, and his shoulder and gut ached and thumped. He hoped to never get shot again. But being a gunslinger is all about bullets and bullet holes; you may catch a few every now and then, just had to make sure it didn't kill you.

John knocked on the door and a man yelled "ENTER" from inside. There was a large desk in the back of the room. It was covered with small ornaments of some kind . . . no, they were small stuffed animals (like with taxidermy, not teddy bears) and on the floor, he had a massive bear rug. John almost tripped over it when he approached the desk. And there were rows of animal heads on the wall to the right (one of them was a bot), but there was room for more on the left.

'Good to see you up and about, John,' Watts said while still inspecting one of his small stuffed

animals behind his desk.

'Thank you . . . Colonel Watts,' he said. 'You had something you wanted to show me?'

'Ah! Yes, of course,' he said with glee. 'Come to the window.'

John approached the wide window and could see cages first, then a stadium of sorts. There were armed guards and others training for the fight to come.

'What am I looking at here?'

'THE FUTURE!' Watts said with a look of excitement. 'See those cages down there?'

'I see them.'

'That's where we keep them,'

'Who?'

'The *unworthy* fiends of the wasted lands! We throw them into the stadium and put them up against the odd man-eater or two, maybe even a bot, or someone just looking for a challenge. This is *entertainment!*' he spread out his arms with glory. 'People come from far and wide just to get to my show, John. Many of them ended up taking part in the games.'

'That's insane! These people aren't *fiends*. People come here for refuge!'

'CHRIST, John, I thought, of all people, you'd understand.'

'You don't *know* me.'

'You're right, I don't,' he said. 'For all I know you could be one of *THEM*!'

'What are you talking about!?'

'Yes, makes sense,' Watts started babbling to himself. 'He's some sort of spy or . . . an assassin!'

'Colonel, I'm not a spy, I just heard about this place—'

'And you wanted to come see the *show*?' the Colonel smiled. 'Come closer to the window, John, a show's about to begin.'

John came close and looked down below at the stadium. It was once a stadium for a sport where people weren't killed or eaten alive. But now it was used for the Colonel's sport, and that certainly resulted in someone being killed or eaten alive. The Colonel had added his own modifications (like spikes, cages, and gates) to the stadium to suit its new sport. There were blood stains on the ground left behind by the last victims, of course.

'Best seats in the house!' Watts cheered.

Down in the stadium there was one man pushed out onto the *gaming* grounds. It was like looking down on the gladiators in Roman times for entertainment. That was *exactly* what it was like. The man looked scared. He was not like any fiend John had ever seen. But this Colonel's idea of a *fiend* was most likely different to John's idea.

John couldn't hear, but the man was shouting something at the crowd that gawked; maybe it was "help me".

The gates on the opposite end of the stadium began to open and the man started to panic even more so. There were weapons scattered on the ground and he had to make his move fast. Three rippers came flooding out of the opened gate and into the grounds.

The unfortunate man grabbed a rusty blade from the ground but dropped it again as his hands were shaking with fear. He was tackled and brought to the ground by a ripper and they chewed on his face and ripped his guts out. The crowd cheered. And the game was over.

John knew this man wasn't a fiend, so what had he done to get put into the cages and forced to fight in the stadium? It was slavery, like with the gladiators, maybe. Or possibly Colonel James Watts simply didn't like the unfortunate man.

John had to play along. He didn't want to end up like that poor man in the stadium. He'd been a gunslinger, but in no way did he want to be a gladiator.

'I was wrong, Colonel,' said John. 'This . . . is . . . entertainment.'

It hurt him to say it but he had to, so he could live to fight another day, and he could see that it pleased the Colonel as he grinned and returned to inspecting his stuffed animals.

'You may return to your room now, John.'

He didn't need to tell John twice. He left that office of the animal lover's nightmare and returned to his room. He thought about the safety of the children. They may not be safe in Blackwater with this so called *Colonel* in charge. What if he threw one of the children into that hell-hole-of-a-stadium?

He's just a fiend in a uniform!

4

'We need to leave?' Rosie asked John. 'What's wrong?'

'This place isn't what we thought, Rosie. It's bad.'

'We have to gather the others then,' Rosie didn't question John's judgement. She trusted him completely, especially after everything they had been through.

'Yeah, but we gotta be quiet about it,' he said, 'and stay away from Colonel Watts!'

