

THE RETURNERS



JOHN BULLOCK

About the Book

The last thing Tom Keighley remembered was nearly being hit by a car one grey, wet, Monday morning.

That was nearly a hundred years ago.

When he is plucked from a strange contraption in a mysterious building, Tom is thrown into the tiny village of Charles Brook, the last beacon of humanity known to exist in the world. Tom must find his place in the Brook, a village where the streets are so narrow that his shoulders touch the walls. A place where only the well armed or foolish go outside at night.

A place where the high, thick wooden walls keep out the dead.

The Returners
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THE RETURNERS

The Debut Novel of John Bullock

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For Sallie and Tristan...

...and for the hope of more to come

Prologue

A building loomed on the horizon like an enormous dull box. Its bland grey walls had long since given over to moss, and even small weeds had found purchase in the once smooth vertical surfaces. A name had sat proudly on the walls, but the oversized letters, each as tall as a man, now lay on the floor gently corroding, and in no discernible order.

From the direction that Harret approached there was only one apparent way in; a set of glass doors slightly to the right of centre. Wire fencing had surrounded the building at one time, but it had rusted almost entirely to nothing and only the evenly spaced concrete posts told of their existence. This made entering the compound easy. There were no obstacles that could conceal danger from view, save for the fallen letters, but they were all lying flat and, as tall as they were, they were little more than a foot deep. Reaching the building would be easy.

What they might find inside, however...

Harret turned to his companions and gestured silently with a flick of his fingers. He set off briskly towards the building with Bran and Holter following closely at his heel.

Harret was a tall man, though he was by no means broad. Still, what he lacked in bulk he made up for in sinewy muscle. He moved silently across the weed-ridden gravel, wincing at the crunch that issued from every one of Holter's heavy footfalls. Holter was broad, and as big and strong as a bull. And he had never quite managed the art of stealth movement.

They reached the glass doors. Harret pressed his back against the wall to one side of the doors and, once Bran had taken up his own position on the other, Holter moved between them, directly in front of the door, and readied himself. They each became still and silent, listening. It was out of caution more than necessity; the lands around the building were as flat as any Harret had ever seen, which would make it hard for anything to sneak up on them. Still, there was no harm in being careful. Confident that it was as safe as they could hope for, Harret nodded to Bran, who removed a resin torch from his pack, igniting it with flint and dagger.

Holter tried the door and, to Harret's relief, it opened easily. The building may be miles from anything, but sound can carry surprising distances and he didn't want to have to break the glass and risk attracting any attention.

Holter tensed, bunching his thick, leather-clad fists. Leather covered almost every inch of Holter's body, such was his role. Being big and powerful alone was no use, but with a bit of protection you could use that strength safely, and let smaller, faster people do the rest. Holter stepped through the threshold ready to defend himself, and when nothing happened, he gestured to Harret and Bran, who filed in behind him.

The air inside was stale and still. Still was good. Air that hadn't moved for some time meant that there was unlikely to be anything else moving. Still, Harret wasn't foolish enough to let his guard down. Slowly, Holter made his way forward and the others followed.

The door led down a short corridor rife with spider webs and mould. It ended in a thick glass door which opened out into a large foyer. Thankfully, it was mostly empty. There were four doors leading out of the room – including the one through which they had entered – one in the centre of each of the four walls. Only the entranceway door was glass panelled, however.

Squat furniture sat in the centre of the foyer, and a low counter skulked at the far side of the room. The seating may have been comfortable at one time, but it had all long since mouldered into almost unrecognisable heaps.

Harret surveyed the foyer with an expert eye, looking for the tell-tale signs that he had trained for most of his life to be able to spot. He pointed to Holter, and then to the door on his right. Holter nodded his silent understanding and, as he strode towards the door, Harret made the same gesture to Bran to take the adjacent one. Harret headed for the door behind the counter, across the foyer from the entrance.

The rule was simple; Don't go forward until it's safe to go back. There were exceptions, of course, but it was good to stick to the rules whenever you could. They each checked their assigned doors and found that they couldn't be locked, at least not without a key that the raiders had no hope of obtaining. The handle would need to be turned to open door, at least; it wasn't ideal, but it was better than nothing. Harret moved back over to the glass door they had entered through, pushing it shut and making sure the latch caught.

'I think this place is empty,' Harret said quietly as he walked back over to Bran and Holter. 'It feels like it's been untouched for years. Still, best not to take any chances.'

'So what do you want to do?' Bran asked. Bran was of an average height, though that placed him the shortest of the three men, but he was strong and fast, and the jagged sword at his hip was as deadly a weapon in Bran's hands as Harret could hope to have at his side. He wore the light armour of a sprinter, but he fought as often as he ran.

'We'll block off the doors and then check each of them in turn.'

'This is a big building,' Holter pointed out.

'He's right,' Bran said, as though Harret might not have noticed, 'it might take the rest of the day to search the whole place.'

Harret nodded. 'If it looks like the rest of the building is worth searching, we'll make camp in here tonight. We can use these old lumps of furniture to barricade the doors. Hells, we might all get a good night's sleep for a change.'

'Sure,' Bran said doubtfully, 'but I'd feel better if we kept a watch, all the same.'

'Yeah,' Harret nodded, 'me too. Let's get these other doors blocked off. We don't want any nasty surprises waiting for us in here when we get back.'

They heaved the rotting frames of what might have once been sofas across the front of all but the door to the right of the entrance. Beyond that door, they found a bank of elevators, all seized shut, and a stairwell. Pushing open the door to the stairwell, Harret looked into the darkness. The stairs led downward only.

'Well, it looks like we're going underground,' Harret said, 'Holter, you're up.'

The big man stepped forward, torch in hand. The modicum of light that had illuminated the foyer through the entrance door and a few grimy skylights was entirely absent here, and Bran lit another torch as he followed, though it seemed to create more shadow than light. Every so often they would all stop, holding their breath and calming their pulse, to listen for any sound that was not of their own making, but all was silent save for the crackle of the torches. The stairs reached a landing, turned back on themselves and continued downward. They descended six flights of stairs and Harret reasoned that they were at least seventy feet under the main foyer.

'No doors?' he muttered to himself, noting that each landing had passed with no way off of it, save for the staircase.

Finally, they found a door at the bottom of the seventh – and last – flight. There they found a small room, little more than a five foot cube with the stairwell at one side and a door at the other. The door was open, which was a relief to Harret, for it was as thick as Holter's thigh and made of solid metal. If it

had been shut, Harret and his fellow raiders would have had no hope of opening it. Harret was only dimly aware of this fact, however, because his attention had been drawn by something else.

'Light,' he gasped.

'Are you sure?' Bran asked, 'we only have one more torch and I doubt lighting it will improve matters much.'

"No, I don't mean we need more light—look.'

Bran and Holter's gaze followed Harret's pointing finger through the door and across the empty space beyond to a dusty window in the far wall.

Their mouths fell open.

Through the window, flickering dimly, an electric light illuminated the space beyond the far wall.

'People!' Holter breathed, and almost had to be held back as he moved towards the door.

'Wait! We don't know that,' Harret said.

'There is no power in the ground any more,' Holter insisted, 'someone must be making it for that light.'

It was true, Harret had to admit. There hadn't been electric in the ground in living memory, something was powering the light. 'Still,' he said evenly, 'we need to be careful.' Reluctantly, Holter nodded.

They entered the room slowly, with Holter in front in the same fashion they had entered the building itself, but Harret knew without looking that Holter's eyes were focused on the flickering window.

Charles Brook had a population of 104 people. When you live in such a small community, the thought of meeting new people has an almost irresistible appeal to it. Especially when you have good reason to believe that your 103 neighbours might be the only other people in the world! Despite this, they forced themselves to stick to the long practiced methods of messengering and, later, raiding. They entered the room cautiously behind their shield, Holter, with Harret in the middle and their sprinter, Bran, at the rear. Bran was strong and fast, and carried the bulk of the salvage that they had collected on their raids; the things that would be useful back at the Brook. If things didn't go according to plan, his job was to get out quickly, taking the salvage back home so that the rest of the Brook could benefit. Such an act was a last resort that usually meant leaving his fellow raiders to die, but it also meant that the salvage made its way back to the Brook. Nobody would die in vain.

The chamber beyond was a large space, not nearly as vast as the foyer above, but big and empty nonetheless. It looked like a room waiting for something, as though the owners of the building had been in the process of moving in just before The Returning. The room was encircled by large windows, though nothing could be seen through the grime that coated the glass and the darkness beyond. The floor was tiled white, and while time had piled on a noticeable coating of dust, it had remained largely unaffected by the weeds and damp that had taken over the entrance overhead.

The only way out of the room besides the way they had entered was the heavy looking wooden door that they were heading to, and, confident that there was nothing in the room with them, they sped up, eager to see what was on the other side. Harret tried to rub away some of the filth that covered the window that they had seen the light through, but it didn't come away easily and something was blocking the bottom half.

Assuming formation once again, Holter opened the door.

A sudden thunderous crash seemed to fill the world, and Holter spun to face the source of the sound, his big arms ready to fend off an attack, but it had been caused by a metal cabinet, rusted and decayed at its base, falling over as the door opened. They each held their breath, but after nearly a full minute with not a sound save for their own heartbeats and the lick of the flames on their torches, they relaxed.

'Well I think it's safe to say we're alone down here,' Bran said, a hint of disappointment tinting his voice, 'They must have heard that racket back in the Brook!'

Harret knew why Bran was disappointed; being alone may have meant safety, but it also meant no people. The disappointment would be fleeting, though, it had been over thirty years since outsiders had been seen; longer than any of their lifetimes. Still, this was the furthest any raiders from the Brook had been since the days of trade, and no messenger routes had ever passed by here. Even Harret had let hope take a small hold.

He pushed his own disappointment away and, now confident that they were alone, relaxed a little, taking in his surroundings. This room was of identical shape and make-up to the neighbouring room that they had just left, but this room was not empty. Aside from some run of the mill furniture – desks, filing cabinets, old display panels – there were four strange looking devices in the centre. They resembled large glass tubes that stretched from floor to ceiling, all together in a cluster. Each was a little over three feet across, with strange looking metal pads at their tops and bottoms where jumbles of corroding wire protruded from each pad, disappearing into the floor and ceiling.

From his position near the door, Harret could see the two nearest tubes full – the other two being hidden behind a frosted glass partition. The flickering light was coming from behind that partition, and Harret moved around cautiously... and froze.

Seeing Harret's reaction, Bran and Holter were quickly at his side, blade and fist ready, but when they saw what Harret was looking at, they were equally dumbfounded.

Inside, as still as a grave, was a naked man.

'What is it?' Holter asked, ill-concealed fear in his voice. Harret had seen his shield wade into a crowd of returners with a smile on his face and a gleam in his eye, it was strange to think that this oddly serene sight might hold any fear for him. Still, Harret had to admit, there was something eerie about the unmoving man.

He was average in height, slim, and not particularly muscular. His hair was neat and straight; it looked groomed, an act generally limited to uncoupled young women. The thing that seemed strangest to Harret, though, was the man's skin. It was completely unblemished, marred only by a light thatch of body hair, there were no scars, no marks of cleansing; it was as though the man had lived his whole life in the tube, never meeting the horrors beyond its glass wall.

'Is he ... alive?' Bran asked, touching the glass with his index finger gingerly.

'I don't know,' Harret said, rubbing some of the grime away to get a clearer look at the man, 'he's not breathing, but there are no wounds.'

'What's this?' Bran asked, looking interestedly at a small panel on the metal band that encircled the tube halfway up its length. The panel was black, set into the metal band, and bore some plain white letters on it. Bran turned to Harret. 'Harret? You're better with your words.'

Harret moved around the tube to look at the panel. The letters read;

AUXILLARY POWER FAILURE IMMINENT!

Revival procedure will initiate automatically before failure occurs. Touch to initiate revival procedure now.

Harret read the words aloud, and exchanged blank expressions with his two companions.

'Touch what?' Bran wondered aloud, and reached out to the panel, running his finger along the words. As soon as he touched the panel, the words disappeared.

'It's a display!' Harret gasped, stepping back quickly. He knew about displays – old technology that could show moving images as clear as crystal – but the knowledge required to make one work, or even make the power to make one work, had long since passed from memory.

The words were replaced by a thin rectangle that spanned most of the length of the display. As they watched, it slowly began to fill up, becoming solid from left to right. As the bar became more solid than empty, a jet of steam blasted into the tube making the three raiders jump backwards. Harret and Bran drew their swords instinctively.

And then, slowly at first, the tube began to rise.

One

Faces were staring at Tom. Disappointed faces.

They had been staring at him for so long that he couldn't remember a time when they had not been staring at him. They had a vagueness to them but, despite that, he knew they were the faces of his parents, and they were dead.

He hung in nothingness, unable to move. Not that it mattered; there was nothing to move to, nothing to move from, just black infinity. And his faceless parents.

He dimly remembered times when there had been more to his world than this limited existence, more than the endless blackness, but it seemed distant, like a story he had heard rather than an experience he'd had.

Something shook.

At first Tom was confused. He didn't understand how anything could shake when there was nothing but himself. He certainly hadn't moved in any sense that he could understand, but, somehow, it had felt as though the very fabric of the nothing around him had moved. And, just as he was beginning to think he'd imagined it, it happened again.

He realised that his parents were gone.

There was a flash, and Tom thought he saw three new faces. They were not faces from his half remembered memories, and they did not have the same blurry vagueness that his parents had, and they were gone in an instant. And now he was shaking. Violent spasms racked his body, as though he was freezing, yet he felt no cold.

His world began to flicker, alternating randomly between a dull grey and soft orange light. And with an unceremonious thud, he fell back into the world.

'He's taking a long time to return,' Tom heard a voice say from somewhere beyond his eyelids.

'He doesn't look dead,' said another voice, harder than the first.

Tom forced his eyes open, and winced. There had been pain before, but now he felt as though he was floating in a lake of pain and the act of opening his eyes had let it all into his head. He squeezed them

shut again, but it was too late. Agony flared behind his eyeballs, in the back of his skull, and, soon after, in every muscle. He groaned.

'Dead or not,' said the second voice, 'he's awake.'

Tom felt coarse hands on the bare skin of his arms as he was pulled up into a sitting position. He grasped at his head and groaned again with more feeling, willing the pain to go away. He wasn't sure how long he spent rocking back and forth and digging his fingertips into his scalp, but the unseen voices seemed content to wait. When the pain had subsided enough, he opened one eye experimentally, and when it didn't come rushing back, he tried the other eye. It took a while for his addled mind to process the sight before him.

He was in a large room. It looked as though it may have once been clinical – all white floors, plain walls and fluorescent lights – but filth coated the floor now, and damp had eaten at the walls and ceiling. Those parts of the walls that had escaped the ravages of damp were coated with moss and dust, and the floor was so covered in the debris of neglect that it was almost hidden from view entirely.

A small fire burned in front of him, it looked like a camp fire, which only served to confuse Tom more as they were clearly indoors.

'What's going on?' he asked weakly, 'where am I?'

'You're in the middle of nowhere,' said the hard voice which seemed to be coming from a blurry shape at the other side of the fire, 'and we were hoping you might know what's going on.'

Tom tried to blink the fuzz from his vision. There were three men sat opposite him. The man on the left was huge, his bald head criss-crossed with scars that looked unnervingly like old scratch marks, and a horrendous burn scar covered the right side of his neck and part of his face. The man on the right was smaller, shorter than Tom by a couple of inches at least. There was some scarring visible under his long black fringe, but not nearly as much as the first man.

The man in the centre was an entirely different prospect. He was tall and thin, but his skin was pulled tightly over bunched muscle. His hair was long, like the man on the right, but where the man on the right had wild, unkempt hair, this man had tied his hair back in a tight pony tail. His body bore no scars that were visible outside of his hard leather armour. He had cold, grey eyes, and they were staring at Tom in a calculating manner.

A stab of white hot pain lanced through Tom's forehead and he clutched at it, trying to weather the storm inside his skull.

'He is returning!' the big man said, getting to his feet with surprising speed and adopting a kind of defensive crouch. The grey eyed man stared at Tom a moment before shaking his head.

'No he's not,' he said eventually, 'he's got a headache, that's all.'

Reluctantly, the big man lowered himself back down, though he kept a weary eye on Tom.

'My name is Harret,' the grey eyed man said. He gestured to the shorter man on his left, 'this is Bran, and the big nervous one is Holter.'

'Tom,' grunted Tom in reply, 'I don't know what's going on.' He tried to remember what had happened, but the effort felt like barbed wire being pulled through his ears. 'The last thing I remember is going to work. Some arse nearly ran me down at a crossing.' Tom's words were met with three blank stares.

'Crossing?' Bran asked eventually.

Tom stared back, unsure how to respond. 'A cross-walk? For crossing the road? A part of the road where it's supposed be safe to cross without fear of being run over by bloody maniacs in their car?' Bran and Holter gasped in unison, and even Harret looked surprised. Tom said, 'Am I missing something here?'

'You've seen a working car?' Bran asked in awe.

'What? Of course I–' Tom started to say, but Bran interrupted him.

'How did it work?' Bran asked, 'there hasn't been a working car in decades!'

'What?'

Harret stared at Tom with the same calculating expression, and he seemed to reach a decision. 'What year was it, Tom? Your last memory, I mean,' he added, his gaze boring into Tom like a drill.

'2014,' Tom said uncertainly, and then took another look around the strange, dilapidated room they were in. A pit began to open in his stomach.

'He's from ... the future?' Holter asked slowly, trying to wrap his mind around an extremely alien idea.

'No,' Harret said calmly, '2014 is a date from the old calender; he's from the past. He's from before The Returning.'

A wave of pain washed over Tom, starting in the base of his neck and spreading through his head like the tide. He clutched at his forehead, trying to understand what was happening.

'The Returning?' he mumbled in confusion.

And then he passed out.

When he woke, his head was throbbing in time with his heartbeat and it felt as though razor blades were lodged behind his eyeballs, slicing into them whenever they moved. He looked around the same strange room that he had been in before, and let slip a little of the hope that it had all been some strange nightmare.

The big man named Holter, and the one called Harret were both sleeping around the small fire that was still burning in the centre of the room, their breathing so soft as to be inaudible over the spit and crackle of it. This surprised Tom; he would have expected Holter at least to snore like an old tractor engine. He looked around for the third man, the one called Bran, and found him sat against the wall next to a glass door that was largely obscured by an old rotted couch. There were three more doors in the room, and more furniture in varying states of recognisability blocked each. Bran gestured silently for Tom to join him, and Tom got unsteadily to his feet.

As he did, he noticed his own attire for the first time. He had been dressed in a long pullover of scratchy wool with matching trousers and a blanket draped over his shoulders that, if possible, itched more than the pullover. He padded across the room in crude shoes made from soft leather, thought about leaning against the wall, and then slid down it collapsing slowly into a heap on the floor. He was dimly aware of Bran moving closer.

'We sleep lightly,' he whispered by way of explanation, gesturing to the slumbering figures in the centre of the room. 'Heavy sleepers die in the wild. You must be very quiet while the others rest; sleep is crucial for a clear head, a clear head is useless if you are dead. They will wake at the slightest hiccup.'

'Okay,' Tom whispered, wondering how any of these men, sleeping or not, could fail to hear the thunderous pounding in Tom's head. 'What's happening to me?'

'We don't know for certain,' Bran said earnestly. 'My guess is you have been sleeping.'

'Sleeping?' Tom laughed mirthlessly, 'For how long?'

Bran shrugged. 'Harret thinks you're from before The Returning. No one remembers its exact date in the old calender, but it has been ninety-eight years since the first returners.'

None of this made any sense to Tom, and the confusion only seemed to inflame his headache. 'I don't understand a word you're saying ... what are returners?'

'They are the reason we sleep lightly, why we seek secure places to rest at night, and why we travel cautiously.'

'That doesn't answer my question!' Tom in a harsher whisper than he'd intended. Bran shot him an angry look as Holter grunted quietly in his sleep. 'Sorry,' Tom said more quietly, 'but it seems as though you're assuming some prior knowledge on my part. What are returners?'

Bran sighed. 'Ninety eight years ago your world changed. The returners came, and almost destroyed humanity. They tore down the marvels of civilisation and feasted on the flesh of those that had created it.'

'This is ridiculous,' Tom said after a moment, keeping his voice low, 'I must still be dreaming.'

'You are not dreaming,' Bran said matter-of-factly.

'Okay then, stop dancing around my question and tell me what these returners are,' Tom said impatiently. The pain had subsided a little, and he managed to hold eye contact with Bran without feeling the need to hold his head to keep it from exploding.

'They are creatures of death. Some believe they are demons that can only get into our world when one of us leaves it, some think they are a plague created by us a long time ago.'

'I see,' Tom said evenly, 'and they came a hundred years ago?'

'Yes.'

'So, what you're saying,' Tom said slowly, his addled mind piecing the information together as he spoke, 'is that it is now at least a hundred years since the last time I brushed my teeth, and I am in a world that has been destroyed by demons?' And then, muttering, he added to himself, 'I need to stop reading so many fantasy novels.'

'You will learn of them soon enough, Tom.' Bran said in the manner of one talking to a child. 'What about your tale? How did you come to sleep for so long in the glass tube? How did you manage to sleep through the destruction of humanity?'

Tom thought about saying something sarcastic, but decided against it. Instead, he tried to remember more about that last memory. He had been going to work in the rain, and he'd nearly been hit by a taxi while crossing the road, but he clearly remembered not being hit by the car. He even remembered having a heated exchange of words with the driver. Tom read science fiction novels by the shelf-load, and considered the possibility that he had actually been hit by the car, and was now in a coma in some hospital, dreaming, but that didn't fit. The memory of the argument with the driver was as clear in his mind as the incident itself and, besides, everything here felt so ... real.

There was something else. There were memories after the argument with the driver, Tom was sure, memories he couldn't reach. They were on the edge of his thoughts, but he couldn't bring them into light and the harder he tried the less substantial they became in his mind.

Tom began to think around the incident with the car. He focused on his job. He'd been going to work that morning but, to his distress, he found that he could not remember what that work had been. A sinking feeling began to form in his gut as he explored his mind further, only to confirm the growing concern that he was just beginning to understand. Tom could remember his name, but that was about all he could remember. He searched the recesses of his mind for evidence of a partner, or a pet, or a parent, but nothing came to light.

'I don't know how I came to be here,' Tom admitted hopelessly, fighting the despair that was rising inside him.

Bran shrugged, as though he'd expected as much. 'Can you walk?'

'Just about.'

'Humanity is an endangered species, Tom ... ?'

'Keighley,' Tom supplied.

'Tom Keighley, and any people found in the wild should be brought to safety, but only if it can be done so without serious risk to ourselves. As long as you can walk, we will take you with us, back to the Brook.'

'Brook?'

'Charles Brook, our settlement,' Bran explained. 'It's the only known settlement in weeks of walking, and the safest place you'll find in around here. The council will hear your story and find a place for you in the Brook.'

'And if I couldn't walk?'

'You can,' Bran said evenly, 'let's just leave it there.'

Tom thought to question Bran further, but the pain his head ramped up again, driving his thoughts away like cloud before a strong wind.

'Try and rest,' Bran said. 'We have finished exploring this place and we'll be setting out for the Brook in the morning.'

The morning smelled strongly of charred meat. Tom woke from a fitful sleep and sat up gingerly as the pain in his head and neck flared. It had died down considerably since the previous night but it was still unpleasant enough to make Tom consider stamping on his own toes to take his mind off of it.

Across the fire from Tom, Harret was holding a long skewer over the flames, which were burning more fiercely than they had been the night before. The skewer had four pieces of unidentifiable meat along its length. For all Tom knew, the meat could have been small parts of a large animal or the whole parts of smaller animals, but his stomach rumbled at the smell of the cooked meat regardless, and he decided not to question the meat's origin.

Harret looked across at Tom, a curiousness in his cold eyes, but he kept whatever he was thinking to himself, wordlessly sliding one of the nondescript lumps of meat from the skewer and tossing it to Tom, who caught it awkwardly on the third attempt, after a bout of involuntary juggling.

Tom bit into the meat, realising just how hungry he was as greasy liquid burst onto his tongue. All of a sudden he felt like he hadn't eaten for weeks. He heard Bran say, 'You might want to slow down; you don't want to get a rat bone lodged in your throat,' and he groaned, lowering the cooked rat. He gave Bran a pained look as he sat down beside Harret, taking a rat of his own from the skewer.

'I didn't need to know what it was,' he said. Bran looked confused, but Tom's stomach gave a rumble to remind him that it didn't care what the meat was, and he took another bite, though with less enthusiasm this time.

Holter, who had been sitting quietly on the low counter that Tom had decided had once been a reception desk, got to his feet and joined the others around the fire. He took a cooked rat from Harret, tucking into the unfortunate rodent with relish, and Harret set about the remaining rat as though it was the last meal he'd ever eat. Tom opened his mouth to ask for something to drink, but Bran, apparently reading his mind, pulled a water skin from his belt and tossed across the fire before Tom could utter a word. Tom tried not to think about the skin itself which, despite his lack of anatomical knowledge, looked suspiciously like an organ of some kind. They ate in silence for a short time that, to Tom, felt like much longer. Finally, he couldn't keep quiet any more.

'What is going on?' he blurted. 'What exactly are the returners? Where are we?' and then, after a moments thought, he added, 'What year is this?'

'It is 98AR,' Bran said helpfully. Tom stared at him blankly. "AR" means "After the Returning," he added.

'And when was The Returning?' Tom asked, exasperated.

Bran and Holter exchanged confused looks. 'Zero AR?' Holter suggested.

'No!' Tom snapped, 'when was The Returning in my time? My last memory was of going to work on a rainy Monday morning in February 2014. I don't know if I got hit by a car, or kidnapped, or abducted by aliens, but something happened to me and I ended up in the big test tube that you found me in. Did The Returning happen in 2014? Did these "returners" start popping into existence mere seconds after I was thrown into my tube, or was I in there for a thousand years before you found me?'

'We don't know the exact date,' Harret said, and Tom noticed a definite hint of anger in his voice. 'Old Jim claims to have memory of people referring to the date as "2028" when he was a child, which would place The Returning sometime in 2015 by your calendar, but his memories are vague and, to be honest, nobodies entirely certain how old he is.' When Tom opened his mouth to speak, Harret cut him off. 'Old Jim is a council member at the Brook. He is very old. Probably the oldest man alive.' Harret got to his feet quickly. 'Enough talk. It is full light out, and we have more than a days walk to do in less than a days time.'

Tom was left with little choice but to acquiesce. It was either that or stay in this strange, derelict building alone. He still clung to the slim hope that this was all some kind of vivid dream, but he didn't want to be left alone with the demons that had taken over the world in his absence, regardless of how real they were.

It took barely a minute for the three men to pack what needed to be packed and make ready to go. Holter had removed most of the thick leather armour he had been wearing, choosing instead to wear only the hard leather vest section, covering the rest of his body in a light, loose fitting cloth. Bran and Harret wore all of the protection that they had been wearing the previous night, but then, their leathers only covered their torsos, forearms and upper thighs, and Bran's leather was half as thick as his companions. Tom understood that they had quite a trek ahead of them, and if Holter had tried any serious walking in all of his armour, he would have lost half his weight in sweat before the first mile had passed.

When they left the ruined building, the air outside was already warming in the early morning sun, and it looked set to be a pleasant enough day. It took Tom a while to notice the weather, however, as he was too distracted by the scenery. All around him, as far as the eye could see, was ... nothing.

The building that they had camped in was little more than a box jutting out of the landscape, but the land around it was smooth, almost flat, and there were no other buildings in view. In that wild surrounding, the building could not have looked more out of place. Stranger still, Tom noticed there were no roads, fences, or signposts. The only suggestion that civilisation had once graced this area of land was the ugly cube behind them, and nature was claiming that, too. Weeds sprouted from it like mole hair, and moss and lichen had almost completely covered over the walls.

