

The Animal Plagues

By

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Trundle bit her lip in concentration as Mrs. Gambit entered the laboratory.

“You’re not focusing,” said Mrs. Gambit, whose voice was always clear and strong despite her age. “You’re concentrating on *looking* like you’re focusing. You can’t properly measure the PH balance of those soil samples if you’re thinking about how you look while doing it, Little Girl.”

“I’m not a little girl. I’m halfway through my tertiary education.”

“Everyone under the age of 30 seems like a child to me,” said Mrs. Gambit as she made her slow approach to where Trundle stood. She used a cane to walk, and she didn’t walk quickly. But nothing else gave away her age. “The soil is changing, isn’t it?”

“It always does,” said Trundle in reply.

“No, I mean, something’s wrong with it.” She pinched a bit of the dirt and held it up to her nose, then let it drop back into the plastic bin. “This isn’t Indiana dirt. Doesn’t smell right. And I’ve been living here for nearly a century, even before the Plague.”

Trundle shrugged, moving a plastic container full of worms to the other table.

“It reminds me of my trip to Cairo. Everything smelled like sand-washed stone baking in the sun. So does this soil.”

“It seems okay. Nothing abnormal in the readings.”

“Not yet. But my nose is telling me something’s changing. I’ve learned to never doubt my nose. I remember what the Plague smelled like. We could tell who would die in a day and who would die in two by how they smelled, sweet but a dirty sweet.”

“How awful.”

“It was the Plague, Little Girl, nothing like the sanitized accounts they teach you in grade school.”

The Plague was old news to Trundle by now, but Mrs. Gambit described it in a way that made it more than just a collection of facts and dates. The facts were that it had originated in Panama 60 years earlier. The *Aedes* species of mosquito carried the virus to humans as they had been doing with deadly diseases for hundreds of years. But this one was different. This was something new. Sparse access to insect repellent, due to burgeoning pesticide bans, spread the disease faster than necessary. And this new, highly adaptable virus killed nearly everyone it touched, leaving the few who survived infertile.

It spread quickly during the summer months, moving from Panama to Mexico, across the Gulf into Florida, then on up. Three years after the virus first emerged, it became airborne and spread across the world.

The last news the quarantined Indiana survivors heard was that the virus had mutated, and survival rates were now 0%. All went dark after that, and it was, by all accounts, the end of humanity. Except, as Mrs. Gambit put it, “Life always finds a way.”

Trundle was the living embodiment of life-finding-a-way, one of the few children in the small quarantine community born after the Plague. She had no mother, because pregnancy was a death sentence, and her father had died five months before her birth.

She lived in a student pod in one of the mostly derelict quarantine buildings—massive steel constructs the CDC had erected to house a hundred thousand people at once.

Trundle’s building was a ten minute walk from the lab and stood at the edge of the community. After a tedious day of testing soil variations, she was happy to return home to her pod where she had a

balcony overlooking the Wilds.

Today, the heat and humidity would keep the air from cooling much until the dew settled onto the ground in the early morning hours. A thunderstorm would be a welcome change, and Trundle hoped for one. In Indiana, the weather was always one extreme or the next. It was either dry or rainy or stormy or bitterly cold. After a mild drought, everyone was praying for rain.

Trundle knew of nothing outside the community. The state of Indiana had been ground zero for the airborne emergence of the Plague, but it had also recovered first. Survival rates never reached 0% in Indiana, but survival was still rare. The 500 people who had lived through the Plague, Gambit included, had just barely held onto their population numbers. Even after much work in medicine and health, the survivors had dwindled to 365. But now that number was growing again. It was considered a victory.

Still, there was no contact with the outside world, and the expedition team they'd sent to the state line, which had included Trundle's father, never returned. And life was far too precious to try again.

Trundle gazed out into the west and wondered if she'd see any animals in the Wilds this evening. She had witnessed deer leaping gracefully over the open fields. She had seen wolves mill about with their heads to the ground, searching for prey. And she'd watched large herds of buffalo kicking up dust as they thundered across the prairie. But that had been months ago. Tonight, there was nothing except empty fields.