John started to feel afraid. He had no idea what they were going to do this time, or how Colonel Watts would react when he found John and the children had left Blackwater. Would he hunt them down like the fiends had? Judging by the mounted animals on the Colonel's walls, he would hunt them down for sport. He'd probably enjoy it.

5

John felt like he was in *The Great Escape* (not the awful remake he saw in the cinema before the outbreak with Rósin, but the old Steve McQueen one), setting up secret meetings with the children, and talked to them about his thoughts on leaving Blackwater. At first the children didn't understand, but then he told them of the stadium and the

possible slavery. But then Charlie said something that made John's skin crawl.

'Are we goin' to just leave these people behind?' he said about the slaves.

'What can we do, Charlie?'

'I don't think I could live, knowing I left those people behind, John,' this came from the mouth a young boy.

John could never really resist the opportunity to be a hero in any given situation. He may have developed some sort of hero complex.

Whatever Charlie had said had been enough to convince John to think of another plan. A rescue plan this time. Free the slaves of Blackwater and put an end to the Colonel's reign of terror. Oh but it wasn't going to be easy. First they had to get their guns back, and then recruit an army by unlocking the cages and setting the gladiators free. He could picture the Colonel's face as the gladiators stormed his office.

He'll piss his pants.

6

John didn't want to involve the children in his

plan; just yet at the least. But he couldn't stop Rosie and Charlie if he tried. Michelle Lorry minded Winnie while they went to get their weapons. They were locked in a building on entrance into the settlement. The whole settlement was heavily guarded but John figured they'd be looking away from their fortress rather than inwards. He was only an artist. How was he supposed to know that Colonel James Watts knew everything? He had eyes and ears everywhere; especially in the room they had discussed their plans. The man was a paranoid maniac who thought everyone was a *fiend*.

They came to the building and it was unguarded. John thought this was too easy and felt unsure about the whole thing. Charlie urged him to go for it. It was now or never.

Then the door opened and out came the Colonel himself. He was smiling and his round glasses fell to the tip of his pointed nose.

'I knew you were a fiend!' he growled the last word.

They were surrounded by the Colonel's guards. John froze, but what could he do; he was unarmed. Charlie thought he knew just what to do, the little gunslinger that he was, and he lunged at the Colonel, and tried to take his gun.

'No!' John screamed out but he was too late.

The gun was fired and Charlie lied on the ground with his hands spread out in the shape of a cross. John's ears were ringing and Rosie was bellowing with tears while being held back by the Colonel's guards. Charlie had been tragically killed by the terrible Colonel.

'Look what happens!' the Colonel said. 'This is what happens to fiends. Take him to the cages!'

John was beaten and then dragged to the cages by the guards. He didn't feel much of the beating from the guards as he was numbed to all sensations after witnessing the death of Charlie. Charlie had saved his life once and he idolised John, but somehow he failed poor Charlie this time. John welcomed the beatings. He felt he deserved them.

John was thrown into the cages and hit to the ground hard. Inside, there were a few slaves who moved out of the way until the guards had left. Chains rattled on his wrists and he was locked away like a prisoner of war. It all happened so fast. John wondered what was going to happen to the children. The Colonel showed he had nothing against killing kids; poor, poor Charlie.

The Colonel wasn't done with John just yet. He visited him in the cages. They were filthy with human droppings and stained red with the blood of the odd beatings from the guards when they got bored.

The Colonel stayed on the other side of the bars, not to dirty his uniform.

'You thought you could make a fool out of me?' Watts asked as he kept a good distance from the bars. 'You were wrong, John. Now, I must punish you. Don't worry, I won't kill you.'

'What you goin' to do to me?' John then spat out some blood and it landed on the Colonel's shiny shoe.

'You dirty fiend!' He put his hands through the bars and grabbed John by the scruff. 'I'll take pleasure in watching you die in the stadium, John,' the pleasure could already be seen in his evil eyes, and smelled from his stinking breath.

'I'll kill you!'

'You try anything and I'll have to kill *another* one of your little fucking kids!' He hissed at the last word and John's eye twitched with rage.

But he could do nothing. This Colonel would

kill every single child right in front of him without a worry, and make sure John lived to feel the pain and anguish. If John tried to cut his own throat, the Colonel would chain him to the wall. If John tried to starve himself, the Colonel would force him to eat, or else he'd kill yet another child right in front of his helpless eyes.