Tom was so busy staring at his surroundings that he didn't see the looping weed in his path. He crashed to the ground with a thud, and the pain in his head came back with vengeance.

'You okay?' Holter asked, pulling him up with one huge hand as easily as if he were made of paper.

'Yeah,' Tom muttered, 'caught my foot on something, that's all.'

'Be more careful,' Harret called back from a little way in front. A little way quickly became a big way; he had not so much as slowed, let alone stopped, when Tom fell, and showed little inclination to wait for him.

They had walked without rest for nearly three hours when Tom began to feel faint. As he stumbled to his knees, he considered the fact that this was the most exercise he had done in nearly a hundred years, and chuckled mirthlessly to himself as he was helped back to his feet. Harret was a long way

ahead by then, but Holter, presumably feeling sorry for Tom, had been hanging back so that he didn't become completely separated from the group. Bran seemed in two minds, and kept pace roughly halfway between Holter and Harret.

The first day passed with monotonous slowness as even the landscape seemed to conspire to stay as unchanging as possible. Tom had never needed to tell the time by looking at the position of the sun before, but he didn't need to be a boy scout to see that the daylight was slipping from the land around them. The sun was touching the horizon when they reached their destination; an old farm house that had all but collapsed. All that remained were thick stone walls, and even they were giving in to the elements.

As he neared the ruin, Tom realised that it was not only the elements that had taken its toll on the building, a lot of the destruction seemed to be man made, and was not actually destruction at all, but poor construction. Stone had been pulled from the upper parts of the ruined house and used to fill in the holes that would have previously had windows and doors in them. It wasn't the neatest of jobs, but it was solid enough to make climbing over the walls a better option than clearing the doorway of stone.

'Can you climb?' Bran asked as Tom reached the farm, nodding towards a section of wall where a number of stones had been knocked out in a staggered pattern. He could hear Harret moving quietly about on the other side of the wall. Doubt must have shown on Tom's face as he looked at the six foot high wall. 'I'll go up,' Bran said kindly. 'That way, if you need, I'll be there to pull, and and Holter can give you a good push.'

There was no need, as it turned out, though it was as much through determination as any physical ability. Tom was becoming increasingly conscious of his frailty, and he was beginning to wonder if Harret might really leave him behind if he became too weary to continue. That brought his thoughts back to the returners, and as curious as he was about their nature, he didn't want to find out about these "demons" by running into one alone. Oddly, despite the danger that the three men attached to these creatures, Tom never got the feeling that they were actually scared of them. The returners seemed to be more of a nuisance than a horror. He wondered if, during the night, he might be able to get one of his new friends to explain to him what the returners actually were. At the very least, what they looked like.

Unfortunately, that was not the case. Harret explained that silence was more important than ever out in the open, and that meant no talking, though Tom doubted that he would have been quite so stringent about silence if Tom hadn't been part of the group.

Harret was first to sleep as he had the last watch of the night, but the others would not speak even when their leader was deep in slumber. Tom decided not to push them. Worse still, they were forbidden from lighting a fire for fear the light would attract unwanted attention in the dark night. As the cold set in, and Tom's teeth began to chatter, he might have defiantly lit the fire himself if he'd had even the slightest clue how – without a match or lighter. Grimly, he pulled the scratchy wool blanket tightly about him and huddled into an almost foetal position on the old stone floor, hoping that sleep would come quickly.

Two

Tom was woken by the low popping of a small fire. It was almost full daylight now, so a fire wouldn't be the blazing beacon of light that it would have been in the dark. Harret, who'd had the last watch of the night, had started the fire and was heating up four small pots of some soup-like substance. Tom had a sensation of *deja vu*, despite the scenery and the meal being entirely different from the previous

morning. In any case, he resolved not to find out what was in the soup so as to avoid being put off of eating it, even though his stomach rumbled hungrily to assure him that his appetite would be just fine.

'Where is everybody?' Tom asked groggily, rubbing the stiffness from his neck and shoulders and pulling the blanket tightly around him.

'Bran and Holter are out hunting,' Harret said curtly, not looking up from the fire. 'We barely have enough food to see the three of us back to the Brook. We need to find more,' he said in barely concealed accusation.

Tom got to his feet, feeling as he did so that the stiffness from sleeping on the hard floor was not just restricted to his neck and shoulders. He relieved himself behind a crumbled wall that would once have separated the inner rooms of the house. I might be pissing in someone's kitchen, he thought with a smile, immediately wondering why the thought was in any way amusing.

To Tom's relief, Bran returned shortly after carrying two dead squirrels. Without so much as a "good morning" he sat down near the fire and began to skin his quarry in silence. It didn't matter to Tom; he was fine with the silence so long as he wasn't suffering it with only Harret's cold eyes and silent contempt for company. They ate their soup, which tasted more of herbs and potato than whatever meat had been mixed into it, and were soon rejoined by Holter.

Much like the previous morning, they set out almost immediately after breakfast and, much like the previous morning, Harret soon opened a gap between himself and Tom. It was more forced this time, however; Tom had been weaker yesterday and had struggled to keep up, but today he felt much better. His headaches were almost completely gone, and he was able to keep pace with Holter, though it cost him to do so. Harret still seemed determined to put the distance between them, though, and, it may have been his imagination, but Tom was sure Harret looked on the verge of breaking into a run on more than a few occasions.

They crossed relatively open terrain, though clusters of woodland that became more frequent, and a range of unimpressive mountains began to creep slowly across western horizon. Tom saw the remains of a drystone wall as they crested a long sloping hillock, The remnants of more farmland, he thought solemnly, surprising himself with the realisation that he was no longer thinking of his present reality as a dream. Bran, having apparently decided to leave Harret to his own sullen devices, had allowed Holter and Tom to catch up with him.

'You've made a friend there,' Bran said cheerfully, nodding towards Harret as he fell in with them.

'Did I do something specific? Or is he this pleasant with everyone he meets?' Tom asked.

'What people?' Bran laughed. 'You're the first person anyone from the Brook has met in a generation.'

'You haven't met any new people?' Tom asked doubtfully. 'Aren't there other places like Charles Brook?'

'The nearest settlement was a two week journey north. We used to trade regularly with them, but visits became less and less frequent, then they just stopped. The last visitor from Brandle was nearly thirty years ago, and the last three messengers we sent north never came back.'

'I supposed you could count newborn babies as "meeting" new people, but they never have anything very interesting to say and, in any case, I'm not sure I'd want to hear the stories they'd tell. No, there hasn't been any meeting of new people for a long time.'

'None that you know of,' Holter said, and the beginnings of a smirk crept across Bran's lips.

'What's so funny?' Tom asked.

'Kids tales,' Bran explained, and when Tom looked at him questioningly, he continued. 'The Brook is next to a small woodland that we call Brook Forest.' He smiled apologetically, 'Our grandparents weren't very creative with names. Anyway; ever since we were kids there were stories of something in the woods.'

'Something?' Tom asked, 'What something?'

Bran shrugged. 'Ghosts, returners; the stories change with the telling.'

'People,' Holter said insistently.

'And people,' Bran added without missing a beat. 'When we got older, those stories told of people hiding in the woods, outcasts from the first settlers that came to the Brook.' Bran shook his head, 'Personally, I just think people want to hear different things at different ages. When you're a child trapped inside high walls with a whole world outside, tales of ghosts and returners just beyond the gates are exciting, but when you get older, you'd rather just know you're not alone.'

'If there were people in the forest, wouldn't they want to come to the Brook?' Tom asked. 'If it's as dangerous out here as you all keep saying. Surely a forest wouldn't be much better?'

'They're angry at us,' Holter said with certainty.

'Angry? Why?' Tom asked, but Holter only shrugged non-committally, apparently reaching his limit for reluctant speech. Bran was more forthcoming, however.

'The stories tell of a time shortly after The Returning when our grandparents first came to the Brook. There were some disagreements between those first refugees and a number of them split away.

'Most stayed in the Brook, building the wall to keep the returners out, making strong homes of wood from the nearby forest. The rest went into the forest itself, living in the open and surviving by their wits. Our grandparents called them "lost settlers".'

'I still don't understand,' Tom said, 'if these returners are so fearsome, why would these refugees choose to live in the woods? Surely they would consider their lives more important than some disagreement.'

'Well, that part of the story at least is true. There was a small number of the original settlers who went off on their own. Nobody knew for certain where they had gone to, but our cutters would see them from time to time in the forest. They never spoke to our people, though, and refused any attempts to trade.

'The thing is, there's been no sighting of anyone in that forest who didn't come from the Brook, not since before my dad's time. Some people say they moved on. Some say they all died and returned or that their ghosts haunt the forest. Some even say that they still live there, and that the many years of hiding from returners has made them like shadows, hiding from the world.'

'What were they supposed to have fought over?' Tom asked.

'A woman,' said Holter.

'A woman,' echoed Bran with a harsh laugh. 'Ridiculous! Breeding is important, I grant you, and I firmly believe that everyone should get as much practice as they can, while they can, but what man would give up his life for a woman?'

'One with a heart,' muttered Holter in a quiet rumble that was clearly intended to be heard.

'A heart indeed. I have a heart,' Bran said, thumping his chest, 'and sleeping out in the open every night because some woman spurned me is a sure-fire way to ensure it stops beating on account of being eaten! Anyway,' he added, his tone flattening, 'they're just stories. Cutters and hunters go into those woods all the time. Sure, they come back with stories of strange noises and things going missing, but that's just because they grew up with these silly stories in their heads. No people have been seen for decades.'

'What happened?' Tom asked, his curiosity rising. 'With the woman and the refugees, I mean. Specifically.'

'Supposedly,' Bran said, though, to judge by his tone, Tom might as well have been asking how unicorns mated, 'a woman called Sarah Potter had come to the Brook with a man, Peter Evans. They had both lived in one of the big cities during The Returning, and somehow escaped together; there weren't many that did.'

'When they found the Brook, and the other refugees that had already begun to build homes here, Sarah started to fall for one of the other refugees – I think his name was James or John, or something – and, naturally, Peter wasn't too pleased about this. They fought, and the refugees all agreed that if the two men couldn't put their differences aside, one of them would have to leave.

'Peter made Sarah make the decision. He told that she must choose between the two men, and she, knowing that the one she didn't choose would be forced out of the Brook, refused. Peter left the Brook that night, and a small number joined him.'

'So you don't believe that story?' Tom asked. 'It doesn't sound all that far-fetched.'

'It's not,' Bran agreed. 'I believe that Peter, Sarah and James were real, I've heard more or less the same story from all the old folks. What I don't believe is that the descendants of Peter and the others who left for the forest are still there. They might be alive somewhere,' he conceded, 'but not right under our noses for seventy years!'

They walked on in a sullen silence for some time after that, and Tom began to wonder if the story of the lost settlers was some kind of sore point between Bran and Holter, but he didn't voice his thoughts for fear it would spark a real argument between them.

Movement caught Tom's eye.

'What's that?' he asked, pointing towards the indistinct, moving silhouette away to the east and between themselves and Harret. It was too far away for Tom to make out any detail.

Bran stared at the silhouette for a short moment, squinting, and eventually saying, 'It's nothing, just ignore it,' but there was edge to Bran's voice, and Tom was sure that his pace quickened from that moment.

Tom matched them stride for stride, but he was growing more weary with every step. He was surprised to notice that Harret had slowed down, too, and they were gaining on him much faster than they should have been despite their increased pace. They walked in a tense silence for a further hour, all the while gaining ground on Harret as the distant shape came closer. It wasn't merely heading towards where they had been standing, it had been altering its course as they passed, coming towards them in a wide arc. It was following them. It moved slowly, but by the time they drew level with where it had been when Tom had first spotted it, he was able to make out the shape more clearly. He could make out the trademark legs and arms of a bipedal creature, and felt his pulse quicken even further beyond that caused by his exertion. He was about to ask if it was a returner, when it resolved into something recognisable.

'It's a person!' Tom said, pointing at the lumbering figure excitedly, as though it was the first new person he'd seen in his entire life.

'No, it's not,' Bran said flatly.

The figure was close enough to make out detail, now, and Tom could see definite human features. Whoever it was wore a strange grey-green coloured outfit that covered most of his body, and walked in a staggering gait, as though one leg was shorter than the other. The sound of faint groaning reached Tom's ears on the light breeze.

'They're injured,' he said.

'No they're not,' Bran said insistently, 'just ignore it and keep walking.'

Holter nudged Tom, gently to move forward, but Tom felt anger rising. The approaching figure was clearly injured, and Tom wasn't about to leave him to suffer or die alone, whatever his companions thought.

'They're injured!' Tom repeated forcefully, pushing away from Holter. He started to move toward the shambling figure. Holter and Bran grabbed at his arms, trying to pull him back, but their grip was loose enough that Tom was able to wrest free and he quickened his pace towards the approaching figure.

Harret, who had started back to meet the group, reached the others. Tom didn't look back, but he heard Harret say, 'Let him see; he will understand better,' and with that, any attempts to hinder Tom ceased, though he could hear footsteps close behind.

The injured man – Tom had drawn close enough to make out definite masculine features now – was limping awkwardly down the shallow slope of the hillock. Tom clambered on, panting for breath, and began to notice more detail on the man. His face was contorted into a horrible snarling expression showing bared teeth below wild, clouded eyes. What he had taken to be filthy, odd-coloured clothes was, in fact, the man's skin, discoloured and dirty, and any doubt about the man's gender was dispelled when Tom realised that there wasn't a scrap of clothing on him. The deathly grey-green hue that Tom had seen on the man's face extended to the rest of his body; it looked so unnatural that Tom had taken it for some kind of suit!

Tom slowed his pace, and, for the first time, considered how strange it was that these three men, who were willing to take Tom with them to safety despite Harret's apparent reluctance and Tom's obvious frailty, would turn their back on another helpless man who, at the very least, could walk under his own power.

The man was closer now, his eyes wide and fixed on Tom, unblinking. From this distance, Tom saw that the man wasn't baring his teeth, as Tom had thought, but that the exposed teeth was actually the result of a lack of lips with which to cover them. Whether the skin had been ripped away, cut off, or had simply receded due to some strange ailment, Tom could not say; the man's face was partly destroyed and covered in old welts. It was hard to distinguish between corruption that might have been either wounds or decay.

Tom finally stopped.

The man continued to shamle towards him, his cloudy eyes fixed on Tom with terrible intensity. He tried to back away, but found that his legs had turned to lead beneath him. He was dimly aware of a drawn out metallic sound somewhere behind him but he could not turn his gaze away from the man ... no, the thing walking towards him.

Its smell reached Tom's nostrils and it smelled like death. A bone protruded from its left ankle, doubtless causing the awkward lopsided walk, and a large chunk of flesh was missing from its right arm, though the arm itself seemed unaffected by the injury. As it drew nearer, both arms rose, reaching out for Tom. It was hard to make out any expression on the destroyed face, but Tom got the unsettling feeling that it was annoyed, even frustrated that it could not make its corrupted body reach Tom any faster.

Its exposed teeth began to clack together, making a sound that no human body should make and, finally, Tom's survival instinct overcame his morbid curiosity and overpowering fear. He turned to flee

...

... but it was too late.

An ice cold hand clamped down on his shoulder like a vice. Tom thought he heard something crack as the grey fingers tightened, pulling him backwards. The force of the hand threatened to pull him off balance, but he fought to stay on his feet. He looked down the slope to Bran and Holter, but they were just standing there, watching Tom struggle, with sympathetic expressions on their faces!

'Help!' he croaked as the hand closed so tightly around his shoulder that the tips broke his skin.

Warm blood began to run down his chest from the puncture wounds and Tom's head began to throb, adding to the internal cacophony of pain. He grasped at the hand, but he may as well have been wrestling with a statue for all the good it did. The pain in his shoulder began to overwhelm him, and he felt consciousness slipping away.

Something flashed past his vision and he heard a metallic thud. While the grip on his shoulder remained as bone-crushingly tight as it had been, he found he could move. He dove forward, desperate

to get away from the creature, landing awkwardly and rolling down the slope. With every revolution the grip wrenched, sending fresh waves of pain through Tom's shoulder. After a few agonising spins, the arm pulled free and Tom screamed as flesh was ripped from his shoulder. He came to a stop at Bran's feet, holding his shoulder and gasping violently, trying to remain conscious as his vision blurred.

He looked up the slope and felt his stomach lurch as he saw the hand that had held him, complete with the associated arm, neatly severed below the shoulder joint. Strips of bloody flesh hung from the fingertips, and Tom could not bring himself to look at the damage that had been done to his shoulder.

He looked past the arm to its previous owner. The creature's attention was focused on Harret now. He was wielding a short, slightly curved sword with a serrated edge. Tom saw him kick the creature in the stomach, sending it tumbling backwards. It began to roll down the slope, just as Tom had done, unable to stop itself, but Harret was already chasing after it before the second turn. He leapt over the flailing thing and put a foot high on its chest to stop it from rolling any further.

Its expression had not changed through all its trauma, and it looked as mad and hungry as it had when it lunged for Tom. If it hurt from its severed arm, or felt disorientated from the tumble, it showed no signs. It swivelled its head to bite at Harret's foot, but he was wearing thick leather boots that the bites couldn't penetrate. Tom cringed as he heard the snap of old teeth breaking against the leather.

Ignoring the head, Harret raised his ugly blade and, grasping it tightly in both hands, swung at the creature's remaining arm. The arm fell away in one swing but the creature showed no awareness of it. Harret turned and brought his sword down again, this time requiring two swings as he removed the creature's left leg followed by the right, until the creature was only a writhing torso and snapping teeth. Harret removed his foot, turned, and raised his sword high above his head. He let out an almighty roar as he brought the blade down.

The head came free on the first attempt, rolling down the hillside. Tom watched it in horror. The limbs and torso had fallen limp and still when they had been separated from the body, but the head continued to chomp at thin air, its eyes locked on Harret, and then Tom, and then Bran, until it had rolled too far away to make out what it might have been staring at.

Harret walked calmly down the slope after the tumbling head. 'Bring him,' he said to Bran and Holter as he passed them. Tom was pulled gently to his feet, dazed and shaking. Clutching at his shoulder, he was helped down the slope. They reached Harret on a plateau halfway down the side of hill, his foot pressed firmly down on the still biting head. Harret looked at Tom disdainfully.

'You wanted to know what the Returners are? Here is your answer,' he pointed at the head with the tip of his sword. 'We are the Returners. Every one of us. Just as you will be one day,' Harret looked thoughtfully at the blood running down Tom's arm and added, 'perhaps sooner rather than later, if you don't toughen up.'

He took his foot off of the head and stepped back. The head continued to chomp at thin air, but it was unable to effect more than the smallest of movement with its flapping jaw. Harret raised the sword one more time, and without ceremony he brought it down on the head, cleaving a ravine in its cranium. The sword didn't make it all the way through the skull, but the biting stopped regardless. Harret had to place a foot on the returners head to pull his wedged blade free.

He took out a piece of cloth from somewhere in his belt, and then a small water skin. He poured some of the contents of the skin onto the rag and began to wipe the blade of his sword, Tom picked up a strong scent of alcohol in the air as he did so. When Harret was done, he used the rag to pick up the cleaved head and began walking back up towards the rest of the creature's body.

'His wound will need cleansing,' he said without turning, 'we wouldn't want the Brook's first visitor in thirty years to return before his time.'

Three

“Cleansing” Tom's wound turned out to involve dousing it with more of the alcoholic liquid that Harret had used to clean his sword, then covering it in a poultice that, soothing as it was, did little to relieve the sting of the initial cleansing.

'If the wound is left to fester,' Bran was saying as he pulled Tom's scratchy woollen top back over his shoulder, 'it will almost certainly kill you. And if you die ...' he nodded towards where the remains of the returner lay, and let the image finish the sentiment. Harret had piled the body parts up, and was now placing kindling around them.

'Why? Does getting killed by a returner make you into one? Is it an infection?'

Bran laughed, 'No no no. Dying turns you into one. That's what Harret meant when he said we're all returners. When we die; we return. The way death comes makes no difference. An infected wound is as good a killer as a blade to the throat if left untreated; it just takes longer to do the job. Although the infection from a returner bite can kill you in under a day if not treated. But it can be treated.'

They sat in silence for a moment, watching Holter and Harret tend to the makeshift pyre. Holter had laid stones out around the body to stop the fire spreading to the grass, though it was damp and unlikely to ignite, and Harret was now trying to set alight what little kindling he'd scraped up from a small cluster of trees a short way off.

'This isn't real,' Tom said suddenly, hugging his knees so tightly they were in danger of bruising. 'This is the sort of thing that happens in movies!'

'If it isn't real, you have a damn good imagination,' Bran said, patting himself down theatrically, as if to make certain he was really there.

'There were stories about them in my time,' Tom said with a slightly manic smile, the shock of what had happened, and the pain in his shoulder completely driving away any remaining hope of this all being a strange nightmare. 'The returners, I mean. We called them “zombies”.'

'People call them that, sometimes,' Bran said, nodding slowly, 'it's an old name. Jim still uses it from time to time. What stories, though? Entertainment is scant in the Brook, you would be a popular man if you brought new stories to tell.'

Tom looked confused for a moment, as though he hadn't heard his own part of the conversation, then he shook his head slowly. 'No, not the kind of stories you tell at bedtime or around a fire; movies, video games even. There were books, too, I guess. I never read zombie novels much, though.' Bran looked blankly at Tom, and realisation dawned. 'You don't have movies or video games, I suppose.'

Bran shrugged. 'We might, what is a “movie”?'

Tom waved a hand vaguely, and winced as red hot sparks of pain shot through his shoulders and neck. 'It's, you know, acting. People pretending to be someone or something they're not to tell a story.'

'Oh, you mean shows? We have those. There is a small group of showmen in the Brook, they put on shows in Brook Square often.'

'Yes,' Tom said, 'like a show, but on a television or cinema screen.' Bran nodded slowly again, as though he understood what Tom was saying but found it hard to imagine regardless.

'Are you feeling okay?' Bran asked after a moment. Tom nodded, and Bran moved to help him to his feet. The image of the returner's nightmarish face flashed across Tom's mind, and he retched.

Confident that the fire would not spread or burn out before the body was sufficiently consumed, Harret and Holter rejoined Bran and Tom, who had just finished regurgitating his breakfast.

'Done?' Harret asked brusquely, as though Tom hadn't just been vomiting. Bran nodded. 'Then we need to get going. We've lost an hour to this ordeal, and if we don't find shelter before nightfall, we're as likely to lose our lives to the next.'

It was plain from Harret's tone that he blamed Tom as much as he blamed the returner, if not more, but Tom didn't say anything; it was his fault, after all. Instead, he struggled to his feet, marvelling at how an injury on his shoulder could hurt so much from the act of standing up.

'There are doctors in the Brook,' Bran said sympathetically, seeing the grimace on Tom's face, 'they'll do a better job than I did.' He gestured to Tom's shoulder. 'This is temporary; to make sure the doctors can fix you when we get there.'

Tom tried not to dwell on the implication that he needed fixing and instead asked, 'How far is Charles Brook?'

'Three days,' Bran said, 'maybe two, if the weather holds and we make good time.'

Tom looked back at the burning pyre. Fiery tendrils were licking across the haphazard pile of body parts inside the circle of stones. As if to spur him on, his shoulder gave a burst of intense pain that seemed to spread down his back as far as his hips.

Tom steeled himself, and quickened his pace.

It took two and a half days to reach Charles Brook.

Tom had felt on the verge of passing out on a number of occasions, but his determination to reach safety and some kind of medical help as quickly as possible – and preferably while still fixable – drove him onward.

Tom first caught sight of the village in the soft light of that time of day where afternoon becomes evening. They crested a particularly high hill amidst the sea of rolling turf, and the woodlands that Bran and Holter had spoken of came into view. They had said that Brook Forest was small, but, even from this high and distant vantage point Tom could not see the far borders. In any case, his attention was not on the trees, but the area before them.

At the bottom of the hillock, the land flattened for roughly a quarter of a mile, all of it dotted with the stumps of long since felled trees. A large stream, or a small river – Tom was no geographer – ran from the west, past the woods and away to the north and east, and directly next to that stream, so close to the forest boundaries that branches overhung the walls, was Charles Brook.

The walls themselves were around eight feet high and made of roughly cut wood, each one driven into ground so closely against its neighbour that no gap remained. They were bound at the top by thick rope and supported by struts at regular intervals around the circumference. Inside the wall, Tom saw the rooftops of dozens of tightly packed buildings, most of a similar height, reaching a short way above the wall, but a few stood much taller than the rest. They all had a distinctly "makeshift" quality to them, as though they had evolved rather than been designed and built. Four structures that Tom supposed were watchtowers were spaced evenly around the edge, part of the wall itself.

Tom found his eyes drawn to movement outside the walls, and was surprised to see small patches of farmland being tended to.

'Is that safe?' he asked Bran, pointing at the distant figures of two people tilling a small patch of vegetables.

'It's not ideal,' Bran admitted, 'but we'd be chopping down trees for the rest of our lives to build a wall around all the land we need, and only if there were enough trees in Brook Forest! Nobody tends to the crops alone,' he added, pointing at three figures standing a short distance from the farmers. They were too far away for Tom to make out any real detail, but he could see that they were wearing the same style leather armour as Harret and Bran.

'What about them?' Tom asked, pointing at a cluster of penned cows, sheep and pigs. 'Presumably, you don't bring them in at night.'

'No, that we don't,' Bran chuckled. 'The fences are just to keep the animals from wandering away. Returners don't seem interested in livestock.'

'What about poachers? Don't people try and steal your animals?'

'What people?' Bran said.

They crossed the distance to the Brook in minutes, and soon they were standing before the high wooden wall. It was only taller than Tom by a couple of feet, but it seemed imposing nonetheless. Harret, who was now walking with the group, led them to a door underneath the northernmost watch tower which turned out to be thick, wooden, and surprisingly small, almost as small as the average interior door. Holter had to duck his head slightly to get through, nodding at the guard on the other side as he passed.

'I was expecting huge wooden doors covered with intricate carvings,' Tom said as they walked through, 'or a section of the wall to split open or something. That tiny door is a bit of anti-climax.'

To Tom's surprise, Harret was the one who responded. Even more surprising was the lightness of his tone and the softness in his face. 'Big doors would be risky; if the returners ever attacked the Brook in great numbers and the door was breached, they could flood inside and cause real problems. If these smaller doors fall, we can deal with the returners one at a time and block the entrance.' Harret's voice wasn't exactly friendly, but there had been real contempt out in the wild whereas now there was merely curtness. 'The eastern gate would probably be more to your satisfaction, but we only use it when we need to get something in or out of the Brook that we can't fit through the other gates.' Harret turned to Bran. 'Can you take him to the council?' he asked, gesturing to Tom, 'I have –' but Bran spoke before Harret could finish his sentence.

'I know what you have,' he said with a smile that seemed forced. 'Go. No doubt she will have been worrying herself silly this past week.'

And with that, Harret smiled an uncomfortable smile, and left, walking at first, but breaking into a run as he disappeared into the maze of small wooden houses. Holter nodded a silent farewell and left also, leaving Bran and Tom alone at the entrance. Tom took in the sight before him while Bran exchanged pleasantries and news with the guard on the gate.

The houses within were also made of thick, roughly cut planks. Many had windows that were so high up that Tom would need to stand on his tip-toes to peer over the ledge. Only a few had glass panes in them, though, and all had wooden shutters. They were so narrow that anyone looking out would be in danger of getting their head stuck.

Tom found himself wondering how cramped living conditions must be for the Brook's people. As tall as the houses were, there was certainly not enough height for more than one floor inside, and the area taken up by each might have allowed for two small rooms. Outside, the houses pressed so close together in places that an average-sized person would have to turn sideways to get through. People were moving through the claustrophobic gaps, though; people were everywhere!