The Wilds were exactly as they were named, unlike the neat and trim farm grounds within the community. In hot, dry summers, the fields in the Wilds faded to yellow, and the sun baked cracks in the dirt as far as the eye could see. It was nothing like the mounds of rich, dark soil growing green within the community. But then Gambit had once told Trundle the soil was rich because of all the bodies buried in it.

"If you think about it," Trundle had said in response, "the dead outnumber the living."

"And they probably try to talk to us, too," said Mrs. Gambit. "What do you think they say? What do

think they're whispering in the silence? Carpe diem?"

"What does that mean?"

"It's Latin for 'seize the day.'" At this, Mrs. Gambit chuckled. "Most of my wisdom comes from 20th century movies and books, Trundle. I'm not as smart as everyone thinks. I was a straight D student in high school, in fact, and a late bloomer. Don't tell the administrators that, though. Their commie method of testing childhood proficiency doesn't leave room for late bloomers."

Twilight grew thick and uncomfortable that evening, and Trundle thought she saw what looked like orange stars falling in the distance. She chalked it up to a play of the light and soon collapsed on her cot and fell asleep.

Trundle didn't regret leaving her window open during the night. By morning, it was much cooler and pleasant. She climbed off her cot, pulled open her cupboard, and fished out a dried block of powder, dropping it into a glass of water. It thickened as she stirred it. It was not up to par with a meal of beef and warm buttered bread that the administrators offered at harvest, but it would do for now.

She stepped out onto the balcony with her breakfast in hand. She expected to see the empty fields covered in dew. However, this morning, a pack of wolves had gathered just outside the fence surrounding the village. Not just any pack, either. There were at least 300 wolves milling about in the field outside. It was more wolves than she'd seen in her life.

The alpha male, a bright white giant with ribs prominently displayed on his flanks, stared boldly up at Trundle, letting out a soft but deadly growl. The rest of the wolves followed his lead. Many were missing patches of fur and stood with their heads bowed as foam dripped off their muzzles.

Trundle dropped her breakfast into the sink and rushed out to the stairwell. Once outside the building, she ran for the administrator's office. It was a quarter mile away, but she reached the front door quickly.

No one would be there yet. She knew that, but she still pounded on the door, hoping someone

would hear her.

She had nearly given up hope when a man dressed in a suit and tie answered it. He was wearing wire-rimmed glasses and had a single stripe of white in his reddish brown hair. His clothes were wrinkled and dull, and his hair stuck up in several places.

“What’s all the ruckus?” he said as he pushed open the door.

“There are wolves at the fence,” said Trundle.

“Nothing to worry about.”

“Three hundred wolves. And they all look as if they’re starving.”

“Three hundred?”

“Yes.”

“Wait here,” the man said. He rushed back inside, then returned a moment later with a set of keys and a battered looking briefcase. After locking up the building, he nodded to Trundle. “Show me where.”

She led him back to her building, to the perimeter fence right next to it. The wolves were still gathered, and when they saw Trundle and the administrator looking at them from eye level, they all shifted at once to stare at the two humans. A desperate growl emerged from the alpha male, which was taken up by the rest. It soon became a chorus, a terrifying rumble of noise that shook the ground.

“This isn’t good,” said the administrator. “Terrel needs to see this.” With that, he rushed off, which further agitated the wolves, some of whom began to paw and dig at the fence.

By the time he returned with Terrel, an authoritative looking man with broad shoulders, others had joined Trundle by the fence.

“They can’t breach the fence, Casanov,” said Terrel.

“I’m not worried about that. Look at their condition. They’re starving.”

“Starvation is common in nature.”

“Not on this scale.”

“We’ll hire a sharp shooter to thin out the ranks. And I’ll send out a team to check on the condition of the deer and buffalo. We will not involve ourselves further, however. You know the law.”

Trundle dressed quickly that morning and rushed to the farm grounds to meet her teacher, Bean, a farmer who would be teaching Trundle hands on work for the next few weeks.