John began to picture himself growing old and withered in these dark cages under the Colonel's punishment. No matter the consequences, John had to do something. It wasn't in his nature to sit back and take this. He didn't come all this way only to be locked up like an animal and beaten like a punching bag in this shit-covered cage.

Colonel James Watts left John alone, with his thoughts (which John was well used to), in the cages. One of the guards brought a slave to clean his shoes of the blood John had spat out. Watts peered down at the slave and rewarded him with a clap on the back of the head.

'Get this filth into the stadium!' Watts shouted to the guard and the shoe-shining slave was dragged, kicking and screaming.

The Colonel was dangerous and unpredictable, and would throw anyone he wanted into that stadium. He used that fear to

control those who had acted as guards or soldiers under his command.

Days would pass and John would begin to lose all hope. Every now and then, the Colonel would come to pay him a visit and tease him with unspoiled food and torture him with more mindless beatings. And he would never forget to mention that he had the children's lives in his hands.

The Colonel would supervise all of John's beatings and take pleasure in watching him bleed. There was something about John that he hated more than most.

'I'm goin' to make the most of this one,' the Colonel would say to the guard he ordered to beat John. John could feel this particular guard go easy on the punches now and then, but they still hurt. Maybe he was imagining it.

You're some hero, Johnny-boy. You got Charlie killed and now you're gonna rot here. This was Brian the unhelpful brain.

Then Rósin's voice came back into his mind with: *Don't give up hope, John.*

John sat in silence in his lonely cage. His knees came close to his face as he hugged his own legs like a scared child. A guard stood just outside as he peeked through the bar. It was the same guard that was ordered to beat him earlier.

'He'll hang ye up on his wall when ye die,' said the guard.

John didn't reply.

'He'll put ye in the *games*,' the guard looked around for eavesdroppers. 'Ye need t'win, and when ye do, ye need to challenge Watts himself. He can't say no in front of the crowd like that, ye see.'

'Why you sayin' this to me?'

'Ah, I say this t'everyone that he puts into the games,' said the guard. 'Just . . . no one ever lived to challenge Watts.'

'But *why*? Is this some sick trick?'

'Ain't it obvious?' the guard asked. 'This Colonel is fuckin' nuts! Everyone's 'fraid of him. I once seen him bite a man's nose off . . . like one o' those monster creatures!'

'And you want me to fight him!?'

'Yes! But with my help,' said the guard as he took another look around. The coast was clear.

'How?' John's interest was piqued.

'The weapons scattered in the grounds are rusty and blunt. I'll sneak ye a *real* weapon . . . but ye can't use it on the monsters in the games; ye gotta wait t'use that against Watts. If he catches wind o' what ye're up to, he'll shoot ye down from his comfy seat! Do ye understand?'

'Yes, I do,' said John. 'How can I thank you? I don't even know your name.'

'It's Arthur Godfrey, and don't thank me just yet. I wanted to apologies for the beatin' I did t'ya before. I had no choice.'

'Tell me, where are the children?' John asked him.

'They're safe with the other guards,' he said. 'I know them as good men . . . but not all the guards here are good. Have to be careful, John.'

'But—'

'No more questions, John,' Arthur said suddenly. 'Just keep yer head down and I'll smuggle ye a weapon.'

'Thank you, Arthur.'

'Thank me by *not* thankin' me, will ye?' he said with a nervous laughter. 'I don't want the wrong one t'over hear ye. Now get some rest, ye'll need it.'

Rosie held Winnie close as she cried for the death of her friend, Charlie. They had no idea if John was alive or dead, too. The last time her saw him, he was being dragged away while Charlie bled out on the ground. She was kept in a large room with the other children of the mini-militia. They all mourned the loss of one of their own. Tammy Jules's eyes were red with sorrowful tears that seemed endless, and she was comforted by the silent Jason Gerathy; sometimes you didn't need to say anything to be there for someone. Sophia Mundy glared at the guards with a fury they tried to ignore. She desperately wanted to grab a knife and force it into each and every one of their veiny necks. But she had to hold back the urge. She didn't want to end up just like Charlie.

Then Colonel James Watts entered the crowded room. He demanded that the guards would take the children to the stadium. He said that he wanted or even *needed* them to witness this next game.

The children were marched along with their heads hung low (Sophia still looking for an

escape) with the heaviness of their grief.

The stadium was large but seemed even larger to the children as they were forced to sit next to the Colonel. Down below was an oval-shaped pit of blood and dirt. There were scattered weapons and bones on the gaming grounds, and the crowd grew with spectators by the minute. It truly was like the Colosseum and Watts was the mad Emperor.