Carrying buckets of water or sacks full of something or other, people moved through the Brook purposefully. Children ran in and out of the many tiny alleyways and through the Brook's equivalent of streets, laughing and shouting to each other, and no one gave Bran and Tom a single glance, let alone a second.

'Is it all like this?' Tom asked Bran.

'Like what? Oh, no,' he added, following Tom's gaze to the nearest house. 'Most of the homes are at this side of the Brook, that's why it's so crowded here, but we only go to our homes to sleep and eat, so we don't need much space. Brook Square is at the centre of the village, that's where shows are put on and village meetings are held,' he pointed off to the right of where they stood, 'the training ground is near the wall in that direction,' he pointed straight ahead and, with a smile, said, 'and the pub is that way. I imagine you'll be staying there tonight.'

'Training ground?' Tom asked, still staring off to the western edge of the Brook.

'Yeah. Anyone who even thinks about stepping outside the wall needs to know how to defend themselves against the returners, but everyone is given some training, whatever their role is to be.'

Tom wondered why anyone would choose a role that led them into a world full of those things. But he looked at the wall again. From here, it seemed endless, but he'd seen the whole of the Brook from the hill, and he tried to imagine living a whole life inside it. How small might it start to seem after even a year?

Bran started walking, and Tom fell in behind him, staring around in fascination. His gaze fell on the small street that Harret had disappeared down, and he asked, 'Was Harret going to see his wife? He seemed a sight more friendly before he left. And don't you have someone to run to?'

Bran laughed mirthlessly. 'Harret isn't running to any wife. Not yet, at least. He and Elissa are betrothed for coupling, but the ceremony will not be until her twenty-first birthday. Still,' he added, 'that doesn't mean they can't enjoy each other's company in the meantime. I suspect Harret's sudden amiability was because his thoughts were elsewhere.'

Was there a hint of bitterness in Bran's voice 'I wouldn't have called his manner "amiable",' Tom said, 'and you didn't answer my question.'

'Well spotted, I thought your brain might still be a bit fuzzy. I have no partner. Why shackle myself to one person when there are dozens willing to show me the benefits of a coupling without the bondage that accompanies it?'

'Coupling? Is that, like, marriage?'

'Marriage, yes,' Bran said, as though remembering something he'd learnt in school, and then promptly forgotten. 'Yes, that's what my grandparents called it, another word Old Jim sometimes uses. He's full of strange old words. You two should get along. Jim will be thrilled to meet someone older than him!'

'Okay,' Tom said uncertainly, 'what now?'

'Now,' Bran said, clapping his hands together and rubbing them briskly, 'we go see the council.'

Brook Square was a sight to behold. After five days of walking through the deserted countryside with three uncommunicative strangers for company, Tom felt almost overwhelmed at the sight of so many people in one place. He tried to remind himself that, from his point of view, he'd lived in a bustling city full of people barely six days ago! But it didn't help.

The square looked roughly twenty feet across, which seemed quite small to Tom but Bran insisted that it could hold every person in the Brook, and the raised platform that was set up at the far side of the square that, Tom guessed, was the stage for the shows that Bran had mentioned. Presently, however, the square was full of children. They clustered in small groups on the packed earth floor, playing elaborate games with sticks and stones and patterns gouged into the dirt. Though Tom hadn't been

paying too much attention to the Brook's residents, it seemed to him that an overly large proportion of the village population were children.

The square was fronted on all sides by amenities. There was a small number of stalls selling various luxuries, but none selling essentials, like basic food or clothing. Bran explained that the whole village pooled the essential resources together to make sure everybody had the necessities. Nobody would be short of bread, grain, clothing, or firewood, but if a person wanted a nice cotton blouse or a can of tinned soup from before the world ended, they would have to haggle. The food dispensary, armourers and blacksmiths looked in on the square from three sides, while the platform stretched across the whole of the fourth. The stalls selling luxury items were randomly placed around the edges. Behind the stage was Brook Hall, though it looked no grander than any of the other buildings around. It was bigger, but it was constructed in the same fashion as all the houses they had passed.

Tom followed Bran across the square, trying to avoid stepping on children as he did. Two girls, no older than ten by the look of them, ran between Tom and Bran, catching Tom's leg as they went. Tom stumbled and crashed to ground with an agonising thump. To his dismay, the pain that he'd been too distracted to think about since they'd first caught sight of the Brook came rushing back to greet him like an old but unwanted friend. He pushed himself to his feet, helped by Bran, and tried to block out the almost overwhelming pain in his shoulder and neck.

'How about we see a doctor first?' Tom said through gritted teeth.

'The doctor you want to see will be in Brook Hall with the rest of the council,' Bran assured him, bracing Tom's good arm across his shoulder to help him walk.

As they crossed the square, Tom became increasingly aware that people were staring at him. At first, he'd thought it no more than children staring at the strange man who had just collapsed in a heap in front of them, but he soon realised that the children weren't the only ones that were watching. In the small spaces between the surrounding buildings, people were crowding out into the square, and their sole reason for being there seemed to be to stare unashamedly at Tom.

'Word's gotten around that there's a stranger in the Brook,' Bran said, as if reading Tom's thoughts. 'They're just curious. Don't worry about them.'

Bran led Tom out of the square and around Brook Hall to a small door and pushed it open. Immediately inside the door was a short and steep flight of stairs up to a raised floor that was roughly two feet above the ground. Tom had thought the windows were surely too high for anyone inside to look out of, but now he saw that, from the inside, they would be about the right level for a man of average height when standing inside on the raised floor.

'Is everything in the Brook built like this?' Tom asked.

'Most are, the climb into the building gives whoever is inside a significant advantage if a returner were to try and pop round for tea. When the original settlers built their homes here, there was no wall to protect them, so a lot of the older buildings are made like this.'

The interior of Brook Hall was one large open space illuminated by oil lamps around the walls, though they provided scant light when compared to the daylight outside. An agitated flapping noise from the gloom above suggested some kind of winged animal, but, whatever it was, it was out of sight. The council sat behind a long table with the far wall at their backs, facing the entrance. Tom almost felt intimidated with the eyes of the council on him, but he was too tired and in too much pain to feel the appropriate amount of discomfort.

The council consisted of five people, three women and two men, and Tom was surprised to see that one of the women was not actually a woman, but a girl, she could not have been older than thirteen. She looked at Tom almost shyly, half hidden under wavy strands of mousy-brown hair. Tom thought to ask Bran about the child, but decided against it; there would be time for questions later.

Whatever her role, the girl was almost unhealthily thin, and pulled at her fingers nervously as Tom and Bran approached the council. She sat in the leftmost seat. Next to her was a man that Tom reasoned must be the fabled Old Jim that he had heard so much about. Bran had said that he was the oldest person in the village by nearly two decades, and Tom couldn't imagine anyone being twenty years older than this man. His back was curved with age, his hair all but gone. His skin hung loosely, looking like old paper and marred by liver spots. He looked closer to 120, rather than the ninety years Bran had spoken of.

His focus, however, did not seem so withered.

Though they were clouded with age, the old man's eyes watched Tom keenly, giving him the impression that they were looking right through his exterior to the scared, gooey interior.

In the middle of the council sat a stern looking middle-aged woman, slim and angular. She had the appearance of someone who might have been quite attractive if she hadn't put so much effort into looking unattractive. Her greying hair was tied into a bun of such severity that it seemed in danger of tearing away from her scalp at the hairline, and Tom found himself wondering how exhausting it must be to constantly press your lips together as tightly as she was doing. She watched Tom approach with sharp, violet eyes and an expression of distaste on her face, though Tom did get the feeling that the distaste was not directed at him specifically, but rather a general distaste that was unbiased and freely available to all.

The other two council members looked closer to Tom's age. The man to the right of centre was short but muscular. He had bright blue eyes below cropped blonde hair, and a vaguely disinterested look on a face that was handsome in a generic way. The woman in the right-most seat bore a striking resemblance to the severe looking woman in the centre, though her appearance was much warmer. Where the other woman's face was angular and her lips tight and thin, this woman had a bit more flesh to her, and allowed her full lips the freedom that they deserved. She had the same dirty blonde hair, though there was no grey in hers, and it was tied neatly into a ponytail that didn't look as though it needed industrial machinery to achieve. The same violet eyes stared out at Tom from her attractive face, though they seemed kinder and full of curiosity.

'Why do I feel like I'm on trial?' Tom said out of the side of his mouth, but Bran wasn't listening, he was staring at the woman on the right with a look bordering on incredulity.

'You are not on trial,' said the severe woman in the middle, 'but you are the first outsider the Brook has seen since Jim here was a young man. This situation needs ... careful handling.'

Old Jim gave out a wheezy cackle. 'Young man indeed,' he said to the woman, 'I was older than you are now.'

'Younger man, then,' she corrected, keeping her eyes fixed on Tom. 'I am First Council Jennifer Holmes,' she said, and then, indicating the young girl beside Jim, continued, 'Apprentice Coke Zero, Wisdom James Knowles,' she turned to her left, 'Council Steve Gilbert, and finally, Doctor Elissa Holmes.'

Tom looked on bewildered. He was not sure what he had expected, if indeed he had set any expectations, but he certainly wasn't prepared. 'My, my name is Tom Keighley,' he said eventually.

'Sorry to interrupt,' Bran lied, addressing the council as a whole but keeping his eyes on Elissa, 'what happened to Grook?'

'Grook, unfortunately, returned,' Jennifer said solemnly, 'two days ago in his sleep.'

'What?' Bran asked, shocked. 'How? He was no older than you, Jennifer, and as fit as any of us.'

'He was experimenting with different combinations of herbs and chemicals in an attempt to find the healing properties of local fauna,' Jennifer said.

'And?' Bran asked.

'He didn't find any,' Elissa answered, not entirely unkindly. 'It killed him. I have been asked to fill his place on the council,' and then, rather defensively, she added, 'I was only a month from completing my apprenticeship, Bran, I'm practically a doctor in my own right!'

'I never said you weren't,' Bran said wearily, as though this was a subject they had covered many times. 'Harret is looking for you,' Bran said, eager to change the subject, but any reply Elissa might have given was cut off.

'As heart warming as that is, I rather think matters of council take precedent over a young man's yearning heart,' Jennifer said, and, glancing at her sister reprovngly, added 'or any other body parts that might be yearning, for that matter.' She turned back to Tom before Elissa could speak. 'Word of you, a stranger, reached us less than half an hour ago, and yet it has caused quite a stir in the Brook as you have no doubt witnessed.'

'Half an hour ago?' Tom gasped, 'we've only been here ten minutes.'

'We send regular patrols into the surrounding lands,' the first council explained, 'that way, we don't get caught unaware by any stray returners. We don't know your story, however. That will be a matter of some importance, under the circumstances.'

'I'm afraid that there isn't much of a story to tell,' Tom said fighting a sudden rush of nausea.

Jennifer leaned forward. 'Well then, tell us what story there is.'

Four

Bran told the tale of how they had found Tom, and he did it considerably better than Tom felt he would have done.

He told of the strange building in the middle of nowhere and how it was mostly empty save for a few furnished rooms. He told of how one of those rooms had been home to some strange old technology in the shape of four large glass tubes, and how one of those tubes had contained Tom.

Nervously, Tom told his part of the story; how he had no memory of said glass tube or the strange building, and how his last memory was of walking to a job he didn't remember nearly a hundred years ago.

The council listened with interest. All the while, Tom felt the cloudy eyes of Old Jim on him. He spoke of traffic and work and city people. It didn't take long to tell all, though. He couldn't have gone into much more detail, though the council seemed eager to hear all, right down to what Tom had eaten for breakfast that day. He probably wouldn't have remembered that, even with an intact memory. When he and Bran had finished, the first council stared at them for a long moment.

'Very well,' she said at last, 'it is getting late, and your wounds need looking at. Presumably, you have no intention of leaving us just yet?'

'Where would I go?' Tom asked hopelessly.

Jennifer nodded. 'We will arrange somewhere for you to stay for the time being. Tomorrow, when you are rested, we will talk more. Now,' she added briskly, getting to her feet, 'if you will follow me, Tom, we shall introduce you to the Brook, and then Elissa can tend to your wounds while Bran arranges your bed for the night.'

Bran coughed. 'It might be better if another doctor were to look after Tom.'

'Why?' Jennifer asked, raising her eyebrow. 'Elissa is a perfectly capable doctor, and the injury you spoke of did not sound overly complicated.'

Bran looked uncomfortable as he spoke. 'Harret and Tom are not ... on good terms,' he said slowly. 'You know Harret is the jealous type, he may not take kindly to—'

'I do not care what Harret Gulliver takes kindly to,' Jennifer said with a slight trill to her voice. 'If he and Elissa are to be coupled he will have to get used to the idea that she is going to be spending time in the vicinity of men that are not him! Unless he plans to personally prevent every man in the village from getting injured or sick, that is. She is a doctor, Bran, it is what she does.'

Bran remained silent, admitting defeat, but Tom knew why Bran was uneasy. 'I think he means me,' Tom said, and added, 'specifically. Harret and I haven't exactly bonded.'

'That may be, but he isn't the one treating you. Elissa can make up her own mind.'

Elissa had stayed silent through this exchange, but her violet eyes had remained on Tom, occasionally glancing at his injured shoulder and giving Tom the uneasy feeling that he was being sized up like a car enthusiast might look at a vintage engine block.

Jennifer got to her feet emphatically, a gesture that, in a different situation, might have involved slamming closed the cover of a heavy book. Probably on a lectern. She led the council out through a door opposite the one Tom had entered through. Ushered on by Bran, Tom followed. The door led directly out onto the platform that Tom had seen from Brook Square, though from here it felt disconcertingly stage-like. When he had passed through the square it had been full of playing children and the occasional bustling adult, but now there were many adults – at least as many as children – all waiting patiently. Waiting for him, he realised with a sinking feeling. Tom turned to Bran for moral support, only to find he had not joined them on the stage.

'I won't pretend you don't all already know that there is a stranger in our midst,' Jennifer said to the assembled crowd, gesturing for Tom to join her. 'This is Tom Keighley.'

A mishmash of greetings and applause rose from the square, deepening the crimson that had spread across Tom's embarrassed face, but Jennifer soon held up her hands to quiet the crowd.

'However, Tom is injured and weary, and it is growing late,' she said to a chorus of disappointed groans. A male voice called out above the disgruntled background noise. 'Why did you bring him out to us now, if not to hear his story?'

First Council Jennifer fixed the owner of the voice with a fearsome glare, and Tom saw the man – a huge muscle-bound individual with a wood cutters axe over one shoulder – visibly deflate under her gaze.

'I brought him out, Paulson Tormay, because the press of ears against Brook Hall's doors threatened to break them from their hinges! And I doubt the Galleon's would fair any better if I hadn't at least introduced our guest before curfew.'

Jennifer went back to addressing the rest of the crowd, much to Paulson Tormay's relief, and Tom allowed his eyes to sweep across the square. Most of the people were staring at Jennifer now, which made Tom feel a little less self-conscious, though more than he'd like were still gazing at him with a strange fascination on their faces.

One face stood out, though.

Tom saw Harret's angry expression and it took him a moment to realise that the look was not being directed at him. From near the back of the crowd, in the shadow of the eaves, Harret gazed balefully at Jennifer. Tom might have felt sorry for the First Council, but from what little he had seen of her, he guessed that Harret would need the sympathy more than she would.

Jennifer explained to the crowd that Tom would be staying at Galleon's for the night, and reminded them all that it was not big enough for the entire Brook to fit inside, and, to that end, the pub would be closed for the night, which brought on another chorus of mutterings and groans.

'There will be time for questions and celebrations tomorrow,' she said finally. And then, with a "shooing" motion that reminded Tom very much of his own mother, she told them all to "clear off".

Tom grasped feebly at the fleeting memory of his mother but as the crowd reluctantly dispersed like every other glimpse of his previous life he'd had since waking, it fled before he could get a hold on it. 'I'm sure you all have something you should be doing,' Jennifer said to the muttering crowd.

'You'd better come with me,' Elissa said, placing a hand gently on Tom's good shoulder which caused him to start, which, in turn, caused the pain in his bad shoulder to ignite. Elissa saw his grimace and said, 'Don't worry, I can give you something for the pain, but I need to see the wound. I'm sure Bran did a good job at cleansing it, but field cleansing is a horrible thing for the skin. I imagine you'll be carrying a scar for the rest of your life.'

Tom shrugged lopsidedly. With everything that had happened, he had not given any thought to potentially lasting scars. His mind flitted back to crimson strands of his own flesh hanging from the fingertips of the returner's severed arm and he shuddered. Scarred or not, Tom was glad he still had a shoulder to heal.

'Elissa!' snapped a harsh voice from somewhere below them. It belonged to Harret. 'You joined the council?'

Elissa sagged slightly, like a tired parent dealing with her errant child for the hundredth time. She looked about to respond when Jennifer stepped forward.

'What business is it of yours, Harret Gulliver?' she asked haughtily.

'Elissa is my betrothed,' Harret shot back. 'It is you who is meddling in my business, Jennifer, don't forget that.'

Jennifer smiled mirthlessly. 'You're making assumptions, raider. Did you consider the possibility that Elissa asked to take her master's place on the council?'

Harret seemed confused for a moment, then his eyes fell on Elissa, who returned an ambiguous expression somewhere between defiance and guilt.

'Is that true?' Harret asked her.

'Yes,' she said quietly, though the look in her eyes was anything but meek.

Harret gaped at her. For a brief moment, he looked as though he was about to say something, but he swallowed whatever had been on the tip of his tongue, turned, and stormed off. The square had mostly emptied by now, and the few stragglers who had stuck around to watch the impromptu show all suddenly remembered that they had some other place to be rather urgently.

'Are you all right?' Tom asked Elissa.

'I'm fine,' Elissa snapped, and in that moment, Tom could see something of First Council Jennifer in Elissa's warm face, but she softened quickly. 'Come,' she said, 'I need to get you to the infirmary.'

'Bran's informing Galleon of the situation,' Jennifer called after Tom as they left the stage. 'He will join you at the infirmary when he is done.'

Elissa didn't speak as she led Tom down the stairs at the side of the stage and through one of the multitude of claustrophobic alleyways that made up what Tom had mentally dubbed the town centre. They didn't have far to walk, however, as the infirmary was only two streets away from Brook Hall. It was of the same size as the homes that Tom had passed on the way to t Brook Square, with the one distinguishing feature being a sign baring a red cross on a white background above the door. Tom realised on the second glance that the cross was actually a metal plate showing St. Georges flag; the national flag of England.

'What do you call this place?' he asked, suddenly curious about his surroundings.

Elissa looked at him with genuine concern, as though she feared he might have seriously hurt his head. 'Charles Brook,' she said cautiously.

'No,' Tom said, waving his arms in a gesture meant to encompass all of the lands around him. It had occurred to him that, as he had no memory of how he came to be in the glass tube, he had no way of being certain he was still in England. It seemed unlikely that he would have been shipped away to another country, but "likely" was relative, and, right now, anything was possible. Elissa erased any doubt, though.

'Oh,' she said, comprehending his wild flailing arms, 'the land? It used to be called ... Britain,' she said, enunciating the syllables as though it was of some strange foreign tongue.

'What do you call it now?' Tom asked.

Elissa thought for a moment, then shrugged. 'Britain?' she suggested. When Tom looked at her quizzically, she added, 'Most of us never go more than a mile from the Brook. Only raiders like Harret and Bran ever go far, and, even for them, a journey lasting more than a week is rare,' she looked meaningfully at Tom; the raiding party that had found him was on one of these "rare" expeditions. He didn't want to think about what might have happened if they hadn't found him. Would he have woken up alone, or would he have stayed in that tube forever? 'We don't really need a name for the lands beyond our own, because we never leave them,' she finished.

Elissa unlocked the door and pushed it open, disappearing inside. Night was fast approaching now, and the sky had already begun to show the first twinkling stars. Tom guessed that the narrow window holes wouldn't allow much light through in full daylight, let alone in dusk. And, as Tom had expected, the infirmary was practically black inside. Elissa hurried around the room, lighting oil lamps that were placed evenly along the walls. Soon the interior was bathed in a warm orange glow. She gestured to a hard wooden table.

'Sit.'

Tom sat, looking uncertainly around the room. The orange glow of the lamps would be fine under normal circumstances, but it wouldn't be much use for delicate work. Like tending to a wound, for example.

'Don't worry,' she said, apparently sensing his uncertainty, 'I've fixed worse wounds than yours. In worse conditions, too.'

'You haven't seen the wound, yet,' Tom pointed out.

'True,' Elissa conceded, 'but it can't be much worse than Bran made it sound. He was going to be a doctor, you know?'

Tom tried to mentally fit what he knew of Bran into his idea of a doctor. When it didn't, he asked, 'Why didn't he?'

Elissa shrugged, 'I guess he didn't want to be cramped up in the Brook all his life. As doctors, we rarely have to go far from the wall to treat people. This will probably hurt,' she added, pressing down on different parts of his shoulder with her fingertips.

'Maybe I have a high pain threshold.'

'Do you?'

Tom remained silent for a moment, his lips turning white as Elissa continued to inspect his shoulder. Eventually he said, 'You mentioned something about painkillers?'

Elissa laughed. 'In a moment, I need to see your wound first. Shirt off, please.'

Tom thought about arguing that the scratchy woollen affair that covered his torso could hardly be called a shirt, but decided instead that now was not the time to be pedantic. He removed the shirt, feeling thankful that it briefly covered his face, preventing Elissa from seeing what must surely have been the most unattractively pained expression in the history of man, an expression that didn't improve as Elissa removed the poultice and whistled like a plumber quoting a particularly expensive pipe.

'There's definitely going to be scarring,' she said. 'A lot of skin has been torn away.'

Tom turned his head gingerly, his eyes closed. He opened one eye tentatively to view the mess that was his shoulder for the first time ... and found that it wasn't nearly as bad as his imagination had led him to believe. There were four gouges where the returner's fingers had ripped at his flesh. Presumably, there would be a fifth on the back of his shoulder from the thumb, but his sore neck would not rotate enough to see without a certain amount of agony. The gouges were quite deep, but he had pictured a palm sized chunk of flesh missing from his shoulder, possibly exposing bone in the process.

Elissa rummaged around in a cupboard, returning with a small discoloured bottle, a leather pouch, and a large piece of thin white cloth. She poured some of the liquid from the bottle onto the wound, and Tom gritted his teeth against the sudden pain. Gently, she upended the pouch over Tom's shoulder, sprinkling some kind of herb over the it. Tom winced in expectation of a renewed rush of pain, but none came. Perhaps to live up to expectations, Elissa applied some more of the alcoholic-smelling liquid to his shoulder, and the pain returned.

'Gah!' he said, flinching backwards.

'Don't be such a baby,' Elissa said, pulling his shoulder back and continuing. When she had bathed all of the exposed skin, she sprinkled some more of the herbs across his raw flesh. Apparently content with her work, she began to pull the white cloth tightly across his shoulder, wrapping it under his arm and tying it off.

'That will need changing in the morning,' she said, stepping back with the kind of expression an artist might have after completing a particularly arty piece. 'Come by here when you get chance and I'll put a clean one on.'

'Thank you,' Tom said. Something seemed to be on Elissa's mind, and when she said nothing, he asked, 'Is something wrong?'

'What? No,' Elissa said, shaking her head as though only just realising she'd been staring, and then, 'well ... What was it like? Before The Returning, I mean,' she looked at him hungrily.

'I, uh, it was ... fine,' he finished lamely. He didn't know what to say. He wasn't even sure that this woman, having lived her entire life in this tiny walled off village in the middle of nowhere, would even understand anything he might say about his previous life. Would she understand about traffic or the internet? Even if she could, where would he start?

Elissa looked ready to press him further when he was saved by the entrance of Bran, who arrived loudly, making them both jump.

'Well,' he said briskly, 'that's put a smile on old Galleon's face.' He gave Tom a sympathetic look, 'He'll chew your ear off all night if you let him.'

He looked at Elissa, and she returned his gaze blankly for a second. Then, as if suddenly hearing an unspoken question, said, 'Oh, yes, I'm done. Make sure he comes to see me in the morning to get that dressing changed.' The last part of her sentence was muffled due to her head being inside a cupboard.

Bran nodded almost curtly. 'Come,' he said, turning to Tom with a grin, 'your abode awaits.'

'Wait,' Tom said, 'what about the painkillers?'

Elissa waved a hand vaguely, her head still in the cupboard, 'In the time it'd take me to make something up, you could be at Galleon's, and, trust me, his medicine works just as well as mine.'

'That it does,' Bran assured Tom, and pulled him gently out of the infirmary.

'Did humanity forget how to make street lights in the last hundred years?' Tom asked in a disgruntled tone, massaging his wounded shoulder. It was throbbing terribly after the second time he'd caught it on the corner of a building, hidden by the dark.

Bran laughed. 'We don't want to wake up to a field full of returners trying to walk into the light, do we?'

'How do you get about at night? I'm surprised you don't all keep walking into each other.'

'Who would we walk into?' Bran said, making a sweeping gesture that Tom could just about see, now that his eyes had adjusted to the silvery moonlight. He looked around, confused at first, and then he noticed.

'Where is everybody?' he asked, the narrow streets that had been full of people earlier were now deserted. And then, he remembered something Jennifer had said to the restless crowd. 'Curfew?' he asked.

'Curfew,' Bran agreed. 'If a returner were to somehow get inside the walls at night, it would have a hard time finding a snack.'

'What if one got in during the day?'

'In full daylight?' Bran asked, as though the possibility was an alien concept beyond consideration, 'We have regular patrols and at least one guard on every watch tower, usually two. I can't imagine a situation where a returner could sneak up on us during the day.'

Tom followed Bran through tiny streets that seemed as narrow as the average path to him. In some places, the gaps between the houses were big enough for broad men to walk three abreast, but mostly they were narrower affairs that might admit two people to pass each other comfortably. The Brook had looked impressive from outside, but Tom still guessed that he could walk across it in minutes. Now that he was moving through the maze inside the walls, however, he wouldn't be surprised if it took him an hour to get from the north gate to the south, and only if he didn't get lost in the process.

At length, they came to Galleon's Pub, also known simply as "the Pub", due to it being the only one in the Brook. Though built in the same fashion as every other building in the Brook, the Pub was the largest structure by far. Some effort had been made to distinguish it – faded colouring on the walls, a carved flagon hanging above the door – but, in the almost pitch black of the night the aesthetics made little difference.

Bran wrapped loudly on the door, which opened to reveal a squat old man. His hair was lank and grey, and his left eye was hidden behind an old and cracked leather patch. He looked at Bran, and then at Tom, and then back to Bran. Wordlessly, he nodded for them to follow and turned to head back inside. Like Brook Hall, the door opened onto a small flight of stairs that led up to the raised floor of the pub. It hadn't occurred to Tom that the pub would be empty, it was a pub, after all. Inside, however, a small number of roughly made wooden tables sat unoccupied.

'The witch ordered me closed,' Galleon said gruffly to the room in general.

'He means Jennifer,' Bran said helpfully, though Tom had guessed as much. Bran turned back to the landlord and said, 'You can't call her that, she'll find out,' he used a tone that Tom had often used to explain to his grandfather that it was no longer acceptable to "call a spade a spade", so to speak. Again, Tom felt the memory slip away as quickly as it had appeared.

'Hmph!' said Galleon.

'Do you have a spare room for me?' Bran asked.

The short man raised an eyebrow. 'You dying?' he asked.

'No,' Bran said.

'Your house on fire?'

'Not the last time I checked.'

'Wife trouble?' Galleon persisted.

'I don't have a wife, Galleon, you know that.'