He looked grave as he pulled open the locker doors and handed her a pair of boots and coveralls. “You’ll be learning how to care for a horse today,” he said. “And that requires a lot of concentration. Perhaps not a good day for it.”

“I’ll do my best,” said Trundle, fastening up her coveralls and stepping into the boots. “I’ll be okay. I just didn’t want to be around when they started shooting.”

“This isn’t a good thing, what they’re doing. I can’t tell you if it’s necessary or not. I can’t tell you if it’ll just make things worse. It may. Humans think they can study animals from a distance and decide what’s good and bad for them. It’s not until you spend morning till night with them, until you’ve watched them die, give birth, that you get a measure of what an animal is, all the good, all the bad. They can’t thin the ranks and think that’s going to fix things. But there’s something else going on here, something with the dirt.”

“You’ve been talking to Mrs. Gambit.”

“Who’s that?”

Trundle buckled up her boots, then brushed herself off. “The administrators believe that humans and nature can’t exist in harmony,” she said, surprised at her boldness. She had learned long ago to keep her opinions to herself. “They wouldn’t allow us to have farms if not for our survival.”

“Aye, they believe that. But humans are as much a part of nature as any other beast. We are the ultimate predator. And, believe it or not, nature needs us.”

“It seems to do all right without us, better in fact.”

“That’s a myth.”

“I’m sorry, Bean,” said Trundle, “but I hardly think a population of billions of people, all crammed into cities, where no animal can survive is hardly beneficial to animals. We were on the verge of driving them into extinction.”

“And Mother Nature made sure that didn’t happen,” said Bean. “You’re confusing bad humans with good. Humans are meant to keep nature in order, to fix what needs fixing before Mother Nature has to step in to do it. It wasn’t human interference that made things wrong. It was the opposite. It was our distance, our lack of a real interaction with nature.”

“But I can’t imagine humans roaming free in the Wilds, Bean, hunting the buffalo to extinction, like they did hundreds of years ago, killing off entire populations of wolves.”

“We paid for our sins, Trundle. Mother Nature burned us down like she burns down overgrown forest.”

“I think it’s better the administrators keep the laws in place and keep the fences up. It’s clear we can’t be trusted.”

“You’re a good girl, Trundle,” said Bean. “You follow the rules and believe what you’re told. That’s an asset. Men like me, we get into trouble. We can’t keep our mouths shut to save us. We just want the freedom to fix or destroy and reap the consequences, good or bad.”

That evening, as Trundle walked home, she dreaded what she would discover out in the Wilds beyond her window. She didn’t step out onto the deck and kept her window and curtains pulled shut. It made her pod feel stuffy, but she couldn’t bear to see any of the bodies of the wolves. She took a chance by cracking her window without looking out into the field. She again caught a glimpse of orange stars falling in the distance before pulling her curtains shut.

When Trundle came awake the next morning, she pulled her curtain open, intent on stepping out onto her deck for a bit of fresh air. She’d forgotten about what she was trying to avoid. Instead, she found a field of black, deep black, moving and writhing like a ghoulish ocean.

It was not an ocean, however. As she stepped onto the balcony, a hundred startled vultures took to the air. They rose higher and higher to join the others circling the skies above the fields.

Trundle dressed quickly and rushed down to the chemistry building. She didn't bother questioning the administrator she had spoken to earlier. She knew he wouldn't tell her anything.

The chemistry building was mostly empty except for one small classroom. Here, Mrs. Gambit taught the entire village's worth of first graders. There were six children in her class, which seemed a small number. Compared to Trundle's own class, however, it was an army.

"You're here because of the vultures," Mrs. Gambit said as she stepped out into the hallway.

"And the wolves," Trundle replied. "The administrators sent a team out into the Wilds to check on the buffalo. Have they returned?"

"Not all of them. Ten men left with the team. Two men returned early this morning. No buffalo herds have been found. But they didn't get far on horseback. They were attacked by a pack of wolves in the night. One of their horses was killed, and one of the men was injured. Those were the two they sent back."