This mad Emperor sat in his throne with an eagerness to let the games begin. John hadn't been in his life for long but he sure had an impact on it. Although, it was easy for Watts to get annoyed, and become obsessed with punishment.

10

Arthur brought John to the entrance out onto the gaming grounds and loosened his chains. Then he showed John a small . . . no a tiny one-shot pistol. It was an ancient weapon that looked as though it probably wouldn't even work.

'Is this a joke?' John questioned him as Arthur stuffed the sorry excuse for a gun in John's belt and concealed it with his top.

'I'm sorry, John,' said Arthur. 'It's the best I can do . . . plus it's easy for me to hide it in case ye die against the monsters.'

'Thanks, Arthur, that helps,' John said sarcastically.

The gates started to open and sounded as if they were in serious need of an oiling.

'Good luck, John,' said Arthur. 'I mean it.'

John started to walk through the open gate and his hand flew to cover his brown eyes as the light stung them with a pulsing sensation.

11

The crowd cheered and jeered, some young and some old while John walked out into the open. He had become that poor man in the stadium he swore he would not. But he won't die like him. He'd put up a fight and maybe even throw one of the blunt weapons into the crowd and take at least one of these glorified fiends with him.

Then he saw Rosie in the crowd next to the Colonel, along with the rest of his loyal mini-militia. The Colonel rose to his feet and addressed

the crowd and they cheered.

Arthur was right: he won't be able to refuse my challenge.

'I think we should make this one interesting, don't you think!?' Watts announced and the crowd agreed. 'Let's give John a real challenge and not only put him against five monstrous beasts, but he must protect something dear to him.'

Watts then pushed Rosie, while she held Winnie in her arms, into the battle grounds. Sophia screamed out but was held back by a guard (then two, then three guards). Rosie fell a couple feet into the pit but was only scratched at the knees. Winnie licked her face and kissed her scrapes better.

The crowd was unsure of this new challenge of including a child into the bloody games, but it would continue nevertheless. Their fear of the Colonel was too great.

John rushed to Rosie's side and Winnie wagged her clueless tail. She was just happy to see John. John helped Rosie to her feet and then the gates started to open once more. Just like Watts had promised, 5 rippers came strolling out to investigate the noise.

It was bright so John and Rosie had that advantage. They both picked up the nearest

weapon and prepared themselves for battle.

There was a ruin of a pillar that created some sort of obstacle on the grounds. John told Rosie to climb it with Winnie to protect herself. She didn't waste any time and made a run for it. As she climbed, with Winnie under one arm and a knife in the other hand, she lost her grip and fell to her back. It made a thumping sound and the rippers obviously heard it. They twitched in her direction until John began banging two rusty blades together. One of the blades broke in half as easy as a twig.

The rippers were coming his way and fast. He took a swing at the first ripper and the rusty blade got stuck in its broken skull. The ripper was twitching its jaw half-heartedly, but the rusty blade did its job. He kicked it off but felt the pain from the bullet wound in his leg pulse again. John was tackled by another ripper but then broke free and climbed back to his feet.

'OHHHH! Soooo close!' Watts said like a commentator at a sports game.

While John was fighting off one ripper, there were still two others trying to climb the pillar that Rosie had climbed again. Winnie barked from the top which only attracted one more ripper. Rosie saw the knife behind the rippers. She dropped it

when she fell the first time. So she picked up some loose stones and chucked them at the rippers. It didn't do much but make them more enraged.

John was struggling to kill this *one* ripper as it was covered in some sort of caged armour. Obviously, it was one of Watts's ideas to make things more interesting. Its head was well protected by a spikey bucket with eye holes (as good as they were in the daylight) and there was a gap for it to bite its victims.

John couldn't penetrate the armour but he could trap the ripper somehow.

Behind him were a row of spikes along the wall. They were there to stop the "gladiators" from climbing to an escape. John decided to use them.

He grabbed the wretched ripper by its shoulders and pushed it as hard as he could. The ripper screeched as it became impaled onto the spike through its back and out through its stomach. It wasn't dead but it was trapped as John had hoped at the least. The impaled ripper twitched and squirmed, but with no luck.

John ran to Rosie and Winnie's aid, and just in time as one of the rippers discovered it could simply climb the same way Rosie had climbed.