A grin broke slowly across the old landlord's face. 'Seems to me you got everything in order, and if you ain't sufferin', I'm fully within my rights to expect payment for my rooms.'

'I thought you might,' Bran said. He slung the pack from his back, and Tom recognised it as one of the packs Bran had been carrying on the journey back to the Brook. He unfastened the flap and upended the contents onto the nearest table.

Glass clinked as bottles rolled across the tabletop and Tom caught one that came perilously close to the edge, holding it up for inspection. It was grimy with age but intact. A tentative rub with the sleeve of Tom's shirt revealed a clear liquid within. There was an odd assortment of shapes and sizes, with some being nearly a foot in height and others small enough to fit into a small pocket. Galleon's eyes widened at the sight of them all. He picked a middling bottle up, rubbing at the grimy glass with his rag hanging from his waist.

'Oh,' he said reverentially, and then, 'oh,' again.

'Is this sufficient to get me a room?'

Galleon looked up at Bran as though seeing him for the first time. He blinked. 'A room? Mr Tord, for this haul you can live here, if you wish. Bring me more and you can even have my bed!'

'That won't be necessary,' Bran laughed. 'However, in honour of our first visitor in half a hundred years, I think it's only fitting that you break one of those bottles open, don't you?'

Galleon looked reluctantly at the bottles, but only for an instant, and then he smiled a horrible, yellow-toothed smile, nodded, and scooped up his treasure. He hurried off to the end of the large room, where a high counter that Tom supposed was the bar stood in front of shelves of mugs, tankards and various misshapen containers made of glass.

'That was alcohol?' Tom asked, watching Galleon excitedly store the bottles away in some unseen container behind the bar.

'It sure was,' Bran said. 'Bottles like those are rarer than a still corpse, and Galleon covets them. He must have case-loads of them down below, but he's reluctant to sell them. I've brought him nearly a hundred such bottles alone, and I know I'm not the only raider to bring him booze.'

'If they're so valuable, why did you hand them over for a room? Don't you have a home of your own?'

'I do,' Bran agreed, 'but it is small and sadly lacking a good strong drink. Besides,' he said, slapping Tom on his good shoulder companionably, causing Tom to wince as his wound reacted to the sudden impact, 'you're staying here tonight, and I wouldn't want to leave you in the company of grouchy old Galleon alone.'

'I heard that!' came a reproachful voice from somewhere behind the bar. Galleon surfaced, and pulled down three metal cups from a shelf.

'Anyway,' Bran went on, 'a bottle of that stuff is worth a hundred mugs of the foul ale that Galleon concocts in his dungeon downstairs, I couldn't possibly keep it all to myself.'

'Hundred indeed!' Galleon muttered as he returned to the table, placing the cups along with one of the smaller bottles on the table, 'and you never complain when you're rat-arsed on my ale,' he added in louder voice.

'Exactly,' Bran said, taking one of the mugs and pouring a measure that, to judge by the expression on Galleon's face, was larger than it should have been. Bran took a sip and inhaled so sharply as he continued that his sentence started with a hiss, 'I haven't had to buy a pint in this place for years! In fact, I must be so far in credit with old Galleon here that technically, I own the place!'

Galleon shifted uncomfortably and, in the apparent hope of changing the subject, turned his attention to Tom.

'So, Mr. Tom, what's your story?'

'I don't know,' Tom said earnestly, 'I can't remember much about my life before a few days ago.'
Galleon nodded sagely, 'I have bottle of special rum that has that very same effect.'

The three men laughed, and threw their drinks back in one fluid movement, and Tom felt some of his mounting apprehension melt away.

'Tell us what it was like, before The Returning,' Bran said, and Galleon nodded eagerly, refilling their cups.

'Sure,' Tom said, feeling the warm glow of alcohol infuse his body, 'why not?'

Five

The following morning brought pain. Lots of pain.

A loud bang woke Tom from his post-drunken slumber and caused him to sit up quickly which, in turn, caused lightning to bounce around the inside of his skull, being sure to spread its aching tendrils to every part of his brain as it did so. His hand shot up instinctively to his forehead, but that movement only served to spark an explosion of agony in his injured shoulder.

Outside, nearby voices were angrily shouting at one another. With great difficulty, Tom got off of the straw bed that he didn't remember getting into the night before, and walked to one of the six windows that lined one side of the room. It was on the second floor of the the pub – it being one of the few buildings to have more than one floor – and, as the returners were not able to scale vertical surfaces, the windows up here were wide enough to lean through. They even had glass panes set into hinged frames, rather than the simple yet solid wooden shutters of most of the narrow windows at ground level.

Fighting the nausea, he pulled aside the thick, light-blocking drapes and pushed open the window. He leant out to view the source of the noise and saw a man and woman arguing from either side of a smashed crate. The crate had apparently been dropped and its cargo of chopped wood strewn across the floor. Who had been carrying the crate, or whose fault it was that it was now on the floor, was not clear. Tom pulled his head back in from the window, and started at the sight of Galleon.

'Bloody hell!' Tom gasped.

'Breakfast,' Galleon grunted, proffering a tray of bread, bacon and some kind of very nearly amber liquid that Tom strongly suspected was alcoholic. He took it, thanking Galleon who merely grunted again and left the room. Tom took a chunk of hard crusty bread and chewed it idly as he walked back to the window.

He had not seen much of Charles Brook since he'd arrived. Between his visit with the council and his trip to the infirmary he had seen only tiny streets and alleyways from inside the walls and only rooftops from out.

From this high vantage point, however, he could see most of the eastern side of the village. Galleon's pub was a little to the west of centre in the vaguely circular Brook, and was the tallest building with the exception of the watchtowers. The western side – the side that Tom had arrived from – was mostly tightly packed houses with the occasional small vegetable patch for punctuation. The eastern side, however, was much more interesting.

A squat building lay between the pub and Brook Square, but Tom's room was high enough that he could see most of it over the rooftops. The square was already full of people and, like the previous day, most of those people were children. Beyond the square, Tom could see a lumber yard next to the wall, one thick log resting in a small recess cut into the top. Tom guessed that the cutters pushed the felled

trees over the wall to get them into the city, which made sense; carrying a twenty foot long piece of wood through the small gates and tiny winding streets would be impractical to say the least.

Tom's eyes drifted across to find a group of people stood by the northern gate. Judging by the hoes, shovels, and other farming implements they carried, it seemed a safe bet that they were farmers. As he watched, a shout of "Clear!" rang out from the guardtower above the gate, and was echoed all around the wall from tower to tower until all had declared their gates safe. Those gates were opened and the waiting people filed out, fifteen in all, though three of them wore the boiled leather that Tom had come to associate with the guards.

He watched the farmers for a short time as they made their way to the nearby fields and animal pens, but when they had stopped to begin work Tom's gaze continued onward to the horizon. The west, where Tom had approached from, was a sea of rolling hills as far as the eye could see, but he didn't need to see them to know that they were; he'd spent days walking over them. Southward was miles of grassland leading into a grim shoreline of sharp rocks and grey ocean. To the north lay more hillside, though Tom could see the merest hint of mountains on the horizon, despite them being wreathed in mist. Directly ahead, however, was Brook Forest.

Being no expert in forestry he couldn't be certain, but it looked like an average wooded area to Tom. As he'd seen on his approach, the nearest trees almost hung over the wall. Tom even suspected it would be possible to get onto the branches from the easternmost watch tower. Then the strange formation of the trees registered in his hungover mind for the first time.

Like the surrounding area, many trees had been cut down, leaving vast swaths of stump-ridden land, but where the trees met The Brook, they had been left alone. A tapering column extended out from the bulk of the forest, and Tom realised that what he had taken to be randomness in the growth pattern of the trees was purposefully left that way by the cutters of the Brook. Tom thought it a bit of a length to go to for an emergency escape route – that being the only reason he could think of for leaving the trees untouched – but it didn't surprise him; having seen the sheer amount of security in place. Tom was not surprised that few of these people ever saw a returner.

Still, he could see why children would make up ghost stories around the forest. At night, it would look as dark and imposing as any self-respecting nightmare setting. How many children had been startled in the night by the silhouette of a tree's branch in the silvery moonlight, looking eerily like a giant claw?

He ate the rest of his breakfast while staring out of the window. A tentative sip of the drink confirmed Tom's fear that it was indeed alcoholic. He'd never been a believer of "hair of the dog" remedies, and didn't feel tempted to convert now. Another memory! he thought as he trudged over to the water jug by his bed, and with a rush of elation, he found that this one did not flee when he tried to hold on to it. He pulled the jug to his mouth, forgoing the misshapen glass beside it, and gulped half of it down with relish, feeling a little more optimistic.

He had dreamt of his parents during his alcohol-soaked sleep, though he couldn't remember anything about them. In the dream, he had been eating a meal with his mother and father in a restaurant that looked like the inside of Brook Hall. He knew – in that strange way that dreamers do – that the restaurant was a high class establishment, despite Brook Hall looking very much like the inside of a child's tree house. The meal had been going pleasantly enough when a man approached them. He had been wearing an expensive suit, like that of a successful business man, and he held the bill for the meal in his hand. Tom had patted at his pockets, but found his wallet missing. He'd looked up apologetically, prepared to explain that he had lost his wallet, and found that he was staring at himself!

Only it wasn't him, not exactly. The grey-skinned corpse would have looked just like Tom, if Tom had been dead.

When it had become clear that Tom could not pay, the returner with Tom's face had attacked his parents, ripping out their throats with its decayed teeth, and then set about their abdomen's vigorously.

Strangely, though he couldn't remember his parents faces from the dream, he could remember their expressions. They hadn't screamed or cried, or even grimaced in pain. They had just looked at Tom with a kind of sad disappointment on their faces. It had woken him with a start in the middle of the night, and only the sheer amount of alcohol in his system had allowed him to get any more sleep after that.

The drink on the tray had almost certainly not been from one of the bottles Bran had brought back from the wild. It tasted like a sterile wipe with a vague hint of potato. Idly, Tom wondered if Galleon made the cleansing liquids that Bran and Elissa had used on Tom's wound, and if he pulled his beverages from the same vat!

The thought, coupled with a slight twinge of pain in his shoulder, reminded him of his appointment with Elissa, and he began to pull his clothes on. He briefly considered waiting around to see if Bran would be coming to meet him, but nobody had actually said that he was looking after Tom; the cheerful raider seemed to have taken it upon himself to keep an eye out for the newcomer. Tom decided that Bran was probably already out of the pub and about his business, as everybody else in the Brook seemed to be.

He dressed in the clean clothes that had been provided for him, which consisted of something that might have been called a tunic, and some loose trousers. Though the materials were woollen, they were far more comfortable than the itchy clothes he had been wearing for the journey to the Brook, which were nowhere to be seen. He made his way down the stairs, which were so steep as to be one degree of angle away from becoming ladders, and into the pub itself.

Galleon was behind the bar, apparently unaffected by the previous night's excess, and a number of strangers were dotted about the room. All of them were staring at Tom. Awkwardly, he said good morning to Galleon and nodded at the woman sat at the bar.

'Make sure you're back a'fore dark,' Galleon said as Tom made for the exit. 'Rules say I lock the door once the sun's down.'

'I will,' Tom said, and left.

The air outside was warm, and as fresh as any Tom remembered breathing. The pub's entrance opened out onto one of the wider streets of the Brook, one in which a loving couple could walk hand in hand without having to do it in single file. The floor, like most of the Brook, consisted of packed earth. It was as good as any paving stone or tarmac pathway at the moment, but Tom didn't relish the prospect of getting around town after a heavy rainfall.

He stepped out of the pub entrance, pulling the door shut behind him. Bran had been very insistent about closing doors; 'Always make sure you shut the doors behind you,' he'd said. 'If a returner gets into the Brook, you don't want it sauntering into your room and snuggling up in bed with you!' and then he'd laughed his infectious laugh and demanded another drink.

It took a few attempts to find the infirmary. He knew it was near the square and that it had a red cross above the door, but all the buildings in this part of the Brook looked the same, save for Brook Hall and Galleon's Pub. Without being able to see the door, Tom couldn't distinguish one building from another, and there wasn't always a straightforward route around the buildings. Some were built directly against each other while others were just built so close that only a child would be able to squeeze through the gap between them.

By the third time Tom had walked through the square, he noticed the audience that was growing. He tried to pretend he hadn't noticed, however, and found the infirmary soon after.

He knocked on the heavy wooden door and a voice called from within. 'Come in,' it said, but it was not Elissa's voice. Tom was quite sure of this. For one thing, it belonged to a man, and a much older man at that. He stepped inside, pulling the door shut behind him.

'Tom Keighley?' said the man in the infirmary. He was leafing through some rough looking sheets of paper with a look of pained concentration. The paper was thick and jagged around the edges, and reminded Tom of paper he had made in art class as a child at school. My memories are coming back more frequently, he thought, and mentally held onto the latest one.

'Yes,' Tom said, and then, 'I thought Elissa was the Brook's doctor.'

'One of the doctors,' the man corrected, though he didn't sound offended. He looked up from his papers. 'I am Doctor Pepper, I'll be – are you OK?' he asked as Tom let out an involuntary snort.

'Sorry,' Tom said, 'did you say your name is Pepper?'

'Yes,' the doctor said, 'why?'

'Your name is “Doctor Pepper”?’

Tom expected the man to be annoyed, but he just looked confused. 'My name is Graham Pepper,' he said, and then added, 'and I am doctor,' in case Tom had misunderstood.

'Sorry,' Tom said again.

'It's not a problem,' said Doctor Pepper as he turned his attention back to his papers, though he kept his eyes on Tom a fraction of a second longer than he needed to, presumably in case he did anything strange.

Doctor Pepper was a middle-aged man, roughly the same height as Tom, but slimmer in an unhealthy kind of way. He had a pointed face that looked a little closer to gaunt than it should have been, and a full head of grey hair that matched his wiry beard. He shuffled through the papers some more and, apparently finding what he was looking for, said, 'Here we are. Okay, Mr. Keighley, if you'll just remove your pullover. This shouldn't take long.'

It didn't. Doctor Pepper had bathed Tom's wound again, though, and that had caused a fresh wave of pain that was still throbbing through his back and shoulder when he stepped out into the warm day again.

It occurred to him at this point that he had no idea what he was supposed to do now. He knew the council wanted to see him again, but they had said nothing about when. His only instruction had been to have the dressing on his wound changed, and he'd done that.

With no immediate commitments to fill, Tom decided to go for a walk and explore the strange little village that was likely to become his home for the immediate, and possibly indefinite future.

Tom walked for most of the morning and, he thought, covered a great deal of Charles Brook. The area that he'd thought of as “residential” was practically deserted by late morning; everybody was presumably busy tilling fields, spinning wool or patrolling the land. In any case, it didn't feel deserted; the Brook was small enough that all the sounds of industry from the busier north quarter were as clear to Tom as if he'd been stood in the midst of it all.

At length, he found himself by the training yard. He'd acquired a small following by this time which he was resolutely pretending not to notice. Most of them were children, but there were a few adults there under the pretence of keeping an eye on the children. Tom soon found the crowd behind him forgotten, however.

The training yard was a hive of activity. It was bigger than Brook Square by half, and seemed to be split into two parts. At the back of the yard next to a small building that might have more accurately been called a shed, five people were practising with spear and sword. Two men and one woman worked alone, oblivious to the world around them as they ran through various techniques that Tom supposed were fighting moves of some kind. The remaining two were engaged in direct combat. At first, Tom thought they had been sparring with each other, but soon realised that, while the armoured woman wielded a long padded stick like a sword, her opponent was coming at her with seemingly no care for his own defences and making no attempt to avoid blows. He wore some kind of padded helmet and little else, which seemed to be enough for him. He lunged at his practice partner almost drunkenly, tumbling forward as his target moved deftly to one side and brought the faux sword down on his neck with a ferocity that made Tom close his eyes.

When there was no sound of padded wood on flesh, or scream of pain, Tom opened his eyes and saw that the woman with the padded stick had stopped her swing barely an inch from the man's protected neck. The man nodded approval and the two resumed their original positions and began again.

The other part of the yard was occupied by children – five of them – all lined up and wearing leather armour that looked unnecessarily heavy on them. They each thrust their spears out with varying levels competence while being shouted at by a huge bear of a man.

He looked, to judge by his balding grey hair and lined face, on the cold side of sixty, but it didn't seem as though age had taken anything from him as he bellowed commands and intimidated the panting youths, his heavily scarred face almost reaching a purple hue during some of the longer shouts. One of the children saw Tom, his eyes widening as he did, and received an extra loud bellowing as a reward for his momentary lapse in concentration.

'Excuse me,' said a small voice behind Tom. He turned to see a nervous boy of perhaps nine or ten, 'are you from Brandle?'

'Sorry,' Tom said, crouching down so that he was eye to eye with the boy, 'I've never heard of that place.'

The boy looked at his feet sadly. 'My dad's in Brandle,' he said.

'Your dad wouldn't want you moping around, asking after him, would he?' said a cracked voice, and the small crowd behind the child parted to reveal Old Jim. He hobbled up to the boy, a crude walking stick taking the burden from his right leg, and placed a kindly hand on the boy's shoulder. 'Go and play, Ford, enjoy yourself. Your dad will want to hear all your stories when he gets back, and he'll be disappointed if the only story you have to tell is that you sat around for ten years pining for him!'

The boy stared at his feet for a moment longer and then, reluctantly, he smiled a weak smile and left. Jim stared at the rest of the crowd with his unsettling milky eyes and, as if suddenly realising they were late for something, the crowd hastily dispersed. Jim turned to Tom, fixing him with the same soul-boring gaze and complimented it with a gap-toothed smile that did nothing to improve the overall effect.

'Let's go for a walk, old man,' Jim said, turning awkwardly and setting off at a relatively brisk pace for a man with a walking stick. Tom followed.

'Old man?' he asked.

Jim cackled, 'Well, it's true, isn't it? You were playing with yourself before I was even born!' Old Jim seemed to consider something, and then he added, 'Might even be before my parents were born; they were quite young, as I recall.'

'I see your point,' Tom said with a smile, 'still, in a purely physical sense, you could be my great, great, great—'

'I think you've made your point,' Old Jim said quickly.

'—grandfather.' Tom finished.

'Yes, yes. I'm an old man. At least you have a bit of spark in you; y'looked a bit like a petrified rabbit at the council last night.'

'Yes, well, sleeping a hundred years late and waking up to find the world is now full of walking corpses can put a man a little off of his stride.'

'I suppose it can,' Jim said with a wheezy laugh, his smile returning.

Tom found himself liking the old man, and the banter that seemed to come naturally between them. It seemed almost familiar and he wondered if he had known a man like Jim in his previous life. 'Where are we going?' he asked.

'Nowhere in particular; the council won't be ready to see you for another hour or so, so I thought we might take a walk together for a little while. Have a bit of a talk.'

'Why another hour?' Tom asked.

'Because they sent me to get you, and I don't intend to get back for another hour,' Jim said with a grin. 'Now,' he said abruptly, coming to a stop and fixing Tom with his penetrating stare, 'tell me about your life.'

'There's not much to tell,' Tom said.

'Don't waste your modesty on me, old man. There's interesting bits to everyone's life.'

'I'm not being modest,' Tom insisted, 'I can't remember my life. Whatever that thing they found me in was, its scrambled my brain. Every now and again something small will come back to me, but it usually buggers off as quickly as it came.'

'I see,' Jim said.

'It doesn't make any sense,' Tom said, letting his frustration out. 'I can remember going to work, but I can't remember what my job was. I can remember living in a flat in Manchester, but I can't remember what the flat looked like, or what the address was.'

'Strange indeed,' Jim said, resuming his walk. He continued brightly, 'Fortunately, you don't need to remember any of it.'

'What do you mean?' Tom asked, perplexed.

'Think about it; everyone you knew is long dead, the world you knew is gone, and the way of life that you were used to doesn't apply. I think it's a mercy that you can't remember any of the details. If you can't remember them, you can't miss them.'

Tom considered that for a moment, and found, to his surprise, that it made sense to him. Obviously, anyone he'd known before would be dead now, nearly a hundred years on and post- zombie apocalypse, but he hadn't actually thought about it until now; it hadn't seemed important. Tentatively, he tried to feel sad about all the friends and family he'd lost, but it didn't work; there were no faces to mourn.

'You want my advice?' Old Jim asked, but he didn't wait for an answer, 'Don't chase those memories. Let the man you were die in the world you don't remember. You're a new man, born in this world with these people.'

Tom couldn't argue with the logic, but he felt uncomfortable at the idea of it. It was one thing to mourn a loss and then move on, but it seemed somehow wrong to just forget what you've lost and pretend it was never there. He decided to change the subject.

'Why all the guards?' he asked, making a sweeping gesture to encompass the three guards walking towards them, the two guards that Tom presumed were Old Jim's escorts, and all the guards on the watch towers.

'I thought that injury came at the hands of a returner,' Jim said, pointing to Tom's shoulder. 'I would have thought the need for guards would be one thing that you'd understand.'

Tom pointed to the high wall encircling the village. 'It would take a small army or some heavy machinery to pull down that wall, and I'm told returners can't climb. Why do you need so many guards inside this ... this fort?'

Jim took a right turn into one of the wider streets. Ahead, the street continued onwards all the way to the outer wall. It was only a couple of hundred feet, but it was probably the longest street in the Brook. Jim remained silent for a short time, ignoring the wide-eyed stares of the many people walking past them, carrying crates and sacks or just hurrying by and failing valiantly to hide their curiosity over the outsider. When Jim next spoke, there was a solemnness to his voice that surprised Tom.

'When I was a boy, there were lots of settlements, not just Charles Brook. Only two of them were close enough for our messengers to reach in reasonable time; Brandle and Tripperton. Almost weekly we would send messengers to the two villages, and they to us. We communicated and traded with other distant settlements through them, relaying news and goods.

'Tripperton was a village of arrogant people. You see, the returners have no memory, and their senses are no better than ours. Unless they can see, smell or hear you, they don't know you're there. Out here,' Jim spread his hands wide to take in all the surrounding lands, 'we rarely see a returner, as you've probably noticed. Oh, a few might occasionally stumble this way by pure chance, or on the trail of a homecoming raiding party, but most of humanity died in the cities, and that is where they stayed when they returned, shambling around the decaying remnants of civilisation with no aim.

'Tripperton was, like us, miles from any city or town. They might suffer three or four attacks a month, and that back in the early days when there were more returners in the wild. They were complacent and spared little thought to keeping their village secure.'

'No wall?' Tom asked, not missing the fact that Jim was referring to Tripperton in the past tense.

'No wall,' Jim agreed, 'and little training for their people. They had a guard, for what it's worth, and they were content that that would be enough. They had no curfew and they chose to live in excess; celebrating their very life with song and dance and gin long into the night.'

'What happened?'

'We don't know for sure. The messengers took turns; ours would go to them with news and goods from the Brook and come home with the same from Tripperton, then the next time, their messengers would come to us. When their messengers didn't come for a few weeks, we thought little of it. Their supplies were well stocked so they needed little trade from us that year and it was quite common to go weeks without news as very little happens in the settlements that is of interest to other settlements.

'When a month passed without word we sent our messengers. They found Tripperton rife with returners.'

Tom felt a wave of sadness wash over him as he imagined a lively village like the Brook filled with walking corpses, and felt immediately frustrated at not being able to feel that same sorrow for the people he'd known and lost, as though a modicum of sadness for his forgotten family would bring him closer to remembering them. Aloud, he said, 'You have no idea how it happened?'

'We can only guess, but a single returner can do a lot of damage ... ' Jim's words trailed off, and he shook his head sadly. 'They used to mock us; saying we were over-cautious and that we should enjoy ourselves more. The bloody fools.'

Something was troubling Tom about the story, and it took him a moment to realise what. 'Bran told me getting bitten by a returner didn't turn you into one,' he said.

'Yes?'

'How could the returners spread through Tripperton so quickly?'

'A reasonable question,' Jim allowed, 'but they have a grip of steel and the bite of a rabid dog. You don't live for long with large chunk of your neck missing. And it's not just the neck, either. I once saw a man get bitten on the leg, and return from the blood loss alone. Like a fountain it was.'

They reached the outer wall and came to a stop by the northern gate. 'We're going outside?' Tom asked, trying to keep his voice from trembling. In his mind, a snarling corpse was pulling at his shoulder with the force of a black hole.

'That we are,' Jim said, nodding for the guard to open the narrow door to the wider world.

Tom thought about protesting, but quashed the urge and followed Jim through the doorway regardless. They walked away from the Brook with the forest on their right, though there appeared to be nothing of interest ahead as far as Tom could see. Perhaps Jim just liked to go for walks from time to time. Tom was relieved to note that Jim's escort was still following them; he wouldn't have liked to come across a returner with only Old Jim for company.

'You said Brandle,' Tom said eventually. 'The kid at the training yard mentioned that place, what's the story there?'

'Brandle was much like Charles Brook. Perhaps not as vigorous with their defence as us, but certainly more so than Tripperton. We lost contact with them nearly fifty years ago, a little while before Tripperton was taken. Their messengers just stopped coming.'

'And you don't know what happened there, either?' Tom asked.

Jim shook his head. 'Even less than we know of Tripperton. Three parties have been sent to Brandle since the last time we heard from them, none of them ever came back. The last time we tried was around ten years ago. Ford – the child in the training yard – well, his father was one of the group that left for Brandle that time. Ford was barely out of his mother's belly at the time. She has the poor child believing that his dad is safe in Brandle but can't get back right now because of the returners, but will be home some day.'

'That seems unlikely,' Tom said.

'Doesn't it just,' Jim said, 'but she's the boys mother, and it isn't my or any other's place to go against her in the raising of her own child. He'll find out eventually.'

Tom nodded, though he really thought someone should tell the boy the truth. Still, he doubted he would have the nerve to do it, even if he weren't a complete stranger to these people.

They walked on in silence for a time, cresting a low hill, and eventually the Brook began to disappear behind the rising turf. Tom stared at the distant mountains, wreathed in a misty haze with fluffy white cloud at their peaks.

'Where are we going?' he asked at last.

'To see an old friend,' Jim said simply, and then, before Tom could speak, he added, 'We're nearly there.'

The ground swelled once more, and as they reached the top peak of the shallow hill, Tom found himself looking upon a strange patch of land. It almost looked like some ancient ruin, if the ruins had been made from wood rather than stone.

'What is this place?' Tom asked.

'This was the home of one of the original settlers,' Jim explained. 'When they first came here and started building, new homes were placed randomly. People opted to build them on stilts, raised high above the ground so that returners could not catch them unawares in their sleep.'

Tom looked around. There were no signs of other buildings and the Brook was lost behind the swell of earth. 'Whoever lived here decided to build their home a twenty minute walk from everyone else? That seems dangerous.'

'Indeed it is,' Jim said, 'but in the case of this particular woman, the isolation wasn't her choice. She was a doctor of some kind. Not a healing doctor, like Graham or Elissa, one that revelled in pulling things apart to see how they worked.'

'A scientist?' Tom asked.

'Scientist,' Jim said, as though trying the feel of the word to see how it felt, 'yes, I think that's right. Doctor Frampton, we called her; I don't recall her first name, or if she ever gave it, for that matter.'

'She was determined to learn about the returners, and she had a seemingly endless cache of medicines. Not just medicine to prevent infection, or break a fever; medicine that could make a man

forget all his troubles and feel that life wasn't the hell that it had become, and she traded them for labour.'

'Drugs,' Tom said, though there was no judgement in his voice. He tried to imagine how he might have felt if he'd been around during The Returning. How he might have acted when the dead started marching through the streets, devouring anyone they came across. Drugs must have seemed like a godsend to those people. The ones who couldn't bring themselves to end it, that is.