John grabbed the climbing ripper by its feet

and yanked it back, causing it to smash its rotten face off the rock and spurt out blood like a fountain.

This displeased the Colonel so he ordered his guards to fix it with another, but special, ripper. The gate opened yet again, but the ripper that came crashing out was so large it made the others look like dwarves. This ripper may have been a bodybuilder in another life. Now he was just one of the Colonel's collectables.

The bodybuilding ripper charged like a rhino toward the broken pillar. John jumped out of the way and one of the smaller rippers was crushed against the stone causing it to burst like a water balloon. The crowd went wild!

Rosie and Winnie fell from the pillar with the impact from the charge. Then she was grabbed by the remaining ordinary ripper. She kicked back but it kept coming. The children screamed and shouted from their seats to distract the ripper with noise. It worked until Watts forced them to be silent. The ripper then put its fickle attention back onto Rosie but it was tackled by Winnie. She growled and snarled as she attacked the ripper like it was a large chew toy. The ripper didn't really seem to care as it kept its eyes on Rosie the entire time.

Rosie acted fast. She grabbed a small rusty axe and sliced the rippers head in two. The axe broke apart as she removed it from the rippers split head.

There was a loud thumping sound and Rosie realised, just in time, that it was the large ripper charging right at her. She grabbed Winnie and ran out of the way of this beast's charge. It was a close call.

The large ripper was also covered with metal armour which protected it, not only from the almost useless weapons, but from the impact of its charges.

Then John had a crazy, possibly suicidal, idea: to use the rippers' powerful charges to their advantage. Sometimes, that which seemed to be one's strength, turned out to be one's weakness.

12

John had to remove the metal helmet from the giant, somehow. He had no time to think of some genius plan. He had to be quick about it.

The muscular ripper continued its raging tantrum and crashed here and there hoping to crush someone in the process. It then spotted its target. It was Rosie. The ripper turned as if it was

aiming, then it began to charge once again.

Winnie wiggled from Rosie's arms and ran to the side, barking in the process. She was leading the ripper away from Rosie. Rosie had frozen with fear.

The ripper turned and followed the barking sounds. They guided him like a trail of breadcrumbs. Then Rosie screamed out "No!" and the ripper stopped again. Winnie stopped running and then barked. The ripper was caught between two choices and didn't seem to be smart enough to choose just one. The bigger the ripper, the more stupid they were so it seemed.

John realised this was his chance. He ran so fast he barely seemed to touch the ground with the tips of his toes. The ripper moved like the *piggy in the middle* caught between Rosie and Winnie. Then John jumped onto the ripper's massive shoulders and the beast roared with rage and it trashed about. John held on as tight as he could like it was the world's most dangerous rodeo. All he needed was the hat.

The metal armour was cold and sharp and John cut his hands as he held on for dear life. He got a grip of the helmet and pulled as hard as he could. It wouldn't budge at first and John thought it never would, until it popped off like a cork from

an expensive wine bottle. The ripper fell to its knees and covered its eyes and John dropped to the ground. The ripper stayed still for a moment and the crowd held their breath.

John stood up and then the ripper turned to him, revealing its face riddled with scars, boils, and endless scratches. The ripper found its new target. It came for John and John ran like hell.

He could hear the ripper behind him breathe its stinking breath.

It reminded John of a nightmare he used to have when he was a kid: he'd been running from a giant boulder after finding some ancient artefact (just like Indians Jones), but his running felt slow and his feet started to stick in the one spot. He could hear the boulder get closer and closer and he always woke up sweating and screaming.

This was no nightmare (it was a living nightmare for sure) so he kept running as fast as he could. Luckily, his feet weren't sticking on the spot.

John then stopped and waited with the spiked wall behind him. He waited and waited until the ripper got too close.

John jumped out of the way on the last minute and the large rippers head crunched onto a spike and then it flopped to the ground with a

thud.

The crowd was silent, only for a moment until they started to cheer. They were cheering for John. This was possibly the most entertaining game they had ever witnessed.

Watts was furious, and it could be seen in the vein popping out on his wrinkled forehead.

13

John, Rosie and even Winnie moved to the centre of the arena. The crowd went quiet and then John came forward. This was John's moment to challenge the Colonel like Arthur had said.

Colonel Watts was intrigued to hear what John had to say. He stood up and waved at the crowd with a fake smile.

'You have something to say?' said Watts.

'Yeah, I do,' said John while out of breath. The pain coursed through his battered body. He'd been through quite a lot. 'I challenge you, Colonel. A fight to the death!'