'When she told the other settlers of her plans, they insisted that she go about her business away from everyone else. They were kind in that respect; some wanted to send her away entirely, or worse. She had this strange place built with many chambers and lots of stone slab tables. Strangest of all was the pit, the purpose of which was the reason that she had been forced away from the other settlers.'

Tom saw it now. Perhaps ten feet ahead of them, a large, roughly square hole was cut neatly into the earth. Across the top of it sat a latticework of thick wooden planks, each as deep as Tom's forearm, and twice as wide.

Tom became aware of a quiet shuffling noise, like the sound of leather being gently dragged across a wood.

'She kept this one alive,' Jim said, pointing his walking stick at the hole as they reached its edge, 'but when people heard of her plans to have a pet returner, they didn't want her anywhere near them.'

Tom looked over the edge. Staring back up at him with wide, clouded eyes, was a returner. It clawed at the wooden walls of the pit on the side which Tom and Jim were standing. Its skin was as grey as stone, its mouth black. There seemed to be no wounds, and the returner did not look to be decomposed in any way. Tom didn't know all that much about biology, but he was sure that the dead should rot eventually.

'How long has it been here?' he asked.

Old Jim shrugged. 'Long as I can remember.'

'What? Shouldn't it be,' Tom waved his hands vaguely, searching for the right words, 'all bone, hair and fingernails by now?'

'That is why we kept it,' Jim said. 'After Doctor Frampton returned – she died in her sleep – nobody wanted to take over this dwelling, so we made use of what we could, dismantling it and using the resources to build in the safety of the Brook. But we decided to leave this,' he pointed his toes at the returner, 'where it is. We hoped to learn how long it took for them to rot away to nothing, but it seems they don't. After a few decades, people just stopped checking. Frampton guessed it was something to do with the tiny bugs that eat away at dead, she guessed they didn't want anything to do with returner flesh, and so the returners don't decay.' He shook his head, 'That kind of knowledge died with her, though.'

'There are no other scientists?'

The old man let out a harsh laugh and waved a hand towards the Brook. 'Those people were all born long after The Returning. Even I only remember stories from your time dimly. The people in that village don't have any concept of a body decaying, of it rotting away to nothing after death. To them, returning is what happens to a person when they die, and the only way to dispose of a body is to burn it; they have never known anything else!'

Tom stared at the creature in the hole. It stared back with milky eyes that, despite being too clouded to possibly see anything, seemed to focus on Tom with such intensity that he thought he could almost feel the returner's gaze. 'How long ago was this? I mean, how old were you?' Tom asked, not taking his eyes away from the thing as it bumped feebly against the pit walls.

'Hard to say; the years began to run together a long time ago for me. I only know my own age because people keep reminding me,' Jim added bitterly. 'It's been there as long as I can remember.'

Tom thought about that for a moment. Old Jim was in his nineties. Tom tried to think of his own earliest memories for a reference point, and to his surprise, one surfaced.

He had been five years old, and soaking wet. His parents had taken him on a family trip to a place called Appletreewick, which, as far as Tom could remember, consisted of a stretch of a field beside a river. Cars were parked in the field along the river bank, their doors hanging open as their owners regularly returned to them to retrieve sandwiches and hot drinks in flasks.

The smell of charring meat was heavy in the air from the half dozen barbecues dotted around the river bank, and Tom remembered the smell as vividly in that moment as he had the day he'd been there.

His mother had dressed him in a light t-shirt, a pair of shorts and some old, battered trainers that were long overdue for throwing out, and his father had taken him down to the river. It had been full of people. Where it passed by the field in which the cars had parked was mostly flat and relatively calm, with faster rapids a short way up- and down-stream, and children played loudly in the chest-high waters. Some were on the far bank, swinging into the water from an old rope tied to a thick branch that stretched out over the river. More still had screamed with joy as they bounced down the rapids in huge inner tubes that were nearly as wide as Tom was tall.

Tom had yelped when his father had walked him into the water; it had been freezing cold even in the warm sunlight of that summer Sunday afternoon, and he had recoiled from it, his father laughing good-naturedly as Tom had clung to his leg like a frightened koala bear.

'It's easier if you just jump in,' his mother had suggested, and he'd looked up at her as though she was mad. And then he'd looked from her warm, smiling face to his father's expression of gentle encouragement.

His dead mother.

His dead father.

'It doesn't look nearly ninety years old,' Tom said of the returner below him, making the assumption that Jim's earliest memory would be from a similar age to Tom's. A tear ran down his cheek, 'it ... doesn't look ...' but the words turned into sobs that racked his body, and the memory of all the people he'd lost hit him in the chest like a bullet.

Six

Tom spent the rest of that day, and most of the next alone in his room in Galleon's pub. Dr Pepper appeared at some point to change the dressing on Tom's shoulder, but Tom couldn't have said when it had been. The doctor was polite enough, though Tom didn't talk much with him, and, soon enough, he was alone again with his demons.

Images of his family, his friends, even acquaintances that he rarely spoke to, flashed through his mind, each one causing a pang of loss as vivid and real as if they'd died the day before, rather than a century ago. But then, from his point of view, they had been alive less than a week ago.

Worse still, he remembered how he had come to be in the strange glass tube that Harret, Bran and Holter had found him in, and the guilt and frustration that came with that memory was threatening to overwhelm him.

He didn't know much of the finer details, not because of memory loss, but because he hadn't paid attention at the time. Oh, how he wished he'd paid attention. He'd entered into a business venture with a friend, and had been convinced that the amount he'd invested, which had included most of his parents savings, would be returned tenfold.

It hadn't.

He'd lost all of the money, his parents' savings included, and all because he'd trusted a glorified salesman's word and not done his research.

He cursed himself now, as he'd done a century ago, for his laziness. He couldn't even recall exactly what the venture had involved, beyond the fact that it was an online service that would, to hear the salesman tell it, revolutionise social networking. How it was going to revolutionise social networking, or even what social networking was, exactly, Tom couldn't say. He hadn't been scammed but that only made it worse. At least if he'd been tricked he would only be guilty of being gullible. As it was, he had talked his parents into lending him their savings, and he had lost all the money.

Depression had followed after that, surfacing from his despair only to look for ways to make back the money he'd borrowed before his parents suffered for the lack of it. The depression was why his kind, patient girlfriend had eventually left him, which hadn't helped matters. He hadn't, and, indeed, didn't blame her, though.

A solution eventually presented itself under the name of Delton Labs, a research and development company with a number of job vacancies paying suspiciously high wages for the low entry requirements. It wasn't long into the interview process that Tom learned that the job advertisements were little more than bait, and that the real opportunities were as test subjects. For two years of Tom's life, Delton Labs offered twice the amount of money Tom had lost in his ill-fated investment. He owed it to his parents to at least hear what was involved.

It was testing new technology – which relieved Tom as he had expected some kind of experimental drug – which could supposedly put a human being into a state of advanced hibernation. Inside the chamber, a person could remain effectively untouched by time for decades. The technology was in relatively early stages of testing, and there was a risk that the hibernation effect may result in “undesirable side effects”, such as death, but at that point Tom had toyed with thoughts of suicide on a regular basis, so it hadn't taken him long to accept the opportunity.

Well, it had worked. Better than Tom had ever thought it would, in fact. Tom had consented to be in the chamber for two years, and he was sure now that The Returning must have happened before the end of those two years, putting a stop to any research Delton Labs had been doing, and resulting in Tom's century-long slumber.

He'd made peace with his guilt, however. Delton had paid him upfront – he'd been adamant about that. He'd told his family and friends that he was going travelling for a while, so no one knew about the experiment, but he'd wanted to be sure that his debt to his parents was paid, whatever happened to him, and he'd gone into the experiment feeling like a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, he'd even started to worry about the experiment going wrong, which, given the consequences, was a healthy concern to have.

What good had it all done, though? His parents hadn't been suffering because Tom had lost their savings, it had been money they would have used for holidays and fancy restaurants in the future. In short; retirement money. The cash Delton Labs paid Tom had probably only just landed in his parent's bank account when people started returning from the dead to eat the living.

Tom spent two days in his room letting the world spin by before he finally forced himself to eat something and go outside. The pain of loss he felt was still overwhelming, but he forced himself, nonetheless; he was determined not to burden these people with a useless shell of a man who could do little but mope around his room mourning people who had died two generations ago. They had their own problems.

He met with the council that day, and it was agreed that he would stay in Charles Brook. The agreement was merely a formality; there was nowhere else for Tom to go and the people of the Brook were hardly the sort to cast him out, even if he had given them reason to want to.

'You will spend some time observing our ways,' First Council Jennifer declared. 'Just watch, for now. See how things are in the Brook and, when you have the lay of the land, we will meet again to discuss what your role is to be.'

And with that, it was done.

Tom walked out of Brook Hall as a recognised member of the community. Jennifer sent word out that all were to be cooperative and forthcoming with Tom, and to show him the way of things. She needn't have bothered, of course; every person Tom came across was more than happy to take him out on their patrol, or to tend the crops, or show Tom how to boil leather, or whatever it was that their job entailed. All the while they would question Tom incessantly about life before The Returning. And he'd answer, as best he could.

He found, however, that some things were just too hard to explain. These people had never lived in a world of computers and planes and processed food, and Tom would often try to explain something with an analogy, only to find that his analogy made even less sense than the thing he was explaining!

Bits of culture had filtered through, though. The young girl in the council, for example. Coke Zero. Her parents hadn't been obsessive fans of the popular beverage – they'd been born long after the last can of Coca Cola had been manufactured – but their parents had mentioned it, and Coke's mother had liked the sound of it; she had no idea that she was naming her child after a carbonated drink. And there were others. Tom met a man by the name of Sony Harper, a quiet and polite cutter with arms the size of Tom's waist. And, of course, the boy from the training yard, Ford.

The influence of the world Tom knew didn't just extend to names, however. Madonna was generally thought of as an old deity from the old world, which didn't seem all that unusual at first – the Madonna was a religious icon, after all – but he soon learned that it was not the Christian Madonna being referred to, but the pop star Madonna, whose face had been on billboards dotted throughout the surrounding lands, before sun and time wasted her image, and the people of the Brook forgot that she was just an entertainer, for it was hardly important information that needed passing on. And so, future generations saw the giant pop singer's face, and perhaps confused it with the religious namesake, and came to believe that the people of Tom's time worshipped her. Why else would her face be pasted onto a ten foot high sign? Even Old Jim, who had surely been born close enough to The Returning to know the truth of the matter, seemed to have forgotten such details. Or, perhaps, he just didn't care.

Life quickly became dull in the Brook. As the shock of his new surroundings faded, and the pain of his losses began to numb, he found that life without the internet, without late night television, without any kind of night life, was almost unbearable.

In terms of work, Tom tasted a little of everything. He helped tend the crops and see to the animals in their pens beyond the wall. He observed the armourer at work, making swords from old scraps of rusting metal, and boiling leather to make the armour that all the guards and raiders wore. He even spent some time in the loom house, though the incessant chattering from the weavers gave him a headache. It didn't take long for Tom to decide that he preferred accompanying the watch guards the most. Especially on patrol, but he didn't mind tower duty, either.

Tom was not the kind of person that found repetitive work soothing or cathartic. He'd heard people say that it was good to get stuck into some good old-fashioned manual labour to take your mind off of whatever was troubling you, but Tom had a very active mind, and repetitive manual labour would only keep his mind busy for as long as it took to learn the task at hand, which generally wasn't long. Thereafter, his mind would focus on whatever was troubling him while his body took care of the task at hand independently.

On patrol, however, Tom's attention was elsewhere. He would look in awe at the land that had been his home nearly a century ago, and try in vain to find evidence that it was ever really there. On the towers, he spent as much time watching the Brook itself as he did the land around. It continued to

amaze him that these people had carved out such a relatively comfortable home for themselves in a world where the dead walked. By the sixth day, Tom was spending most of his time with the guards, and it was with the guards that Elissa found him on the seventh day.

He was sat in one of the southern guard towers, his back against the wall in a position so casual that he might have been dropped there. In his hand was a book, though it was a stretch to call it so, by the standards Tom was used to, and he studied the words on the page with lazy interest. It was a copy of the town register – a list of all the known inhabitants of the Brook, living and returned, though this copy had not yet been updated to include Tom's name.

'You're not going to spot many returners like that,' Elissa said flatly.

Tom looked up in surprise. He'd not seen Elissa since his last meeting with the council, and not spoken to her since she had first dressed his wound. He suspected that Harret had forbidden her to speak with Tom, but if that was the case, what was she doing here now? He shrugged.

'Filip and Roy are on guard,' he said, nodding to the two men stood a little to his right. 'I'm supposed to be safe in my room at Galleon's.'

'Then why aren't you?'

'I like it up here. Galleon knows where I am, don't worry.'

'I know he does,' Elissa said, her voice taking on an edge, 'how do you think I found you?'

He closed the book, keeping his finger between the pages he'd been reading, and sat up a little straighter. His limbs felt stiff from the last few hours sitting on the cold and hard wooden floor, and he stretched a little to loosen them.

'Why were you trying to find me? I haven't seen or heard from you in a week! I assumed Dr. Pepper was taking care of me now.'

'He was,' Elissa said quickly, 'but he asked if I would take his rounds today.'

'Oh,' Tom said, raising an eyebrow. 'Is he going on holiday?'

'I don't know,' Elissa said. 'What's a holiday? I do know that he purchased a bottle of Galleon's better tasting rum, and that his son is staying the night at the Parrows, meaning he and his wife have the house to themselves.'

'Ohhh,' Tom said, understanding, and then he said, 'Still, I'm surprised you came; Bran told me Harret is the jealous type, I figured you'd been forbidden from seeing me, or something.'

'Forbidden?' Elissa asked incredulously, and for an instant, Tom could see some of First Council Jennifer in Elissa's face again.

'Uh, you know ...' Tom said lamely, suddenly wishing very much that he hadn't started down this path of conversation.

'No, I don't.'

Tom resisted, briefly, but Elissa's stare wore him down. 'Never mind,' he mumbled.

'And why would Harret be telling me who I can and can't see?'

'Because you're betrothed?' he suggested weakly.

'And?'

'I just thought--'

'Thought what?' Elissa interrupted, 'Thought that because he's to be my partner he can order me around? Things aren't like they were back in your day, Tom Keighley!'

'In my day? We didn't--'

'I choose who I do and do not speak to, and if I choose to stay out of your way to make things easier on my overly jealous husband-to-be, well, that just makes me a kind and caring partner, doesn't it?'

'Yes,' Tom said meekly, trying to ignore the sound of Filip and Roy sniggering. He might have warned them when he saw the look on Elissa's face, but he didn't get the chance.

'Is something funny?' Elissa asked so suddenly that Tom thought he saw Filip stiffen in fright.

'No, miss,' Roy said quickly, staring straight ahead at the horizon with added intensity.

'I thought not,' Elissa said, and then, turning her attention back to Tom she said, 'Assuming Graham has done his job properly, this should be the last time he or I will need to visit you.' She crouched down and began to pull the collar of his top back to reveal the dressing on his wound, and added, 'Well, for this injury, at least.'

Tom was acutely aware of Elissa's scent. In his experience, the women of the Brook seldom bothered with perfumes, but Elissa's smell was pleasing to Tom nonetheless, and the faint sheen of sweat on her neck from climbing the watch tower ladder did nothing to diminish the effect.

'Do I need to be injured to see you?' he asked.

For a moment, they met each other's gaze, but it was a brief moment and it ended when Elissa looked away, turning her attention to Tom's shoulder. She pulled the dressing off as though it was the only thing in the world worthy of her attention, and inspected the healing wound for a long moment before saying, 'It should be fine to leave the dressings off now. Just try not to put any excessive strain on your shoulder; the skin is still knitting together and you don't want to tear it.' She got to her feet, wrapping the used dressing in a piece of leather and stuffing it into her pack. She said, 'Have a good night,' and turned for the ladder leading out of the tower.

Tom jumped to his feet. 'Wait,' he said, 'I'll walk you home.'

'That's not necessary,' Elissa replied quickly.

Tom looked at the darkening horizon, then back to Elissa. 'Well,' he said, 'how about you walk me home? I'm supposed to be meeting Bran and Jim in Galleon's, you could come in for a while.'

Elissa seemed to think about this for a moment, and then, with no small amount of misgiving in her voice, said, 'Okay, I could use a drink,' and started for the ladder.

Tom watched Elissa leave. More accurately, he watched her behind leave. Intently.

He nodded goodbyes at Filip and Roy, who grinned mischievously at him, and he climbed down after Elissa.

'So, the whole betrothed thing,' Tom said, waving a hand airily, 'it's optional?'

'Yes, what else would it be?' Elissa asked.

'I don't know. "Betrothed" puts me in mind of arranged marriages. Couplings,' he corrected when he saw the confused look on Elissa's face. 'I don't understand why you would want to voluntarily commit yourself to committing to someone at a later date.'

'Did you not have a similar custom before The Returning?'

Tom thought for a moment, and realised there had been a similar custom, one which he had taken part in. 'I guess we did,' he said. 'We called it "getting engaged", and it wasn't the kind of thing that you and Harret did as a child.'

'I wasn't a child when Harret and I became betrothed! I was thirteen, and entitled to make my own decisions.'

'Before The Returning, a person was considered a child until at least the age of sixteen.'

'That is a long time to burden your parents,' Elissa said thoughtfully.

'Perhaps,' Tom allowed. 'Learning takes a long time, I guess.'

Elissa shook her head, 'Not here it doesn't. Children generally learn all they need by the age of ten. Mostly, people look after their own until the age of thirteen, when they will be expected start working

for their own meals and being a useful member of the community. By sixteen years, they will have their own place and be entirely responsible for themselves.'

'The Brook's children must learn fast,' Tom observed.

'Perhaps,' Elissa said, 'or perhaps there is just less to learn. From the stories I have heard of your world, ours seems much less ... complicated.'

'I guess it is,' Tom said, and then, 'What is Harret's problem with me? It can't be that he thinks I'm chasing you; he was treating me with contempt before I ever met you!'

'He does think you're chasing me,' Elissa said shortly, 'but he knows better than to say it aloud. His only concern should be who I am chasing, it makes no difference who stares at my arse as I walk.' Tom felt his face burn red; had she seen that? Elissa continued before Tom could respond. 'Still, you're right; that's not why he doesn't like you.'

'Then why?'

Elissa sighed and came to a stop, turning to Tom with an earnest look on her face. 'Harret has had a hard life. His father, one of the first raiders when it became clear messengers were no longer needed, fell to returners when Harret was three years old, and his mother died of grief soon after.'

'Of grief? Is that possible.'

Elissa waved her hands dismissively. 'Not directly. She was so distraught at the loss of her beloved that she stopped eating, and barely slept. Eventually her body just stopped working. She returned in their home one night and Harret, four years old at the time, was in there with her.'

'Bloody hell!' Tom gasped, imagining a child, barely out of nappies, trapped in a room with a flesh eating monster that looked exactly like his mother.

'Yes,' Elissa said, 'it's a harrowing tale, and all the more so because Harret was the one that put her down.'

'How could a child have taken out a returner?'

'Luck, I guess. His father's hunting knife had been nearby, he grabbed it quickly and his mother – that is; the returner – fell on it as much as Harret thrust it. It went through her eye socket. They found Harret the next morning, covered in his mother's blood and sobbing over her body, though he'd long since run out of tears to shed.'

'That's horrible,' Tom said quietly, not knowing what else to say.

'Yes, it is. It affected him – obviously – and he wasn't easy to get along with as a child, but Bran and I persisted and he eventually came around.'

'Bran and Harret used to be friends?'

'Oh, yes. Very close friends.'

The image of the two men who, to Tom's observation, had shared little more than cold courtesy during the journey back to the Brook, being close friends didn't seem to sit right, but that was a story that could be heard later. He said, 'That horrific story would explain things if Harret treated everyone the same, but he seems to have a special reserve of bile for me.'

'Don't you see?' Elissa said, resuming the walk, 'Harret resents you because you haven't suffered. To get to where we are now, we have all endured some kind of suffering. Everyone in the Brook has lost a loved one and known that, in the end, they became a mindless, flesh-eating monster. Some of the unluckier ones, like Harret, will have seen it happen first hand, or had to put down people they knew. It's almost a rite of passage at this point; few people reach adulthood in the Brook without some kind of trauma in their life.'

'And then you come along, a grown man without a mark on you, having skipped the horrors of this world entirely.'

'But that's not my fault!' Tom said. It was almost a wail.

'You asked why he doesn't like you, I never said he was justified,' Elissa said with a shrug, and Tom thought to say more but he could find no words that seemed worth saying. He lapsed into silence, and they walked the rest of the way without talking.

Very faint sounds of conversation filtered out from the crowded pub as they approached, and the sky was turning from purple to black. Elissa looked at it with concern.

'I should head home, I don't like to burden the guards with needless travel after curfew.'

'So don't,' Tom said simply, 'Galleon has more rooms than he knows what to do with. He finds most of his lodgers in people who've drunk more than their legs can handle. Honestly, he's glad of any company that can talk coherently and doesn't drool on the tables. Bran and Jim have a room, too.'

'Well,' she said with a smile as she walked through the door that Tom held open, 'you seem to be settling in well, don't you?'

Tom followed, averting his eyes from her shapely behind for fear of being caught. 'I've been staying here since I arrived in the Brook and I haven't been getting much sleep, and people can be very talkative in Galleon's. That kind of thing makes it easy to fit in.'

They climbed the short but steep stairs into the packed taproom. Old Jim and Bran sat at a table near the centre, just two faces in a crowd of perhaps thirty. Though it didn't seem like an overly large number of people, the pub was full from wall to wall. Every seat had an occupant, and that still left a quarter of the people standing. It suddenly struck Tom that the occupants of the pub in that moment represented nearly a third of the entire population of Charles Brook. Perhaps even the world, for all Tom knew. It was little wonder that there were few secrets kept in the village, and this room was probably the epicentre of rumour and gossip.

A watch guard – one whom Tom had not previously met – was standing as still as stone against the far wall, looking at nothing in particular, which seemed odd as the guards didn't usually come to the pub while on duty until it was time to escort the late night revellers quietly to their homes.

'Tom!' Bran called cheerfully when he caught sight of him. 'We were beginning to think you weren't coming,' his eyes fell on Elissa as she and Tom struggled through the press of seated bodies to Bran's table, 'and you brought a friend,' he added, with less enthusiasm.

Tom offered Elissa the stool that Bran had saved for him, and began pushing his way through to the bar to get her a drink.

'A small glass of rum, please,' she said in answer.

'Small is not a problem,' Old Jim cackled, 'try getting that crook to pour a real measure!'

'I heard that!' Galleon shouted over the noise of conversation.

'How are you going to fit all these in for the night?' Tom asked the landlord jovially as he reached the bar, 'you don't have that many rooms!'

'I'm not, only you three are staying the night, everyone else is going home with the escort.'

'Is that safe?'

'Let's be honest,' Galleon said, pushing the rum across the counter, 'inside the Brook's walls' as safe as you get. Curfew's more for keeping the noise down and making the watch's life easier.'

'How so?'

'If they see anything moving inside the walls at night that they weren't expectin', they know to treat it with suspicion. And, perhaps, a pointy stick,' he added.

Tom laughed, and thanked Galleon for the drink. Trade in the Brook was a mix of haggling and a kind of personal credit, and Tom had done a lot of heavy lifting for Galleon in the past few days, enough to cover his drinks for a good while, at least. He struggled back to the table fully expecting to have to stand, but he found that Bran had secured a stool from somewhere. He looked around the crowded room, taking in all the faces of the other standing people, and hoped the former occupant of the stool wasn't too put out about being made so.

'Isn't this a bit loud?' he asked as he sat down, passing Elissa her drink. The packed taproom was noisier than he'd heard it in his short time in the Brook. He noticed that Bran had placed Tom's stool between himself and Elissa, which seemed odd as it forced Bran further over, squashing him up against the occupant of a stool behind him, when Tom could have sat on the other side of Elissa with considerably less disruption.

'Did you hear anything on your way in?' Bran asked. Tom thought back. He'd heard the muffled talking and footsteps, that was true, but, he had to admit, nothing that had betrayed the existence of such a full and lively taproom. Bran turned to the guard stood by the wall and said, 'Frank, give the wall a good thump, will you?'

The guard, who Tom was sure had been paying little to no attention to anything anyone had been saying, snapped his attention to Bran in an instant and, craning his head to hear the words, promptly obliged. He gave the wall two hard wraps with his balled fist, and then went back to staring into space as though nothing had happened, apparently unconcerned as to why he'd been asked to assault the building.

'The walls of the taproom are doubled up, and the gap between them is stuffed with a mixture of earth and wood shavings. The windows have two pains of glass, too.

'Double glazing?' Tom asked, surprised, but no one seemed to recognise the term, and Bran seemed content to ignore it.

'We found the glass in the back of a big car on one of those wide roads.'

'Motorways?' Tom suggested, expecting no more recognition than he'd received for his knowledge of the glazier profession and, sure enough, Bran shrugged non-committally.

'Could be,' he said, 'there weren't many panes in there, but the glass was all intact, even after all this time, so we brought them back. Only the pub and Brook Hall have them, though. Not enough to go around the whole Brook.'

Tom nodded. He took a sip of his drink and winced as it hit his tongue. It was a Galleon-brewed concoction, and it tasted vaguely of apples. Still, the taste was more unexpected than unpleasant, and Tom figured, quite correctly, that it wouldn't be an issue by the time he was ready for a second mug.

'Why is he here?' he asked, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and nodding towards Frank, who didn't seem to have moved a muscle since the wall thumping incident.

'Crowded pub,' Bran explained, 'it's good to have a guard here in case people get a little too merry.'

'Merry, yes,' Jim said, 'or dead.'

'Jim!' Elissa said in a voice that might otherwise have been used to reprimand an embarrassing grandparent, but Jim merely smiled the smile of mischievous elderly people everywhere.

'What do you mean?' Tom asked, ignoring Elissa.

'I mean,' Jim said with a smile, 'that when you get to my age, people start to worry about you.'

'That's not surprising; people here like you,' Tom said.

'That's kind of you to say, old man, but that's not what I meant.'

'Jim, we don't need to talk about this,' Elissa said, though there was more plea than warning in her voice this time. Whatever the issue, it clearly made her uncomfortable.

'Hush girl,' Jim said wearily, 'it's no dirty secret.' He turned back to Tom, 'It's rare for people in the Brook to reach old age – more often they die of sickness or some injury before they ever see fifty – but when they do, you need to start looking at the bigger picture.'

'That picture being quite gory,' Bran said with a grin, ignoring Elissa's stare and finishing his drink in one swift movement.

'I'm not following,' Tom said.

'I'm blessed to have lived so long, but there is considerably more life behind me than in front. It's good to have a guard around just in case.'

'In case of what?' Tom asked, almost annoyed now. He was beginning to think he understood, but he wanted to hear someone say it.

'In case my heart pops a valve and I'm in the middle of a crowd of people,' Jim said brightly. 'It takes less than a minute for a dead man to become a returner, however they became dead.'

By look of discomfort on Elissa's face, Tom guessed that this topic was taboo, and he had no desire to upset her further, so he said no more on the matter and the conversation soon drifted into more comfortable waters. They talked long into the night about things like cars, fast food, the internet, and more, and Tom soon realised that Bran, Jim and Elissa weren't the only people in his audience. Before long, he found himself taking questions about the world before The Returning from most of the taproom.

And, for the first time in over a hundred years, he really enjoyed himself.

Seven

Bran was waiting in the taproom when Tom reached the bottom of the stairs the next morning, a warm smile across his slightly scarred face.

'I was wondering when you'd get your backside out of bed,' he said. 'Have you eaten?'

'Yes,' Tom said, though his breakfast that morning had consisted of little more than half a loaf of hard bread and a cup of sweet tea. Still, Tom wasn't to complain.

'Good,' Bran said briskly, 'because you'll need your strength for today!' and he turned and left, leaving Tom to follow in his wake.

Tom hurried after him, noticing with pleasant surprise that the pain in his shoulder was so faint now as to be almost gone, though the aching memento of last night's alcohol consumption was making a valiant effort to fill the void. He caught up with Bran walking across Brook Square.

'Where are we going?' he asked.

'Training,' Bran said simply.

'Training for what?'

'Combat! You've spent a week following the patrols around and sitting on the towers, it's time you participated. Besides,' he added with a smile, 'it will take your mind off of your old life. You won't have time to dwell on much in combat training, Thump will see to that.'

'Thump?' Tom asked, struggling to keep up with the conversation through the throbbing in his ears.

'Combat instructor,' Bran explained. 'He trains the youngsters so that they can protect themselves when they become oldsters, like us. I don't know if you've seen him, but you'll probably have heard him; the man's voice is like a thunderclap!'

Tom thought back to the thickset, grey-haired man barking commands at the children in the training yard and asked, 'Why do they call him "Thump"?''

'Oh,' Bran said with relish, 'you'll like this one! Supposedly, when he was younger, he was a messenger, which is basically a raider with mail to deliver. Anyway, he was on his way back from Tripperton – he'd been part of a team sent to find out why we'd not heard from them for so long – and, on the journey home, they came across a small band of returners.

The group leader, whose name I forget, wanted to go around the returners and leave them be, rather than risk injuries by facing them, but Thump had other plans. He was enraged by what he had seen at Tripperton, and I guess he wanted to take his anger out on something. When he went for the returners,

his fellow messengers had no choice but to join him; as big as he is, he would have had no chance against seven of them alone, so it was a case of help him, or leave him to die.

'They dealt with the returners relatively easily, but the last one standing very nearly took bite out of the group leader, and might have had him if Thump hadn't intervened. He came down on it like an avalanche, smashed its head to mulch with nothing but his bare hands.'

'Bare hands?' Tom asked doubtfully.

'Yep, bare hands,' Bran repeated. 'The returner's skull could have been brittle, if it was one of the older ones, but even so, Thump broke every bone in his hand.'

'Is that true?' Tom asked, 'Or just another story?'

'No idea,' Bran admitted cheerfully. 'It happened before my time. Thump's right hand is a scarred mess. He can barely close it around a spear shaft or sword hilt, and I've seen him wincing in pain when he flexes his fingers, but I guess he could just as easily have done it falling over, or something. That's why he trains the youngsters, though; there's no place in the wild for a one handed messenger.'

Tom thought for a moment before saying, 'Is the training hard?'

'Well, it's no Salford Massage, that's for sure, but it shouldn't be too bad for you; worst bit is seeing your first returner, and you've already done that.'

'What's a Salford Mas— never mind, I don't want to know. So I'm going have to fight a returner?'

Bran laughed, 'Not in your first session! We wouldn't have many people in the Brook if we just tossed all the kids at the nearest returner for the experience, would we? Anyway, if you want to join the watch, you'll need to get used to the idea of facing returners; part of the training for a would-be guard is spending a day in the forest with the other trainees.'

'That sounds terrifying.'

'It's nothing,' Bran said dismissively, 'if you want to be a raider, you have to spend the night in the forest as well!'

It only took a few minutes to navigate the maze that was Charles Brook, much of which Tom spent wondering how much force it would take to smash a skull to mulch. A lot, he decided. Probably more than any man – even one as big as Thump – could deliver with a punch. Still, there was no denying that the man did have strength. Tom remembered the broad shoulders and the strong hint of muscle visible even through the loose-fitting woollen clothing. That kind of muscle would be impressive on any man, but on a man in his sixties it was even more so. Even a little unnerving.

He considered his own ability, and how he might fair against a returner. He had studied Shukukai – a discipline of Karate – for six years as a child, but it was a long time ago and, in any case, he had quit as a teenager and never looked back.

They found the training yard almost empty. Almost. Tom saw, with no small amount of apprehension, that Harret and Holter were practising in one corner of the yard. Harret stopped at Tom's approach, briefly fixing him with a cold glare before turning his attention back to Holter, who simply gave Bran and Tom a nod and went back to their training.

'He doesn't seem too pleased with you,' Tom observed, noting that Harret didn't so much as wave to Bran.

'Harret and I work together,' Bran said dismissively, 'we haven't been more than that since we were children.'

'If you don't get on, why work together?'

'Because I don't particularly fancy the idea of going raiding on my own; the three of us are the only raiders in the Brook right now.'

'Tom Keighley,' said a deep growl of a voice from across the yard as, with a duck of the head, Thump stepped out from the armoury. He was carrying one of the padded sticks that Tom now knew as training swords, an equally padded helmet, and a hard leather vest.

'Yes?' Tom said, cringing as his voice came out in a kind of high pitched squeak.

'Put this on,' he said, dropping the leather vest at Tom's feet as he reached them. He tossed the padded head-wear to Bran, who nodded and pulled it over his head. Tom fumbled the hard leather vest on and Thump passed him the padded cane.

'That,' Thump said, indicating the cane, 'is your sword, and he,' he continued, jabbing a finger in Bran's direction, 'is a returner. Show me how you would defend yourself, and try not to hit him too hard, the padding's not as protective as you'd think.'

Tom looked at Bran uncertainly, but he merely grinned, let out an almost comical impression of a returner's growl, and lunged at Tom. Caught off guard, Tom barely managed to lift his padded cane in time, but it only bumped feebly off of the front of Bran's head guard as he bore Tom to the ground.

'Stop,' Thump said in a voice so weary that it might have been the hundredth time Tom had failed, rather than the first. 'You are now dead, Tom Keighley, returners have inhuman strength. If they get you on the ground, you may as well start making your peace with the gods. Up!' Bran pushed himself off of Tom, and Tom got to his feet. 'Again!' Thump bellowed.

Bran came at Tom again, and this time Tom got his cane up quickly, but not quickly enough. Again, the practice sword struck Bran's head guard, but the impact would barely have been enough to break skin, had it been a real blade. It certainly wouldn't have cleaved any skulls asunder! Again, the air was expelled from Tom as he hit the ground hard with Bran on top of him. Bran seemed to be enjoying himself, though, and made a show of wagging his tongue around like a low budget monster from an 80s horror movie, all the while making strange growling noises.

'Get up, idiot!' Thump snapped, and Bran obliged with a smile and a wink in the trainer's direction. Thump narrowed his eyes at him, but turned his attention back to Tom. 'Returners might not be able to move particularly fast, but they're not slow. If they're within five strides of you, you can forget swinging your sword.'

'What use is a sword if I can't swing it?' Tom asked shortly, getting to his feet.

'If the returner is too close for you to swing your sword,' Thump said slowly, as though talking to a particularly slow child, 'put some distance between the two of you.'

'How?'

'Figure it out,' Thump said abruptly, and nodded at Bran.

Again, Bran lunged at Tom. This time, however, Tom ducked under Bran's outstretched arms and spun around quickly. Before Bran could turn, Tom kicked the back of his leg, bringing him down to his knees, and brought the cane around in a wide, swinging arc, stopping it a short distance from Bran's neck. Bran smiled an approving smile, 'Fast learner,' he said, getting to his feet.

'Horse shit!' said another voice. Harret was marching across the training yard. 'You're going easy on him and you know it.' Harret strode over to Bran so aggressively that it seemed like he intended to attack him. Bran merely stood upright and stared at the approaching Harret impassively, though there was an air of intensity about him, like a coiled spring.

'Would you expect a child to do better in his first training session?' Bran asked evenly.

'He is not a child.'

'This is his first time in the yard, what difference does it make how many years he's seen?'

'Enough,' growled Thump, who had been watching the confrontation with a curious expression. 'This is his first time,' Thump said thoughtfully, 'but as I recall, Bran, you nearly beheaded Holter on your first try.'

'That is different,' Bran snapped, 'I grew up expecting this!'

'Still,' Thump said vaguely, rubbing his stubbly chin. He seemed to reach a decision. 'Harret, you will take Bran's place as the returner. I think Bran is going a little soft on his friend, and that will be

no help to anyone in the long run.' Bran opened his mouth to protest, but Thump cut him off, 'The same rules apply,' he said, and then, with a pointed look at Harret, he added, 'this is a training session.'

Bran seemed about to say something but his mouth closed and he remained silent. He pulled off the head guard and passed it forcefully to Harret, and Tom thought he saw a look of warning in Bran's face as he looked into Harret's eyes. If Harret noticed it, however, he showed no sign.

'Right, Tom Keighley,' Thump said briskly as Harret pulled on the head guard, 'the situation is no different; Harret is the returner, and you must end him before he ends you. Don't let him get hold of you, and don't let his mouth get near you. You can survive a bite, but they'll take a big chunk of you with them if they get the chance.'

Harret looked at Tom and grinned, though it was not the playful grin that Bran had sported before, and he dived. Much like with Bran, Tom ducked under the outstretched arms of the faux returner. Unlike with Bran, however, Harret's fingers found purchase in the back of Tom's tunic, gripping tightly and pulling the neckline against his throat. Tom crashed to ground with a thud, forcing all of the air from his lungs, which only added to the discomfort around his throat.

'You are dead,' Thump said flatly, and added, 'again. The returners may not be the fastest predator in the wild, but they can grip so tightly that you're as like to remove their arm before you pull free of their fingers.'

Tom got to his feet with a scowl. He remembered the grasp of the returner on his shoulder, and, as if in answer, a stab of pain shot through the nearly healed wound. He ignored it, his eyes focused solely on Harret.

Harret lunged again. This time, Tom advanced directly, bringing his cane up to strike at Harret's neck, but he was not quick enough and Harret was on him, baring him to the ground. Tom heard Thump say, 'Dead again!' but he wasn't really listening. Lying on his back, his face mere inches from Tom's, Harret spoke.

'Stay away from Elissa,' he said in a low hiss that only Tom could hear, 'or I will hurt you.'

Harret got off of Tom with a harsh shove, and Tom pulled himself up, rubbing his sore chest. He felt anger rising in his gut. True anger. It was the first time he'd felt enraged since waking in this strange new place. Harret had treated Tom with nothing but contempt from the start, giving him no chance to prove himself worthy of anything better, and now he was accusing him of ... what? Trying to steal Elissa away? He'd thought she was attractive, he couldn't deny that, but he'd barely spoken to her in the time he'd been in the Brook, and during those few times that he had, Elissa had shown little interest in the conversation, or him.

Tom was vaguely aware of the crowd that was now gathering around the training yard as he stood upright. He adopted no defensive pose, but merely stared at Harret with intensity. Harret recognised the silent challenge and sneered, as he prepared to charge again.

And all pretence was gone.

This was not the charge of a returner. Not the prolonged, shambling fall of a walking corpse, but the charge of a man intent on running through something, and he was fully determined to make sure Tom was that something. It didn't matter to Tom, though, he'd been expecting it.

As soon as Harret began to move Tom shifted his position and caught Harret's leading arm. Tom was rusty, but Harret was inexperienced at dealing with opponents who did anything more than stagger and gnash their teeth together. The throw used Harret's own momentum to flip him over Tom's back and send him sailing through the air. The sound of his body hitting the floor almost made Tom cringe, but he moved quickly, and before Harret had stopped sliding along the dusty floor, the padded cane was at his throat.

A silence fell on the yard that was velvety thick, but it was soon broken.

'A novel approach,' Thump said, 'but they don't feel dizzy, or care for balance. They will try to grab at you with the same vigour when they are upside down and airborne as when they are upright and on the ground, and what do you think would happen if a flying returner got hold of your shirt, or hair? No; distance is the key. Keep their hands and mouth away from you. Kick at their chest to send them backwards if they get too close, but deal with them from a distance. Again.'

Harret got to his feet with a sneer on his face and rage in his eyes. Had Thump even noticed the way Harret had attacked Tom? They took up positions once more, and Harret came at Tom with, if anything, more zeal than before. Tom knew he didn't have time to use the cane effectively so, following Thump's advice, he thrust his foot forward at chest height. His shin clashed with Harret's elbow, and even Thump could see that it was no accident as Harret drove Tom to the ground rugby tackle-like, with so much force that the air was completely driven from his body.

'Don't forget your role here, Harret Gulliver,' Thump said quietly, with unmistakable warning in his voice. Harret merely grunted and resumed his position while Thump helped the wheezing Tom to his feet.

Tom took a moment to catch his breath before giving a nod to say he was ready. Harret moved again, slower this time, and more in keeping with his role as the returner, but it wouldn't have mattered to Tom. He dropped the padded cane, drew his fist back, and revelled in the momentary widening of Harret's eyes as he realised – too late – what Tom was doing.

The impact seemed to happen in slow motion.

Tom heard something crack, and until the stab of pain shot up his arm like a lightning bolt, he hadn't been sure if it had been his knuckles or Harret's jaw. He just hoped he hadn't broken anything. It was a crude move and the soreness of the knuckles on his right hand was testament to how poorly executed it was, but the momentum of Harret's charge added to the force of the blow, and Harret was lifted wholly from the ground. His legs continued onward for a prolonged instant, even as his head ceased motion entirely, and they swung upwards to the point where Harret was almost horizontal. Gravity soon took over, though, and he crashed to the ground.

'Harret!' yelled a familiar voice from some way down the street. Elissa was running towards them; she must have stepped around the corner just in time to see Tom strike Harret, because the look she gave Tom could have melted iron. She skidded to the ground by his side, lifting his head gently and prying open one eye with thumb and forefinger.

Harret grunted. His eyes focused on Elissa, and he jumped, but his face softened when he recognised her. The softness vanished as he caught sight of Tom and his faculties returned to him.

'Here to check on your lover?' he sneered at Elissa, and in that moment Tom pitied Harret, for the expression on Elissa's face was far more fearsome than anything Harret could have managed.

'Do I look like I'm here for him?' she snapped, waving a hand at Tom as though he were a matter of smallest interest. 'Am I checking him for injury? Am I holding his head,' she let Harret's head fall to the ground with a thump, got to her feet and began walking purposefully away. She stopped at the edge of the yard and spun around, fixing Harret with the same glare once more, but when she spoke, her voice was almost too quiet to be heard. 'If you carry on like this, Harret, I might have to rethink our betrothal,' and she turned again, and left.

She might have taken all of the sound in the Brook with her as the silence that fell in her wake was thick and heavy. Bran walked over to Harret, who was still on the floor, and held out a hand to help him up. Harret shoved the hand aside, rolled onto his front and pushed himself up easily. He rubbed at his jaw where the blow had landed and glared at Tom with murderous eyes. Without a word, he stormed off followed by Holter, who gave Bran an almost apologetic smile and shrug as he went.

'That was an impressive strike,' Thump said when Harret had disappeared from view, 'but it would do nothing to a returner. They don't feel pain, they don't get knocked unconscious, and they don't get angry and make silly mistakes like humans do. Now pick up your cane. Practice isn't over.'

Eight

Tom ached all over.

He ached in places he couldn't remember ever having ached in before and, worse still, he knew those aches would only ache all the more in the morning. Still, it had been a useful diversion from the constant sense of grief he had felt since his memory had returned.

It had been an education, too.

Anything Tom might have known about self-defence or fighting in his previous life was useless now. Fighting in the Brook was uncommon, and most of the people in there would live their entire lives without ever having a physical confrontation with another human being. All of their training was geared toward dealing with returners. Tom hoped that this was the main reason for the commotion that followed his altercation with Harret, but he doubted it.

News of the incident had spread through the Brook like wildfire, and Harret had not been seen since he'd left the training yard. It hadn't been a problem at first – Harret was more than capable of looking after himself – but night was approaching now, and Harret was still nowhere to be seen.

'We need to go look for him,' Elissa said in a tone that brooked no argument.

'None of the guards have seen him leave, Elissa,' Jennifer said wearily.

'There are a lot of ways he could have left without being noticed,' Elissa insisted.

The council sat in silence, each deep in their own thoughts. Tom and Bran had been asked to join the council, though Tom wasn't sure how he would be of use to anyone. He'd learned that Harret and Elissa were a known couple in the Brook; a kind of mishmash of high school sweethearts and the celebrity couples that used to grace the covers of gossip magazines in Tom's day. Any significant event in their relationship was sweet meat to the rumour mill.

'Why are you all sitting there? Why aren't you sending word for a search party?' Elissa demanded. She railed on Bran, 'Go! Gather a team together and find his trail before it's too cold to follow.'

'Wait,' Jennifer said at last. She looked at her sister with a kindly, sympathetic expression that almost seemed alien on her usually stern face, and said, 'Supposing he did leave; it is too dark, Elissa. Sending people outside of the walls at this time would be foolish, and very nearly suicidal on the part of the search party.'

'Our people spend nights outside of the wall!' Elissa snapped.

'Moving as shadows in the night,' Jennifer said wearily, 'a search party can do little without sight. They would need torches. And they would travel noisily, for they would need to shout for Harret, lest they pass by him without his notice. All of these things would draw attention.'

Elissa turned on Bran again. 'Are you afraid of the dark? Would you let your raid leader die alone because you are too scared to face the night?'

'It is not the night I fear,' Bran said defiantly, 'if we walk into the wild shouting amidst a blaze of torchlight, we could find ourselves surrounded by returners and not even know it until they are tearing out our throats! And if we go silently under darkness, we're as like to find a Tripperton messenger as we are Harret, if he doesn't want finding.'

Elissa's mouth opened and closed in silent indignation, unable to find the words she needed. Eventually she spoke, but her voice was quiet and calm and, Tom thought, dangerous.

'This is your decision, fellow council members? You will leave my betrothed to die alone in the night, despite all he has done for us?'

'Harret is strong and not unwise to the wild. If any man can survive alone outside the wa—'

'He is drunk and you know it,' Elissa growled, 'there are worse personality traits than a bad temper.'

'Even under the influence, I'm sure that—'

'Don't try to comfort me, sister,' Elissa snapped, the last word escaping through a sneer of disgust, 'you have tried to control my life ever since mother died. I know you never approved of Harret, but it was never your place, and I will not let the night take him just so you can push someone on me who is more to your liking!'

Elissa stormed out of the hall and into the deepening dark of the evening, ignoring the pleas for calm from the council. Jennifer sat in silence for a moment, her mouth still open around the words she'd been about to say. She looked genuinely dumbfounded. Eventually, she shook her head as though to clear it.

'Ideas?' she asked the room at large.

The council talked for a full hour on the best way to go about finding Harret, and more importantly, to hear Jennifer tell it, how to deal with him when he was found. It seemed that Harret had been ruffling more than a few feathers lately, and people were beginning to look to the council to reign him in.

'I think,' Old Jim said eventually, getting awkwardly to his feet, 'that we have achieved all we can tonight.' He looked at Bran, and Tom noticed that the old man was shifting uncomfortably as he stood up, 'Take out a search party as soon as the sun permits it, we can worry about Harret's attitude once he's safely back inside the walls.'

'Are you okay?' Tom asked.

'Fine, fine,' Jim said, waving a dismissive hand, though the other hand moved to his chest and Tom thought he saw the tips of those fingers start to whiten as they clutched, 'I just need sleep. I am going to retire for the night.'

The assembled people watched Jim struggle out from behind the council table. 'Do you want me to walk you home?' Tom asked. He'd grown fond of the old man, and it made him uncomfortable to see him struggling.

'Don't be soft,' Jim said with a pained smile, 'I only live around the corner.'

He hobbled over to the exit, breathing much heavier than he usually did, and the ever present guard – Frank again, that night – began to follow him out. Tom looked around the room, but Bran and the remainder of the council were now talking animatedly about Harret and making plans for the morning. By the sounds of it, Steve and Coke didn't agree with the decision, which they were out-voted on.

'Do you still need me here?' Tom asked.

'What?' Council Steve asked, looking at Tom as though he'd momentarily forgotten who he was, 'No. You can go.'

Tom nodded, and started to leave, just as things became heated. Frank stopped at the door as Steve and Bran came nose to nose.

'I say you're a coward,' Steve growled, his big muscles bunching like rocks in a sack.

'Really?' Bran replied evenly, looking up at the taller man, 'would you like to go search for him, cutter?' Bran spat the last word in the same way another man might have said "peasant". Steve bristled

and, for a moment, Tom thought he was going to swing at Bran, but Frank stepped quickly between them, pushing them gently but firmly apart.

And then the row began in earnest.

Tom shook his head and turned for the door. Nothing he could do would make a difference here, but Jim barely looked able to walk under his own strength; the least Tom could do was help him to his home. He stepped into the darkness outside, pulling the door shut behind him, and marvelled at how loud the raised voices inside Brook Hall sounded from the outside.

So loud, in fact, that no one inside the hall would have heard the scream.

The darkness in the Brook seemed almost absolute, and Tom's eyes struggled to adjust as he stepped briskly away from Brook Hall. The sun was completely set now, and thick clouds blocked out the moon and stars and, with them, any hope of a decent visibility. Tom felt a sudden longing to be back inside the hall with the arguing council and, more importantly, the glowing lanterns. Or back in Galleon's pub, drinking some foul concoction of the old man's making. He shook his head, that line of thinking was doing nothing for his resolve.

The scream had been unsettling, sure, but it could have just been a nervous woman who had jumped as a bat landed on her open window ledge, or scared children breaking the curfew for a dare. A treacherous voice in the back of his mind pointed out that if ever the term "blood curdling" could be applied to a scream, it was that scream. Even if it was something sinister, the hushed whispers and footsteps of the many watch guards could be heard echoing around the Brook as they searched for the source, and that at least settled Tom's nerves a little. They would deal with it, and he would deal with Jim; if there was reason to be worried, Jim shouldn't be left to worry about it alone.

All of these thoughts passed through his mind in a heartbeat. He steeled himself, and set off in the direction of Old Jim's house.

Not a single ray of light escaped the many windows around the Brook, for they were all shuttered tightly for that very reason, and in the blackness each building loomed imposingly over Tom as he passed between them, silhouettes of absolute black against the blue-black of the night.

He caught sight of Jim around the first corner. Fifty yards or so along the narrow alleyway, the old man was hobbling along as though drunk. Tom was about to call out to him, but caught himself, remembering the strict rules about loud noises at night. Part of him wondered if he would be in trouble for being out alone at night, and what the penalty would be, but he pushed the thought away. Instead he quickened his pace to close the ground between them.

A parting in the thick cloud allowed a few thin slivers of moonlight to cast silvery shadows along the alley, and it became apparent that there was something strange about the way Old Jim was walking beyond simply seeming drunk. It was almost like he was falling down, without the down part. A cold feeling began to creep up Tom's spine as he remembered all that he had been told about returners.

He didn't have time to order his thoughts, however, as an intense pain shot up his leg. He looked down at his ankle and his blood ran cold as he saw a crimson hand wrapped around it. The grip was crushing, and Tom's involuntary yelp caught the attention of Old Jim, who turned slowly.

Jim looked almost exactly as he had in Brook Hall save for two significant differences. The first was barely noticeable in the silvery moon light, but Tom thought the old man's eyes had a vacant quality to them now. The second difference was not so subtle. Blood covered the lower half of Jim's head, and

most of his neck and chest. His gnashing teeth were stained black in the night, and Tom saw a piece of flesh hanging from his mouth.

His attention was drawn back to his ankle as the grip tightened, and he saw the face of a woman pulling herself jerkily towards his leg. He recognised the face as one of the weavers, a woman called Gretta. She was covered in blood and a large chunk of flesh was missing from her throat. A noise that might have been a growl before it passed through all the blood and ripped meat of Gretta's neck entered the world as a sickening gurgle.

Tom stamped on the grasping hand with his free leg, but the blow did nothing to loosen the new returner's grip and only caused Tom more pain as the arm wrenched against him. Worse still, the act threw him off balance, and as the creature that had once been a kind, polite woman pulled herself towards him once more, his balance disappeared entirely and he tumbled to the ground hitting his head hard on the damp, earthen floor.

Tom's vision blurred for a moment and he thought he might black out from the impact but he kept his consciousness at the expense of feeling an urge to vomit. The returner on the ground had pulled itself within range of Tom's leg, now, and its mouth opened, wide and expectant. To Tom, it seemed wider than any mouth had a right to be.

Tom swung his free leg around and drove his foot hard at the returner's head just as it was about to bite down on his shin, the kick pushed its head away, but it soon came snapping back. Tom kicked again, and again, and with all the strength he could muster, he drove his foot hard against the returner's skull one last time and heard a sickening cracking sound.

The returner's head snapped backwards, but this time it did not come back and the creature fell limp. Tom breathed a momentary sigh of relief.

Then he saw Old Jim.

The beast that had been his friend had closed most of the distance between them during Tom's struggle, and was nearly on him. Tom tried to shuffle backwards, but the dead woman's grip was as solid in death as it had been in, well, death. He found himself having to pull its weight as well as his own. He managed to move, but Old Jim moved faster.

Tom lashed out with his free leg again, and another crack echoed through the alley as his foot connected with Jim's left knee, breaking the old, brittle bones within and sending the dead man tumbling to the ground.

Immediately, Tom regretted it.

Now Jim's snapping, blood-stained mouth was down on the same level as Tom, and he was crawling forward with nearly as much speed as he had achieved on two legs. Tom heard a sound from somewhere behind him, but he dare not look, for Jim's mouth was nearly at his feet and readying to feast. The sound resolved itself into footsteps, but any relief Tom might have felt vanished when he realised that the footsteps were erratic and stumbling; footsteps like those of a returner.

Jim pulled himself onto Tom's feet, pinning his free leg, and opened his mouth wide to take a bite out of the living flesh before him, even as the lumbering footsteps reached Tom's head.

Tom closed his eyes and hoped it would be over quickly.

A slithering metallic sound caused him to open them again, though, and he saw the shape of a man above him. The man was unsteady on his feet, but he was not acting like a returner. For one thing, he had an evil looking jagged sword raised high above his head, the blade reflecting the orange torchlight of the guards that were, even now, running down the alleyway.

Harret brought the sword down on Old Jim's neck, and his head fell free, bouncing off Tom's thighs and rolling to a stop next to his head.

Tom watched in horror as Old Jim's head snapped feebly at him from mere inches away from his face. He shuffled sideways, putting as much distance between his extremities and Jim's decapitated head as his trapped leg would allow.

Harret stepped unsteadily over the body of the dead woman, and Tom realised that the raider's stumbling gait was due to the fact that Harret was completely and utterly drunk. Tom's eyes widened as Harret raised his sword once more, his unfocused eyes fixed somewhere in the region of the snapping head that was, at present, a little over a foot away from Tom's own.

'Wait!' Tom said, but too late.

To Tom's relief, the sword struck the thing that had been Old Jim's head – silencing it permanently – and did not accidentally remove any of Tom's limbs. Or on purpose, the treacherous voice in the back of his mind added. He looked up at Harret, and he could just make out something that looked, if possible, like an apologetic sneer.

'Conshider this an apology,' he slurred, 'for being an arse.'

The guards came to a thundering halt, shining torchlight on the gruesome scene. Blood was everywhere, and the head of the dead woman was tilted at an unnatural angle, blood trickling out of the mess where her temple had been.

'No problem,' Tom squeaked.

'Are you okay?' asked one of the guards, and Tom nodded fervently.

'I mean,' Harret continued as a guard politely relieved him of his sword, "s not like she'd ever be interested in you, is it?"

'No, you're probably right,' Tom said, a little bitterly.

'Where is she, anyway?' Harret asked, addressing someone behind Tom, and he looked up to see that Bran was approaching. 'Where's Elissa?'

'Are you okay?' Bran asked Tom, ignoring Harret's question.

'Yes,' grunted Tom, as one of the guards pried the returners hand from his leg with difficulty, and his foot began to tingle with pins and needles as blood flowed freely once more. Bran helped him to his feet, and Tom turned to Harret.