And the crowd was stunned with a collective gasping sound.

Watts flipped his tongue between his teeth.

He really hated John, and didn't realise just how much until now. Ah, what the hell, why not give John what he wants and kill the fucker?

The crowd waited for a response and then Watts finally spoke. You could hear the fury hidden, not so deep, in his voice.

'I accept your challenge, John,' he said. He had a plan.

The crowd loved it. It wasn't every day you saw the Colonel step into the stadium grounds.

14

Rosie took Winnie in her arms and stood aside. John waited as Watts entered the battle grounds. The smaller ripper that had been impaled on the spike earlier still twitched and moaned to get free, but it failed.

Watts thought it looked strange from this angle, the stadium looked bigger and he loved that. Now is his chance to end John's life.

'You sure you want to do this?' Watts teased and smirked. What John didn't know was that the Colonel came onto the grounds armed.

'Let's do it,' said John as a nerve hopped in

his top lip.

'Okay, then,' said the Colonel as he then revealed his gun in its holster. 'Don't worry, I'm fair. I've got one for you, too,' he then lobbed a gun onto the ground between them. 'If you can, shoot me before I shoot you,' he said with a smirk.

The crowd was so silent that you'd think it was only John and Watts alone in that stadium. You could hear a feather drop. A bead of sweat rolled from John's forehead, but the Colonel was calm and confident. In his mind he had already won, so he decided to tease a little more; he was a crowd pleaser.

'You think you're fast—'

And the Colonel was cut short by a bullet to the chest. In John's hand was the small, ancient gun that Arthur had given him earlier. It worked after all.

Colonel James Watts wobbled where he stood for a moment, in disbelief, and a little confusion until he took two shaky steps forward then fell flat on his face, breaking his rounded glasses.

The crowd was stunned into silence. John started to breathe again, not realising he had been holding his breath the entire time. His chest deflated with a long sigh of relief. But it wasn't over yet. He was still standing in the centre of this

battle ground and was viewed by a crowd of spectators, still sitting in their seats. John had no idea how they'd react after seeing their "leader" get taken down like that.

Arthur came rushing out to John's aid and then announced their freedom from the terrible self-made Colonel. And all thanks to John. The crowd showed mixed responses. Some were simply confused like they were watching a magic show but the magician didn't catch the bullet like he said he would.

(Is this part of the show?)

Those who were loyal to the Colonel were forced out of Blackwater with their heads hanging low. They were lucky they weren't hanged themselves. They had a good thing going here with the Colonel... they'll be back. Should they have been hanged?

There were many in the crowd that cried with joy as they were now freed. There were many spectators willing to come see the *shows*, but there were also those who were forced to watch and pretend to enjoy so that they could feed the Colonel's fantasy (they'd be killed or worse if they showed their true feelings).

John chose speak to the on looking crowd as Arthur stood by his side with: 'Colonel Watts's

reign of terror is over! Now, we need to make this place the beacon of hope it was meant to be.'

'For Charlie!' Rosie screamed while she held Winnie in her arms.

'For Charlie!' the rest of the mini-militia responded together like a choir of young children.

'For Charlie!' said John, 'for Charlie!'

15

And the sun set over Blackwater like a fire dying on a cold and frosty night with the colours of yellow and red painting the sky.

The mini-militia gave Charlie a proper burial; one that he deserved – and gave the Colonel one he deserved, too; he was buried in an unmarked grave outside of Blackwater; where he'd be forgotten.

The stadium was abandoned and the entrance was chained. No one would be thrown into those grounds and forced to fight for their life again; not while John (or even Arthur) was in control of Blackwater.

Sophia came up with the idea to rename the town of Blackwater to Fort Charlie. John thought it

was a great idea and the rest of the town's folk were just happy to be finally somewhere they could call home. That made John think about the future; the real future, not the Colonel's design from madness.

John made plans with Arthur to create a safe route along the train track. They posted signs that read: **SAFETY IN FORT CHARLIE** and sent out patrols, and trained those willing to become John's militia. It was no longer a *mini-militia*. Although, that mini-militia had changed everything for everyone and for the better.

John had spent so many years all alone; now he was the leader of a colony. Even though John was covered in bruises and wounds that were slowly healing, he carried out those plans the very next day.

Fort Charlie would become a safe haven. Like John had promised: it would be the beacon of hope it was meant to be.