'Thank you,' he said earnestly, but Harret wasn't paying attention to him.

'Where's Elissa?' he repeated insistently to Bran.

'She's probably bouncing off the walls of her home,' Bran said, and when Harret gave him a quizzical look, Bran explained about the meeting with the council. Tom watched Harret's face as Bran spoke, and it seemed to him that the raider grew more sober with every word. Once Bran had finished talking, Harret set off at a fast walk without a word.

'Where are you going?' asked Bran, walking after him. Tom followed, not knowing what else to do.

'How long ago did she leave Brook Hall?' Harret demanded.

'Little over an hour ago,' Bran said, but Harret had broken into a run before he'd finished his sentence.

'She could be miles away by now!' Harret shouted as he ran.

Bran and Tom sped up to keep pace. By now, all the commotion had piqued the curiosity of the nearby residents, and shutters were being tentatively opened. Some were conscientious enough to put their lanterns out first, but not all, and light poured into the dark streets of the Brook as Harret raced through the square.

'Why do you think she would leave?' Bran asked, easily keeping pace.

'Because I know her,' Harret replied, 'if she thinks I stormed off outside the wall and didn't come back before nightfall, then she's gone looking for me. I'd do the same.'

'Where were you?' Bran asked.

For a moment, the only sound was the thumping of feet on the ground and heavy breathing, the heaviest of which was coming from Tom. Eventually, Harret spoke, but uncomfortably, 'In the armoury,' he said, and before Bran could question him further he added, 'with a bottle of rum.'

Perhaps Bran had some sympathy for Harret, because he didn't press the matter, changing the subject back to Elissa instead. 'How would she even get outside of the wall? A guard would have stopped her. At the very least, someone would have told the council that she'd left,' but when Harret said nothing, Bran persisted. 'Where would she go? She's no tracker; she couldn't hope to have followed your trail in daylight, let alone the dark of night.'

Harret said nothing, but slowed to a fast walk. They'd reached the wall, and he strode purposefully towards it, any traces of inebriation seemingly evaporated. No guards had followed the three men but a number of people were watching curiously from their high windows. Most were dark here, at the other side of the village to the incident, but some lamp light spilled out into the night.

Tom tried catch his breath while Harret came to a large lumber chest. It leant against the wall, providing dry storage for firewood, though Tom had never seen it used. Harret lifted the lid up to reveal the empty innards, but he wasn't interested in what wasn't inside.

As Bran and Tom watched curiously, Harret reached into the box, took hold of something and heaved. The base panel of the container came away with the strained squeak of wood on wood, and inside, black as pitch, a hole stretched down into the earth.

'I didn't know about this!' Bran said, in voice that suggested there was little Bran didn't know about, but again, Harret wasn't listening.

Without a word to the others, Harret climbed into the container and slid down into the darkness, disappearing under the wall. Bran turned to Tom, 'Probably best if you stay here,' he said apologetically, and leaped into the hole after Harret before Tom could respond.

He stood for a moment, considering his options. He had an overwhelming sense of guilt for the fact that Elissa was missing, which made him extremely angry with himself as he knew it was not his fault that she and Harret had fought over some imagined affection for Tom. Still, the guilt was not enough of a reason to put himself in mortal danger, was it? Perhaps not, he thought wretchedly, but you like these people.

Tom sighed, and climbed into the container.

Immediately he banged his head on something hard and, after grasping around blindly with his hands and biting his tongue, he realised it was a supporting beam for the wall. The thick planks were driven into the ground so that their points were nearly three feet below the surface, Tom knew, but, in the tunnel, the wall was supported by a bracing of timber as thick as Tom's waist. He ducked under it, forcing himself almost into a crawl, and began to climb the other side.

'What are you doing?' Harret hissed. Tom looked up to see him standing over the hole, one end of another wooden panel in his hand. The other end was being held by Bran.

'Helping?' Tom suggested.

Bran looked about to shoo Tom back inside, but Harret grunted, nodding his head sharply in a gesture that emphatically didn't care what Tom did so long as he got out of the way.

Tom climbed out of the hole, and the wooden panel was placed over it. He was surprised to see that the panel sat on a lip set well into the ground, and that it was covered in long, wild grass. Once it had been replaced it was indistinguishable from the rough grass around it.

Of course, in this darkness, he couldn't see much at all.

Harret leaned close to Tom and spoke in a voice so quiet that Tom strained to hear. 'Move slowly and quietly, and don't make a sound.'

And, without another word, Harret set off silently towards Brook Forest.

Nine

They moved quickly at first, with Harret setting a brisk pace, but the further into the forest they moved, the more cautious Harret's pace became, and before long they were moving at a speed barely faster than a stroll. Tom glanced back towards Charles Brook, expecting to catch sight of pursuing guards, but they had moved far enough into the forest that the upper branches hid the nearest guard tower from view. It had been empty, anyway; every watch guard in the Brook had come running to the alleyway where Old Jim had returned.

When they had put roughly a quarter mile between themselves and the Brook, Harret straightened and turned to face Bran.

'I don't know why you followed me,' he gave Tom a meaningful look, 'you especially, but I didn't have time to argue. People saw us leave through the tunnel, and Jennifer might just be stubborn enough to send guards after us, which can't happen. If you want to go back, now is the time.'

'I followed you for the same reason that would bring Jennifer to send guards after you,' Bran said with a hint of irritation in his voice, 'because no human life, no matter how stupid, should be thrown away.'

Harret sneered at the first council's name. 'She wouldn't send guards after me, remember, that's why Elissa went looking for me in the first place, but when she realises her sister is missing, well, that's different.'

'Jennifer does not have it out for you— never mind; I have a more important question. How do you know Elissa came this way, and why wouldn't you want the guards to help search for her?'

Harret looked unsure for a moment, and when he spoke there was reluctance in his voice. 'Because we promised.'

'What?' Bran said, bewildered, 'promised what? Promised to who?'

'When we were children, we found that tunnel during a game hide and seek. We talked about sneaking out for weeks to explore the forest, and, one day, we did.'

'We wanted to see if the lost settlers were real, so we went looking for them. We spent the whole day in Brook Forest,' Harret gave a sad little laugh. 'Our parents were furious with us. When we got home, it was dark and they were on the verge of forming search parties against the council's will, but we told them we'd been playing hide and seek all around the Brook most of the day and mustn't have heard their calls. We got away with a tongue lashing.'

'We travelled north through the forest for most of the day. I'd already started messenger training, so I knew enough to keep us from getting lost.'

'Most of the day?' Bran hissed, 'that would have taken you past the trenches!'

Harret nodded and, seeing the look on Tom's face, said, 'There is a city beyond the forest. It's more than a day's journey from the trees' end, but it's full of returners. They infest the lands beyond the trees. We might have one stray returner a month in the Brook, but if our grandparents had settled on the other side of the forest, it would be more like a returner every day, probably more.'

Bran took up the explanation, 'We dug trenches in the forest to funnel the returners away. They fall in, shamle around and walk out facing the way they came. Natural features make it difficult too; rock

faces, thick patches of trees – there is an almost unbroken line of obstacles cutting right across the forest,' Bran looked to Harret and added, 'it is very foolish to go past that line.'

'We were kids,' Harret said defensively, and resumed his fast, silent strides into the heart of the forest.

'Well, what happened?' Bran said shortly, moving to keep pace with him again as Tom hurried after them.

'We found them,' Harret said.

Nothing but the quiet sounds of feet on the forest floor could be heard for some time before Bran finally said, 'I'm sorry, what?'

'We found them,' Harret repeated, 'the lost settlers. We found them.'

'Like buggery!' Bran said, loud enough to earn him a sharp hiss from Harret. Bran continued more quietly, though the edge was still in his voice. 'If you found them, why haven't you ever said anything about it? Why didn't Elissa?'

'They told us not to,' Harret said, and Bran laughed mirthlessly.

'They told you not to? The bedtime stories and imaginary people told you not to tell anyone about them?' Harret didn't reply. 'Okay, then, supposing I believe you. Why would Elissa go to them?'

'Because when we were children, we'd talked about joining them. I still do.'

The silence that followed Harret's remark eclipsed the previous silence. Harret continued to walk for a full five seconds before he realised Bran had stopped dead in his tracks.

'What?' snapped Harret, coming to a stop.

'You and Elissa were going to leave the Brook?' Bran asked. He sounded as though he'd been punched in the gut.

'Yes,' Harret said, 'so?'

'You were going to leave Charles Brook?'

'Well, I was. Elissa was just young, she grew out of the idea quite quickly, but I still talked about it, on the bad days when the council needed too often or the Brook seemed too small.'

'But you wouldn't have left without Elissa, would you?' he asked, but hastily added, 'Why would you leave at all?'

Confusion flashed across Harret's face, but he shook it away before replying. 'It's better there. They live out in the open, unafraid. They don't hide from the returners; they deal with them.'

'Deal with them?' Bran said incredulously, 'What do we do? Any returners stumbling into our lands are capped and burnt as quickly as we can get to them!'

'You said it yourself, Bran, the Brook sees maybe one or two returners a month. We survive, but what good are we doing?'

'What do you mean? What does "good" mean?'

'What are we,' Harret said angrily, 'behind our big walls, doing to deal with the problem?'

'Problem?' Bran said, 'The returners? What do you expect us to do, go hunt them?'

'It would be a start. The lost settlers live in a land full of returners, and they fight them every day. In the hundred years since we've been here, they have made a noticeable difference to the surrounding area.'

'And you want to join these lunatics?' Bran laughed bitterly, 'I've never seen this side of you before.'

Harret shrugged. 'It's why I became a raider. I always thought it was the reason anyone would want to become a raider; Holter certainly took on the task for the chance to smash returner skulls together. I thought you might have been the same, Bran, but I should have known better. You're a sprinter, your purpose is to run away.'

For a moment, Tom thought Bran might bristle at the slight on his bravery, but he showed no signs of annoyance. Instead, he said, 'And Elissa shared these views?' When Harret didn't answer, he repeated, 'Elissa, she shared your views?'

'Not entirely,' Harret said.

'Then why would she go?'

'For me,' he said quietly.

'And you would have let her?' Bran shouted. He stopped, took a deep breath, and said quietly, 'You selfish bastard.'

In that moment, realisation dawned on Harret's face. 'How long?' he asked, some of the anger draining from his face.

'Always,' Bran said, all of the anger draining from his.

Tom knew that, in Harret's mind, all the pieces were fitting together like a jigsaw, and he was seeing past events with new eyes. Whenever Bran and Elissa had been in the same room, there had been a strangeness and a tense air between them. Bran was almost openly hostile towards her, an attitude that was at odds with his generally easygoing nature. She, in turn, seemed to be permanently apologetic toward Bran. The three of them had been very close as children but somewhere along the line, Elissa had chosen Harret for her betrothed, and the pain of that betrayal showed in Bran's face now.

Tom had only suspected as much, but certainty had come only a short time after leaving the Brook. Bran had seemed more surprised that Elissa had not told him about her sojourn beyond the Brook's walls as a child than he was with the fact that they had found the lost settlers.

To Tom's surprise, Harret's face softened. He reached out a hand to place it on Bran's shoulder, but Bran smacked it away violently.

'I don't need your pity now,' he snapped in an uncharacteristically hard voice, 'if she is willing to live a life she doesn't want for such a weak concept as love, she is welcome to it. Let's just find her, make sure she is safe and well, then Tom and I will head home, and you and Elissa can do as you please.'

Harret looked to be groping for words, but none came. Despondently, he began walking again.

They walked in silence for a time. The cloud overhead thinned and, eventually, cleared, allowing a bright gibbous moon to cast its eerie light on the forest, though most of it was lost in the canopy before it ever reached the floor. Still, compared to the darkness before, it was practically daylight to Tom's eyes. A fact that Tom was soon grateful for.

'I think something moved,' he hissed.

'We've seen it,' Bran said.

'Just ignore it,' Harret added, 'it's moving slower than we are. It won't catch up to us until we stop.'

'And then?' Tom asked.

'Like I said before,' Harret said, 'I didn't have time to argue with you or explain the situation back at the wall, but we will have to deal with returners before the night is through. You'd best accept that. There may be a couple here but once we're past the trenches, there will be dozens. Hundreds, maybe.'

Tom didn't say anything. He thought about the returner that had nearly ripped his arm off, and of Old Jim and the woman he had killed after his return mere hours ago, though it seemed like months, now. Whether it was numb shock or plain acceptance Tom wasn't sure, but he found that the thought of walking into an area full of returners didn't chill his bones like it would have done a few days ago. Of course, he might not have been so calm if he'd been alone. With that thought, another occurred to him.

'I don't have a weapon,' he said suddenly.

'Hells!' Harret cursed quietly, 'Never even leave your house without a weapon, never mind the Brook.' He pulled a small blade from the sheath on his calf and held it out, handle first, to Tom, who took it gingerly, surprised at how heavy the small weapon was. It was much larger than any knife Tom had ever held, but a far cry from the nightmarish sword that Harret had at his hip.

'If you have to swing it,' Bran said, 'swing it hard. There's no use sacrificing power for aim when hacking at a returner; striking it sweetly on the base of the skull will do no good at all if you don't hit it hard enough to break the skin.'

Tom nodded, and glanced again at the moving shape in the darkness some way behind and to his left. It was falling behind them, but they would be stopping eventually.

As the night wore on, Harret's pace increased to the point where they were moving at a light jog. It was for this reason that it was still dark when they reached the trenches, though the sky was beginning to lighten overhead. They had made it without running into any returners, though Tom had seen movement on the edges of his vision more times than he cared to count. As soon as he saw the trenches he knew that they would not be able to continue without facing the shapes in the darkness.

They cut through the earth seemingly at random, leaving no way past them that Tom could see. Each was roughly twelve foot wide and nearly half as deep. Occasionally, the long gouges in the earth would end at a fallen tree or rocky incline, and then continue where the land became smooth again. It would be little trouble for a person to climb in or out of them, but it was enough that it would keep any returners from escaping.

And there were a lot of returners.

Beyond the trenches the shapes of perhaps twenty figures staggering around aimlessly, spread thin across the forest floor, could be seen, but as the travellers moved silently up to the trenches, Tom saw the erratic mass within.

'With no prey,' Bran whispered so quietly that Tom barely heard him from half a foot away, 'they wander aimlessly. Most returners stumble out at the ends of the trenches eventually, but some will just keep bumping around in there for decades. That one,' he said, pointing to a grey skinned returner that had once been a middle aged woman, 'has been there since I came here as a child during my training.'

'How do you know?'

'She hasn't really changed much. Besides, that pendant around her neck has managed to stay on all this time.'

'OK,' Tom said quietly, watching the seething mass of returners wearily, 'how do we get across?'

'Through the trenches,' Harret said loudly, and over a hundred eyes snapped up at the sound.

The effect chilled Tom's spine. Had this been one of the zombie films he'd seen in his previous life, there would have been a tense moment in which the returners all stared balefully at the three humans, before anything happened.

That didn't happen.

At Harret's voice, every returner in earshot immediately began surging toward the living. Their eyes fixed on their prey as though they were locked gimbles. Tom flinched back as arms began to reach over the lip of the trench and claw at the dirt, and returners from the far side began stumbling towards them, the nearest ones falling in with the rest. Soon, the crowd became a press.

'Run fast,' Harret shouted, and took off, sprinting away to Tom's right along the edge of the trench.

Bran was on his heel quickly, and Tom set off after them. He glanced back to see the returners following, but they were slow and clumsy and constantly got in each others way. By the time they had run a few hundred yards there were only a few returners spread very thinly across the trench floor. Tom watched in horror as Harret leapt into the trench some way ahead, covering the width of it in one bounding step, and jumped up the other side with such ease that he barely needed his hands. Bran was

barely a second behind him, but Tom was not so fast. A few of returners were closing on the spot where Bran and Harret had crossed, and Tom hesitated long enough to see the hoard of returners advancing up the trench after them.

There must be over a hundred of them! Tom thought in the mental equivalent of a scream as he stared wide eyed at the press approaching. They were so tightly packed together that it was a wonder they were able to advance at all, but advance they did, moving forward like the breakers of a treacle thick ocean. Distantly, Tom became aware that a muffled voice was saying his name.

'Tom! Tom! Tom!' he heard Bran and Harret shout, their voices getting louder as he drew his focus from the returners and let the rest of the world in, as though cotton wool was being slowly removed from his ears. He looked at them in puzzlement. They were jumping up and down as they shouted, as though he hadn't seen the mass of walking dead coming towards him. A look of puzzlement crossed his face as he regained his composure; he wasn't in the trench, why were they so frantic? The returners couldn't get to him where he stood.

Realisation came with barely an instant to spare. Tom dived to his left, his heart pounding in his ears as he watched the returner that had just been about to grab him tumble forward into the trench. It didn't get the chance to get back to its feet, though, as the hoard reached Tom's position, trampling over their fallen comrade as they moved. Flailing arms reached out from both sides of the trench, fingers grasping for the three men.

'Just wait there a little longer,' Bran shouted over the din of dry groans, 'then run back down the way we came and cross where its clear.' Tom nodded, but his blood felt cold at the thought of getting into the trench. 'Now!' Bran shouted, and Tom ran.

He ran as fast as his aching muscles would allow, eager to find a section of trench that was completely unoccupied. His heart sank as he saw, far in the distance, another cluster of returners approaching from farther along. He was going to have to cross soon or he'd find himself running toward danger as much as he was running away from it! He stopped by the area he deemed clearest, and tried to ignore the sound of scuffling as a large portion of the returner hoard fought its way down the trench, leaving the rest to grope feebly for Bran and Harret. Tom took a deep breath, and pulled the blade from his belt.

He leapt into the pit, a million scenarios in which he stumbled and fell as he landed running through his mind as he flew through the air, but his landing was good. He had covered most of the width in his leap, and had only to pull himself up the other side, when a hand clamped around his ankle.

Fresh pain shot up his leg as the returner gripped tightly around the same bruised ankle that Old Jim's victim had grabbed only hours earlier. Tom looked to his right and saw the hoard getting closer, and his ears only made things worse by conveying the sound of the returners approaching from the other direction. Bran and Harret were sprinting along the trench behind the advancing hoard, but, though Tom was terrified, the fear did not paralyse him this time. Bracing himself for the pain, he tensed his leg and spun onto his back. His ankle spun in the returners grasp, causing a new tone in the symphony of pain as his skin burned from the friction. He thrust the knife forward with both hands, but the tip did not get through the returners skull, skidding along its forehead and leaving a horrific flap of dangling grey skin. Without so much as a heartbeat's hesitation, he drew the blade back in his right hand and brought it around in an almost graceful arc. The tip of the blade penetrated the creature's temple easily, sliding into the soft flesh and putting an end to the infernal spark within.

There was no time to feel relieved, however, the hoard was almost upon him. Tom didn't waste time trying to pull his leg free; his shoulder and the very same ankle that was now held by the corpse in front of him could attest to the futility of such an act. Instead, he began sawing at the returners arm. The effect was minimal. Though the blade was sharp, it was smooth and no good for sawing through something hard, like bone. Fighting the rising panic as the returners drew nearer, he began to hack at

the wrist wildly, nicking his own flesh in the process. This was more successful, but the blade still ran afoul of the hard bone of the returners forearm. Tom cursed himself for not cutting at the wrist, but he had no time to start again.

The front runners of the hoard were in his peripheral vision, now.

In desperation, Tom braced himself and kicked hard at the returner's chest. The arm separated from the wrist with a sound like splintering wood and old paper and, for an instant, Tom didn't move in confusion; he'd expected to have to kick at the corpse a few times at least. His survival instinct took over with almost no time to spare. He rolled away from the edge of the trench just as a grey, half-eaten arm swiped through the air where his leg had been, brushing against the fabric of his trousers.

Hands gripped him under the arms and heaved him from the ground. Tom tried to bring the knife around, but the returner was behind him, and he couldn't reach it effectively. Fearing that he would feel cold teeth sinking into his neck any second, Tom was surprised to hear the returner speak.

It said, 'Stop waving that damned knife around!'

It sounded like Bran.

Ten

'Sorry,' Tom said meekly, but Bran just waved a dismissive hand.

Most of the returners that had been near the trench on this side had toppled over the edge in their attempt to reach the three men, but more were filtering out from the trees now, and the growing morning light betrayed the presence of more still moving among distant trees. It was nothing like the press of the hoard in the trench, but there didn't appear to be a clear way ahead regardless. Harret seemed to have a clear solution in mind. He drew his blade and set off at a run.

The first returner to cross his path hit the ground with considerably less head than it had previously possessed, and Harret barely slowed. Bran was close behind him and Tom was left with no choice but to try and keep up, though he had struggled before, and now their pace was very nearly a sprint. He kept the large knife in hand, though he never had cause to use it. Between the two raiders, a wide path was cut through the closing tide of the dead.

They ran for the better part of an hour, and the number of returners never seemed to lessen. Still, neither did Harret and Bran's energy to dispose of them. Tom, however, was exhausted, and had long since began to fall behind. The feeling of relief he felt when Harret came to a stop was immense, and he collapsed onto his knees, gulping air into his burning lungs as his muscles screamed at him.

'Now what?' Bran said to Harret, but he didn't seem to be paying attention. Harret spun around wildly, as though looking for a familiar face in the closing circle of walking dead.

'Where are you?' he shouted.

'Where's who?' Tom asked, panic rising as the returners closed in. He forced himself to his feet and held his blade ready.

'Where are you?' Harret shouted again, louder this time, but no one answered. Tom and Bran exchanged uneasy glances.

'If she was here, I'm sure she'd have heard you, Harret,' Bran said, 'maybe you should pay attention to the returners!' the end of Bran's sentence came quickly as he swung his own sword, removing the top of the nearest returners head. 'Harret!' he shouted again.

Harret looked at Bran as though he'd only just noticed he was there and, shaking his head as though to clear it, he drew his sword. The nearest returner moved to within striking range of Tom, who raised his blade to strike, but, just as he was about to swing the large knife, the returner's head exploded.

One by one, the returners began to fall limply to the ground in various states of head trauma. Tom's mind, already addled from fear and exhaustion, could not wrap itself around this latest development, and so he looked to Harret, who was staring wildly at a spot in the distant gloom.

'Follow me,' he said after a moment.

Harret hopped easily over the bodies as he ran down the path cut open in the approaching returners. Not path, Tom thought as he followed, more like a parted sea. Even as he thought it, returners were filling in from either side, like water rushing to reclaim the land after the dam breaks.

'Where ... are ... we running ... to?' Tom gasped as he fought to keep pace with Harret.

'Don't worry about that,' Bran shouted from behind him, his breath coming as easily as if he were merely taking an evening stroll, 'just concentrate on the "running" part, let Harret worry about the "to".'

So Tom ran. The sun was almost up now, and light was spreading through the forest like treacle, pouring in between the bows of trees and casting erratic shadows on the floor. In that light, Tom saw figures directly ahead of them. He was about to call out, thinking that somehow Harret had not seen them, when his brain registered what his eyes had seen.

There were three men, not returners, dressed in some kind of rough shapeless garb, and they were very, very well armed. The lead man notched an arrow to a large bow, drew back, and released. The arrow soared passed Tom's head so close that he heard the air parting as it went. Some way behind him, a sickening wet thud told him that the arrow had found its mark. The other two men held long, curving blades with crude hilts that were little more than rough yarn wrapped around one end. As Tom watched, one of the men detached from the group and decapitated the head of an approaching returner casually, like a gardener clipping an errant rose stem.

'This way, child' the lead man said to Harret in a gravelly voice that betrayed a certain amount of anger. He turned and began running with them, his companions falling into step beside him.

They were, each of them, as lean and muscular as lionesses. They all had the same short black hair and stubbly faces and, unlike the raiders of the Brook, there didn't appear to be a scratch on them. They ran on for perhaps five minutes, until Tom's lungs were burning and his vision was blurring over. The area they were running through appeared to be clear of returners, though the occasional prone body on the floor told Tom that it had, probably recently, not been.

To Tom's relief, for his legs were on the point of giving way, they came to a stop in a small clearing. The lead man looked around and, seeing no returners in view, drove his hand into the ground. Tom watched in confusion, wheezing as he fought to catch his breath. The man seemed to be concentrating as his hand moved in the undergrowth. Then, with a grunt, he heaved and the ground opened up. Much like the cover to the tunnel under the Brook's wall, a trapdoor led underground. This trapdoor, however, was thicker and no doubt heavier. The hole was large enough to admit two people at once, though there was only one ladder.

'In. Now,' the lead man said with a certainty that seemed to preclude any other outcome. Harret moved into the hole without hesitation, with Bran following more cautiously. Tom stepped up to the edge and looked over to see a very deep circular hole with stone walls. Deep enough, in fact, that Tom could not see a bottom. Harret was already disappearing from view.

'You get in now, or you stay out here,' the man said simply.

Tom heard the approaching muffled groans and hastened into the hole. The ladder was rickety and dubiously fastened to the stone surrounds. Tom had severe doubts as to its safety, especially with six men on it. He hurried down as fast as his aching limbs would allow, and the three men above followed straight after, though from the sounds above, the last had found time to put down another returner before doing so. When there was enough space for the lead man to climb in he pulled the trapdoor shut, and darkness fell absolute.

'Keep going,' the man above Tom growled. A different voice, he was sure, but remarkably similar.

As slowly as he dared, Tom continued his descent, hoping that there were no missing rungs in the ladder and that the wood was not too rotten to hold his weight. He was surprised to find that his eyes were adjusting to the darkness, and he could see, very faintly, the ladder before him. For his eyes to adjust at all, Tom knew there must be light somewhere, even a tiny amount, and the trapdoor seemed be pretty definitive in cutting out the light from above. As they descended further, Tom found he could make out the stonework around him.

He could hear the sound of running water also, now that his heart had calmed to a point where its thump didn't threaten to burst his eardrums. He strained to look down, and saw a faint orange glow coming from a recess in the stone adjacent to the ladder. Harret was already scrambling across the gap into the recess as Tom watched. The hole continued downwards into blackness and there seemed to be running water on the edge of hearing. Following Bran, Tom made the precarious jump from the ladder to the recess, which turned out to be the entrance to a narrow cave system, and waited for the three men to join them.

Wordlessly the men, whom Tom assumed were the lost settlers, entered the cave, and the lead man set off down it leaving the other two to shepherd Harret, Bran and Tom after him. The cave looked, as far as Tom could tell, very old. It was full of jagged rock formations and things beginning with "stala". The natural tunnel curved slightly and sloped downward, gradually at first, but there were steeper sections and Tom found himself wondering just how far down it went. At seemingly random intervals, resin torches burned brightly along the rough walls, but it was clear that they were spaced to achieve the absolute minimum amount of overall light that was necessary to navigate through the tunnel without walking into any unpleasantly pointy rock. Each flame was protected from the slick walls and constantly dripping water by a haphazard assortment of items, from old ceramic plates to sheets of bent metal and, in the case of one torch, the trim from a car wheel.

'Where are we going?' Tom asked, not really directing his question at any single person, but the lead stranger answered.

'We are going to Tomac Cavern, our home, where Harret is going to explain to the council why he came to us shouting and screaming with outsiders in tow after we warned him never to tell anyone of our existence!'

Tom saw Harret tense slightly but remain silent as they walked. The journey through the cave was little more than ten minutes in total, but it was long enough for the cold to start to take hold. Tom had just wrapped his arms tightly about him, poor defence against the chill, when he became aware of a gentle gust of almost warm air. Looking past Bran and Harret, he saw why. The tunnel opened out into a cavern. A big cavern. It seemed wider and longer than the Brook and as high as any tree in the forest above. Torches burned like orange stars all around.

Sounds filtered through the twinkling darkness like voices in a vague dream. Tom could make out the shape of conversation drifting up, though he couldn't tell what was being said. The occasional bleat of livestock layered the human sounds and, through it all, the incessant sound of water running and dripping.

They were led down a winding path that was part cave floor, part wooden walkway, into the cavern proper, where two similarly and equally dangerous looking men were waiting.

'Your weapons,' said the lead man.

'Not a chance in—' Bran started to say, but stopped when Harret handed over his sword to one of the two men without hesitation.

'I suggest you follow your friend's lead,' said the man, and Bran, reluctantly, handed over his own blade, a look of pure disbelief on his face as he stared open-mouthed at Harret. Tom handed his knife over without quarrel, and they were ushered further into the cavern.

The contrast of this place with Charles Brook was startling, and not just because of its location. The buildings were made in a similar fashion to those of the Brook, but down here, they were not raised from the ground, and they were not shuttered to keep all light from escaping. Many windows glowed warmly in the sporadically placed huts, which numbered less than a quarter of those in the Brook, and animals roamed freely in the spaces between, drinking and eating from various troughs.

They walked across the uneven floor of the cavern, occasionally stepping around a sleeping sheep, or stopping as a pig ran across their path. At length, they came to a stop by what looked like the only defensive measure in cavern, a wall of thick logs encircling an area of perhaps twenty feet across. Bright, flickering light spilled out through gaps in the wood. The lead man grasped at a section of the wall, heaved, and a panel that must have weighed as much as Tom three times over lifted and swung out, admitting the group inside.

The only occupant already inside the wall was a young girl, barely a teenager, whose sole job appeared to be to tend to the fire that sat in a natural depression in the cavern floor. Sweat dripped from her brow, but that wasn't surprising; even with his back against the encircling wall, Tom felt the heat of the fire permeating his skin. It was good to be out of the cold, but he could see himself longing for the cold, dank caves again if he spent too long here. The lead man gestured for them all to sit on the lip of the depression, dangerously close to the blazing bonfire.

'Now,' the lead man said, 'would you care to tell me what in the hells you are doing, Harret Gulliver?'

'You remember my name?' Harret breathed, surprise clear on his face.

'Few people from your pathetic playpen of a village ever stray into our midst, I have not forgotten the only people we have let stray back out.'

The implication of his words was not lost on Bran, who looked ready leap at the man, but he seemed to restrain himself.

'Have you seen Elissa?' Harret asked.

'I have,' the man admitted, 'my question stands.'

'She ran off alone, looking for me. I came to find her before something happened to her. Is she here, Gaiman?'

'You remember my name also,' Gaiman laughed. 'She is safe,' he said, though there was an edge to his voice that Tom didn't like. 'What about these?' Gaiman gestured to Bran and Tom, 'We were quite clear about telling others of our existence, let alone our location.'

'They followed me,' Harret said, trying and failing to come across as casually dismissive, 'They won't tell anyone about you.'

'How can we know that? We trusted you to keep quiet. When you stumbled into our camp before, there were those who wanted to kill you, and keep the girl.'

Tom saw Harret's skin pale. He could well imagine what they would "keep the girl" for.

'You said that we could join you, when we were ready,' Harret said through gritted teeth.'

'We did that,' Gaiman admitted, 'but we did that some time ago. So long ago, in fact, that we assumed you'd had a change of heart. Our life is not one for the soft folk of the Brook; it wouldn't have

surprised us. And you were children. Had you not been, we would not have been so ... nice. In any case, we have a different problem now.'

'What problem?' Harret demanded, and the look on Gaiman's face said, in no uncertain terms, that he was unaccustomed to having demands made of him.

'Well, the girl arrived here alone. There has been sight nor sound of any other people, aside from your miserable lot, for decades. We may be the only humans left alive.'

'What does this have to do with Elissa?' Harret asked, but Tom was one mental step ahead of him.

'Breeding,' he said distantly.

'Exactly,' Gaiman said, almost gleefully, 'there aren't enough women left in the world for us to just let her wander out of here. Not when she could be so much more use to humanity if she stayed.'

'She is with me!' Harret snapped, but there was desperation in his voice.

'Are you married?' Gaiman asked, and, seeing the hesitation in Harret's face, cut off his reply, 'When you came to us before, you were children. We took pity on you, and allowed you to leave. You could have settled your affairs and returned to us to join our plight, but we never truly expected you to. Elissa is a grown woman now, a pretty one at that, and long past due for having a baby in her belly. We need all the people we can get, and a woman who can give birth and does not, is a woman not doing her duty to the species.'

'She will bear children,' Harret said, 'mine.'

'I would advise you,' Gaiman said in a calm but dangerous tone, 'not to take that tone with me again. She arrived alone, Harret, and many uncoupled men have already staked their claim on her.'

'Their claim?' The words were out of Tom's mouth before he could stop them.

'Who are you?' Gaiman snapped like a whip, 'and why do you think you can speak to me without first being asked?'

'You claim women?'

'Be quiet!' Harret hissed, but nobody listened.

'We are not barbarians,' Gaiman shot back, 'she is free to chose among the uncoupled men.'

'And if she doesn't want any of them?'

'Then the claimants will face each other in combat and she will couple with the winner.' Tom realised that Gaiman was intentionally angering Harret, now.

'Then Harret is putting in a claim in also,' Tom said.

'He is not of our people, he cannot claim a woman.'

'Elissa is not of your people!' a voice growled, and Tom was surprised to find it was Bran's. He had almost forgotten he was there, but he saw now that Bran had been sat, quietly boiling over as the others spoke. 'She is not from this depressing hole, yet you feel you have the right to stake claims on her as though she were livestock.'

The wrath in Bran's voice caught Gaiman momentarily off guard, like a bear being attacked by a salmon, but he recovered quickly. 'If Harret wishes to claim the woman, he will have to face the others in combat to earn the right. That is,' he added with a smile, 'if she doesn't choose one of our men first.'

'She won't,' Harret growled.

'And you understand,' Gaiman said dangerously, 'that you will not be leaving to tell others of us this time. You will be one of us, or you will be dead.'

They were led to a small isolated hut near the cavern wall and unceremoniously shoved inside.

'We will inform you of her decision,' Gaiman said, and, before slamming the heavy door shut, added, 'and ours.' After a few moments had passed, Tom gave the door a tentative push, followed by a more assertive push, neither of which budged it in the slightest. The hut was little more than a wooden shell, with no furnishing to speak of and only one dim oil lamp for illumination, which was fortunate as the hut had no windows. He turned back to Bran and Harret just in time to see the first punch land.

Harret stumbled backwards as Bran rubbed at his knuckles, but he didn't take long to recover and launched himself at Bran, using the wall as leverage. The two went down with thud and began scuffling like fighting school children, each trying to get the upper hand and, in turn, failing. It was clear to Tom that they'd never done this before.

'What are you doing?' Tom shouted, pulling Bran away from Harret with some difficulty and placing himself between them.

'Why did you hit me?' Harret snarled over Tom's shoulder.

'Elissa deserves better than you!' Bran said with venom, 'she wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for you. She should be—'

'Should be what?' Harret interrupted, but Tom, seeing where this was going, came up with an interruption of his own.

'Why are you fighting?' he snapped. 'What use is that to Elissa?' He turned on Harret, 'Will fighting with Bran get her out of this situation?' he said, and, sensing that Bran was about to speak, he whirled on him, 'and does hitting Harret change anything that's happened? Even if it is his fault that Elissa is here, it doesn't change the fact that she is here. We need to get her out.'

The two men looked angry, and Tom feared for a moment that they might both turn on him, but they deflated, seeing the sense in Tom's words.

'Harret,' he said, 'could you beat these people?'

Harret shook his head. 'When they aren't hunting returners, they fight each other for entertainment, they think it hones their skills. I could hunt with any of them, but fighting them is a different matter.'

'And what will they do to us?' Tom asked, gesturing to himself and Bran.

'They might give you the choice to join them,' Harret said awkwardly.

'Or they might kill us,' Bran shot angrily.

'Okay,' Tom said quickly, lowering his voice in case anyone was listening outside the door, 'fine, so we need to find another way.' He began feeling around the dark interior for some hope of escape.

'Even if—' Bran started to say, but he lowered his voice after a sharp look from Tom. 'Even if we can get out of here, what do you hope to achieve? There's a lot more of them than us.'

'I'll figure something out,' Tom said distractedly.

'What?' Harret sneered, 'Will you offer to lick their boots clean in exchange for our freedom?'

Tom stopped. He turned slowly to face Harret, keeping his expression even. 'Attack me,' he said.

'What?' Harret blurted incredulously.

'Attack me,' Tom repeated, hoping fervently that he wasn't making a big mistake. Harret shrugged. Bran was just about to offer up protest when Harret lunged at Tom.

Tom moved quickly, slipping to the side of Harret's charge and taking a loose hold on his wrist. Before Harret could react, his world spun violently and he was on his back on the cold damp floor. Snarling like an angry dog, he got back to his feet and went for Tom again, this time more cautiously. A jab intended for Tom's face met only air, and a second punch that might have found a kidney was blocked easily. Out of frustration, Harret threw a thunderous right hook, hoping to power through Tom's defence, but Tom caught Harret's arm and twisted it painfully, moving behind him. Holding the arm tightly, he said, 'I practised martial arts as a child. I may be out of my depth with returners, but put me against a normal man who feels pain and I'm far from useless.'

He shoved Harret away, and the raider turned, rubbing his wrist and fixing Tom with a deathly glare. Tom felt a rush of relief. In truth there had been little in the way of martial arts in what he had done; he could barely remember his training, but Harret was such an inexperienced fighter that it hardly mattered. Harret looked ready to attack again, though, but Bran spoke and his words seemed to bring Harret back to the bigger issue.

'This is all well and good, but unless we find a way out of here it doesn't matter if you can singlehandedly take down all of the lost settlers.' Harret glared at them both for a long moment, and then, grudgingly, he turned his attention to looking for a way out.

Finding one proved considerably less difficult than Tom had expected, but then, the settlers probably didn't have to keep hostages often. The wooden planks that made up the rear of the hut were rotten from the constantly dripping water and damp of the cavern wall and, as quietly as he could manage, Harret managed to break away a short section from the bottom of three of them, opening up a small hole that was just big enough for one of the men to get through. Harret moved to slide through, but Tom put a hand on his shoulder.

'You need to stay here,' he whispered.

'Like death I do!' Harret shot back.

'He's right,' Bran said with a sigh, 'if we all go, the guards are going to wonder why it's so quiet and check on us. Two of us need to stay here and make enough noise for three.'

'We don't even know there are any guards!' Harret hissed.

'There are guards,' Bran said wearily, 'they haven't exactly locked us in a vault.'

'Fine,' Harret said eventually, 'you two stay.'

Bran shook his head again, 'Tom is better at fighting people than either of us. It's the best chance we have.'

'That doesn't mean he'll be any use against them. I can move like a shadow; I wouldn't need to fight anyone,' but even as he said the words, it was clear that he didn't believe them. Whoever went may be able to find Elissa unnoticed, but she was unlikely to have been left alone.

Without another word, and with considerable reluctance, Harret moved aside.

Eleven

Tom struggled through the hole in the back wall, a feat made all the more difficult by the need for stealth. The hut was barely eight feet across and, like Bran, Tom was certain that there would be men guarding the door on the other side of it.

Stalagmites lined the floor around the edges of the cavern where they hadn't been hacked away, and Tom found a few of the smaller ones digging into his back as he tried to ease himself silently to his feet. Inside the hut, Harret and Bran started up an animated conversation that had all the hallmarks of an argument, but he didn't pay attention to what they were saying. He hoped that they could maintain the fake argument without letting it become a real one!

He crept away, silently thanking the Brook for the soft leather soles of his boots, which were so quiet as to be practically silent amidst the background noise of dripping and running water. The cavern opened up before his eyes – that were now fully adjusted to the gloom – and he could see more than just a darkness with shapes. It was huge, and many tunnel-like caves similar to the one they had entered through came to an end at the cavern's erratic boundaries. One such tunnel gushed water like an enormous running tap into a pool which, in turn, drained out through another lower tunnel.

Aside from that, there were few natural features that Tom might have exploited to get around unseen; the settlers had apparently cleared them all away, leaving an almost smooth and open floor to build on. The buildings really were spread thinly across the cavern floor. There was no clear way of moving from the hut to the central cluster of structures where Elissa was undoubtedly being held, not without walking in plain view of a host of windows, not to mention whoever was guarding the hut. Tom moved gingerly along the edge of the cavern until, sure enough, two men in front of the hut came into view. He watched them uneasily. All they had to do to catch him was turn around. Tearing his focus from the two men, Tom looked desperately for a way across the floor.

With the cavern wall behind him and the hut to his right, the central cluster of buildings lay off to Tom's left. There were no other buildings along the outer boundaries that Tom could see, and, in any case, reaching such a building would be of little help; he'd still have to get to the centre of the cavern. He noticed that the torches were just as thinly spread as the buildings, and darkness reigned in the areas where there were no huts. It wasn't the greatest plan, but he could see no other alternative. Silently, he made his way along the cavern wall for one of the darker, emptier patches of floor.

The guards mustn't have turned, for no cry of alarm or sudden footsteps reached Tom's ears. He leant back against the cold, damp cavern wall, feeling truly hidden in the velvety shadow, and scanned the scene before him. The hut that Bran and Harret were being held in was tilted slightly away from where Tom stood, so the guards were almost out of sight now. He would have to pass through the fringes of their peripheral vision, but he was counting on the shadows to help him there. More of a problem lay in his destination, however; there would undoubtedly be more men in the central cluster, and the brightly burning torches precluded any possibility of hiding in the shadows. There was hope, however.

The centre-piece of this subterranean village was the walled-off fire that they had been taken to when they'd first arrived and, from here, Tom could just about hear raised voices over the sound of rushing water. A meeting, he thought; probably deciding what to do with us. He moved forward quickly in the hope that his nerve would not have chance to fail, and crossed the open space with as much haste as he dared. He came to a stop at a wooden hut, much like the one he had left, on the outskirts of the central cluster, pressing his back against it. Almost fearfully, he looked over to the men guarding Bran and Harret but they seemed oblivious to him, and were having a lively conversation of their own, though Tom could hear none of it over the pervasive sound of the miniature waterfall, which was now closer to Tom than the hut. Slowly, he edged along the wall of the hut and peered cautiously around the edge.

The area seemed entirely deserted. The voices from the fire were louder here, and Tom could make out telling phrases like "outsiders", and Harret and Elissa's names. More huts hid the fire from view, but that was just as well; if anybody was standing outside the wall, the huts would be hiding Tom from their eyes also.

He moved down the side of the hut to get a better view of the area, and stopped dead as the backs of two men came into view. He pushed himself so hard against the hut wall that the wood left an imprint in his back. The guards didn't stir, and Tom breathed a silent sigh of relief. He moved around to the back of the hut that the men were guarding and was relieved to find that they were the only people around. At least, the only ones he could see. Everyone else, it seemed, was either at the bonfire or in their huts. He moved away from the corner to think, and cursed silently as his foot caught something small and loose on the floor. The stone skittered across the floor and, though he couldn't see them, Tom knew the two men would be making their way around the side of the hut to investigate the noise.

He didn't waste any time, moving quickly to the right side of the hut and thanking his luck that the men guarding Harret and Bran were blocked from view here by some of the other structures in the central cluster. As Tom had hoped, the two men had split up, working their way around to the back of

the hut from both sides. As cautious as the man on the right was, he was still surprised when Tom came at him.

He struck at the man's jaw with a bone jarring uppercut, rendering the him unconscious immediately but Tom didn't stop moving until he was behind the man. He caught the falling figure, lowering him to the ground quietly and quickly. Without wasting a breath, he ran around the front of the hut and kept going in pursuit of the other guard, trying to ignore the pain in his knuckles, which were still sore from hitting Harret in the training yard. Scooping a loose, fist-sized shard of stone from the ground as he went, he caught up with the second guard just as the man came into view of his fallen comrade, but he didn't have time to react as Tom brought the stone down on the back of his head. The guard fell to the ground and did not get up, and Tom hoped he hadn't hit the man too hard, but relief washed over him when it became clear that the man's chest was slowly rising and falling with the calm breath of unconsciousness. Tom turned his attention to the door.

'Elissa?' he whispered with his face pressed against the rough wood.

'Tom?' replied Elissa's voice from within, altogether too loud for Tom's liking. He tried to ignore the mix of disbelief and disappointment in her voice.

'Keep it down,' he hissed, 'I've come to rescue you.'

'My hero,' she said sardonically.

'Do you want rescuing or not?'

Tom took a step back and looked at the door. It was a simple affair that only earned the label "door" by way of the fact that it had hinges and was, more or less, the same shape as the hole it filled. A large piece of wood barred it shut. Tom carefully lifted the wood out of its cradle, placing it on the floor, and pulled at the door tentatively, cursing silently as the old rusty hinges creaked with what must surely have been the loudest noise in the Universe. The noise from the bonfire had not lessened, however, so Tom continued, opening the door only as quickly as he dared. When it was open wide enough for a person to squeeze through, he stopped and beckoned Elissa.

She stepped gingerly out of the hut, blinking in the torchlight. Unlike the hut that he had been locked in, Elissa's lantern had burned all its oil, and it would have been nearly pitch black inside when the door was closed.

'Back of the hut,' Tom ordered in a whisper, 'but don't run; there are more men guarding Harret and Bran.'

'Harret and Bran are here?' Elissa asked, surprised. 'Why are you rescuing me?'

'Thanks,' Tom said flatly.

'You know what I mean,' Elissa said, waving a hand dismissively.

'Hopefully,' Tom said, 'there will be time to explain later. Now go!'

They hurried around to the back of the hut. Tom didn't bother shutting door to the hut, either the guards would wake up and alert everybody, or somebody would find them unconscious ... and alert everybody. The hut door's state of existence hardly seemed important; getting out before they were missed was the goal now.

'Wait here,' Tom said suddenly, leaving Elissa against the back of the hut and in full view of the other guards, should they turn to face her. He moved quietly back around to the two fallen men and picked up the stone that he had used to bludgeon the second. A short moment later, he was back at Elissa's side. 'Move slowly and quietly, straight across to the cavern wall. And watch your step, the floor's uneven and full of dips and holes.' Elissa did as she was bid, and if she was scared, she hid it well.

After what seemed like an eternity of fighting the instinct to run for the protective cloak of the shadows, they reached the cavern wall. Here, at least, they were out of sight. Though they would have to be extra careful not to make noise as they moved closer to the hut. When they reached the hut, Tom

gestured for Elissa to move behind it, completely out of sight, while he took a firm hold of his rock and moved in the other direction, towards the guards. He was about to try and catch them by surprise when a thought occurred to him. He moved back around the hut, passing Elissa and ducking to poke his head through the hole Harret had created. Bran and Harret looked surprised at first, and then expectant, but Tom simply gestured for them both to come out, which they did.

It seemed to take an age for the two raiders to pull themselves quietly through the hole. When they were out, Tom pointed around one side of the hut and made a punching gesture. Harret and Bran nodded their understanding, and began to creep around that side of the hut, Tom moved back around the other side.

He tried to use the rock to much the same effect as he had with Elissa's guards, but Harret and Bran stepped around the opposite corner just before Tom, and the guard nearest to him, suddenly alert, caught sight of his would-be attacker before he could strike. The guard lashed out at Tom, knocking the rock from his hand and sending him stumbling backwards. He managed to keep his balance. Just. The guard advanced on him, and Tom was thankful that he wasn't crying out and alerting the others; evidently, he wanted to punish Tom for escaping himself. Behind the guard, Harret and Bran seemed to be wrestling their man, though it was far from clear who had the upper hand, if anyone.

Tom's own problem raised his fists, and Tom mentally breathed a sigh of relief. There was a sword at the guards hip, but he was so arrogant that he felt he wouldn't need it, and that only increased Tom's chances of not being killed, which he thoroughly approved of. He waited and, sure enough, the guard threw the first punch. Tom swatted the fist away with enough force to twist the guards body around, and followed up with an open handed blow to the side of the head. Tom leapt at the guards back, wrapping his arm around the man's neck. He realised his mistake an instant before the guards elbow drove into Tom's stomach, and he staggered backwards, breathless.

Rubbing his jaw, the guard leered at Tom, doubled over and breathing hard. Tom saw the man raise his arm to strike at the base of Tom's neck, and steeled himself for what could be a big mistake. The guard brought his arm down hard, and Tom rolled backwards, grabbing the attacking arm as he did, and using the momentum of both moves to send the guard flying over him. Tom kept hold of the guards arm, however, and the impact of body on floor brought with it the sickening crack of the arm dislocating from shoulder. Before the man had a chance to scream, be it in warning or pain, Elissa was there with the rock that Tom had dropped. Again, Tom hoped she hadn't used too much force and killed the man, but there wasn't time to worry. After cracking the skulls of three of his men, Tom thought it unlikely Gaiman was going to offer them a place at his side.

The other guard was proving to be hard work, and was still fending off his two attackers when Tom got to his feet. Thankfully, Bran had the foresight to wrap his muscular arm around the man's mouth. Eventually, with Harret restraining his arms, the man passed out silently from the lack of oxygen.

'Elissa!' Harret gasped as she stepped over the prone body that she had created, relief radiating from him as he embraced her. Elissa said nothing, but simply held Harret tightly.

'What now, wise one,' Bran asked Tom breathlessly, his typical mischievous grin making a brief comeback.

'We get our weapons and get out of here,' Harret said before Tom could speak.

Tom shook his head, 'We don't know where they are. Right now, the only people who know we've escaped are unconscious, and we need to get out of here before they wake up or someone finds them.' Harret looked about to argue, but the look passed and he nodded. He started moving in the direction of the well that they had entered through, but Elissa put a hand on his shoulder.

'They're planning to attack the Brook,' she said.

'What?' Bran and Harret said in unison.

'I heard them talking outside where they were keeping me. I don't know when, but they intend to take over the Brook and its supplies and force us to join their hunting parties.'

'Hunting parties?' Tom asked, 'hunting for what?'

'They go into the wild with the specific aim of finding and ending returners. They think they can make the world better by destroying them,' Elissa explained.

'That's ridiculous,' Bran said. 'The sheer number of people that have returned; they'd be at it for a thousand years!'

'I know that!' Elissa snapped.

'We can't do anything here,' Tom said, 'let's get back to the Brook and warn them. Presumably you have a council for a reason, let them decide what to do next.'

'He's right,' Harret said, to the surprise of everyone. He started for the well again, but, this time, Tom stopped him.

'I have an idea,' he said with a smile, 'help me with these bodies.'

Confused, Harret and Bran helped nonetheless, dragging the two unconscious guards along the cavern floor and dumping them near the winding path that led up to the tunnel they had entered through. A noise from the central cluster caught Tom's attention, and he made an urgent but silent gesture for the others to follow him, and he ran for one of the many small caves that led out of the cavern.

They were well out of sight by the time the cries of alarm went up.

Epilogue

Word reached Gaiman's ears that all the guards were now conscious, each with a headache to show for their failure. He resolved to make them wish they had never regained consciousness at all, but that was a task for a later time.

'Any sign?' he asked as Peet arrived at his side.

'None whatsoever, sir,' said his right-hand man, 'I came in sight of the Brook; if they went that way, they are safe within its walls by now, but I saw no evidence that they did go that way.'

'They went that way,' Gaiman said with certainty.

He took a deep breath and let out a theatrical sigh. The returners in the trenches before him grasped impotently at his feet and he stamped down on one stray hand so hard the finger bones shattered. The returner didn't seem to notice, but Gaiman felt a rush of pleasure at the act of violence nonetheless.

'Any word from the others?'

'Most have arrived back, yes,' Peet said, 'though none have seen any trace of the cowards and the girl.'

'They may live among sheep, Peet, but they took out four of our men and escaped Tomac. I think it's safe to say there is more to these people than the usual bleating cowardice we have come to expect from Charles Brook.'

Peet said nothing, but gave an almost imperceptible nod of acknowledgement. Gaiman continued to stare across the trenches in the direction of the Brook, a thoughtful expression on his face and a calmness that was a stark contrast to the hundred or so snarling creatures that were mere feet away.

'Do you think they saw anything we wouldn't have wanted them to see?' Gaiman asked.

'I don't think so,' Peet said, knowing exactly what his leader was referring to, 'but it's hard to say. If they took the guards out quickly and stayed away from the northern end of the cavern, they could have

snooped around unhindered for a full twenty minutes while we talked. Though none of the women or children claim to have seen anyone.'

Gaiman nodded, 'Still, I think it best we move our plans forward. I find it suspicious that four people from the Brook drop into our laps now. If they suspect our intentions, we should strike now, before they have time to warn their council.'

Peet nodded, but said nothing. He wasn't one for saying much.

Hours later and miles away from Tomac, a small rock began to shudder. The rock, which was much like the many other rocks around it, moved back and forth until, ponderously, it came loose and rolled away down the gentle slope before it. Another rock, this one much larger, echoed the first's strange movement, and tumbled down the slope, slamming into a tree trunk with a crash that snapped the heads of three nearby returners around to focus on it. They moved over to the rock and eyed it curiously. Another rock moved and fell into a hole that was emerging underneath.

The returners' attention moved to the hole now.

Before the walking dead could reach it, three men clambered quickly out. A tall man with a crimson stained rock gripped in his hand jumped down from the rocky verge and smashed the stone into one returner's head, caving in its brittle skull and finally ending whatever had kept it going. The other two men were right behind the first, using their arms to snap the necks of the other two returners.

The three men surveyed the area and, content that it was safe enough, called back to the hole, which produced a woman soon after.

'Where are we?' the woman asked, rubbing at her bruised and grazed arm. All of them carried such marks from the jagged rocks and cramped quarters of the caves below.

'We're miles away from home,' the tallest man said absently, his eyes gazing across the wide expanse of open land before them.

Slowly, the others followed his gaze. Their view swept across the hundreds of sporadic returners aimlessly ambling around the fields and decayed roads. Beyond the fields were the suburbs of old, ruined by time and the elements. And then, almost imperceptibly, the suburbs became a city, full of tall buildings reaching for the clouds. A feeling of dread fell over the group.

'I think we'd better start back for the Brook,' said the shortest of the men.

The others nodded.

Author's Note

Zombies, as you will probably have noticed, do not play a starring role in this story. They were intended to be environmental, rather than a fully fledged character.

In truth, they could have been replaced with any number of monsters, or even animals, but I have wanted to write a zombie story for some time. Unfortunately, zombies are rather going out of fashion these days, and I felt that putting this story off any longer would put it at risk of being written during a zombie dark age. Like all fads, they'll come back around, but who knows when?

I made zombies my monster of choice for this tale, though; hopefully, you'll agree that they never really felt like the real villain. Humans are perfectly capable of being the villain of any story all by themselves.

Appletreewick is a real place in the Yorkshire Dales of England, and the memory that Tom recalls in the story is very close to my own memories of being taken there by my parents as a child. I would constantly lose the wagon wheel inner-tube that my father had procured for me, though bigger kids in the deeper parts of the river usually saved it before it vanished downstream.

My father and his friends would often take a large dinghy and float around aimlessly in a wide, calm portion of the river. To my knowledge, this was the only reason he owned the dinghy. Grown-ups never did make sense.

To the best of my knowledge, the area of Appletreewick that we used to visit is no longer accessible to the public.

As far as I know, the village is still there.

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This book was originally intended to be an entirely solo effort. Thankfully, I made the wise decision to ask for help in certain areas. The end result is significantly better because of this.

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About the Author

John Bullock is the author of a number of freely available short stories on the internet. He lives in a quaint little village in Yorkshire with his long-term girlfriend and baby boy, fervently hoping for the day when scientists invent a drug that will allow him to go without sleep indefinitely.

He generally has too many projects on the go at one time, this is one he finished.