"It's what you said about the soil, isn't it?"

"I believe so."

"What about the vegetation? Were the plants dying, too?"

"The team said all the vegetation seemed normal."

"That makes no sense. The wolves have been eating the dying buffalo, which is why their populations have been growing. But now the herds are gone, and so the wolves have nothing to eat."

"Which is why they showed up outside our gates," said Mrs. Gambit. "We must be the last living thing for a hundred miles."

"Except the vultures."

"Who live off the carcasses of dead animals."

“Are we next?”

“Possibly.”

“Have you told the administrators?”

“They already know, and they responded as I thought they would. They checked the coal mine, the water supply, tested the rainwater, and took soil samples.”

“Maybe they’re onto something.”

“They’re never onto something. They have no imagination. They react to a new threat with old solutions. They plan to observe from a distance and let it run its course.” Mrs. Gambit paused for a moment, then pulled open the door to her classroom. “I have to get back before they wreck the place. Not every child sits quietly and waits for my return. These kids aren’t like you were.”

Trundle turned and made her way back to the farm, pondering what Mrs. Gambit had told her. As a child, she’d thought of the administrators as the wisest and most benevolent of the village. They made all the rules and taught why those rules existed. Everyone had food and a place to live. Everyone had a job to do. Everyone contributed. And no one except authorized personnel stepped into the Wilds.

It wasn’t until Trundle had been exposed to some of Gambit’s lectures that she’d learned to question the administrators’ judgement. She questioned it now

Human survival required the ability to solve problems, and if simply withdrawing from nature was the answer, humans would have never developed problem solving skills in the first place. Yet to the administrators, solving problems interfered with the natural order of things.

“It’s not the natural order of things,” said Bean, when Trundle posed her ideas to him. “It’s the *wild* order of things. The natural order of things requires human interference to be complete. Without us, all you have is the hierarchy of the wilds. And that is what the administrators believe is the right course of action, no action at all. But it’s not.”

Trundle took the overalls from Bean and started pulling them on over her clothes. She put on a pair

of rubber boots, because they would be mucking out the horse stalls today. It was a task everyone was required to do at least once. And everyone was afraid they would show a proclivity to the task and be forced to muck stalls for life.

As Bean led Trundle to the horse stalls, he was quieter than usual. At this point, he normally would be explaining the basics of the task, repeating things Trundle had already read and memorized. She knew all the fundamentals of mucking out a stall. But to physically do it was another matter. A hands-on farmer often had tips and tricks that an instruction booklet didn't cover. And she was counting on Bean to explain those to her now, unless, of course, mucking out a stall really was that easy.

When they arrived at the first stall, however, Trundle understood Bean's silence. There was no horse in the stall, but the mess inside was not what Trundle had expected. She expected to find soiled hay but not the unmistakable leftovers of a very sick horse.

"They put him down this morning," said Bean. "He was bleeding internally, vomiting, and couldn't hold any food. He was one of the horses they took out with them to find the buffalo. He ate the grass outside the gates. He came back here healthy but died within a few hours."

"What about the other horses?"

"They're still out there. If this disease affects them the same way, they'll have died by now. That means the team will be stranded miles away. If they are well, they can walk back, but it'll take them days. Or they could be dead, too."

"What about the other animals, the ones inside the gates? Are any of them showing signs of sickness yet?"

"Not yet."

"But you said the soil is changing. Outside the fence or in here?"

"Everywhere."

"Our animals aren't dying yet, Bean," said Trundle.

“They will soon, though.”

“If something has gone wrong with the soil, though, couldn’t we change it back?”

“Some of it, yes, but not enough to save an entire ecosystem.”

“But it’s something. If our farm animals die, we’ll die, even if the disease doesn’t kill us.”

“The administrators won’t let us do that.”

“I don’t care. Maybe we can fix this, at least some of it. If we can save our animals, it’s a start.”

Bean stood there for a moment, in front of the horse stall, holding his pitchfork. “Casanov works in chemistry. He’s an administrator, but reasonable. We both have the same ideas about the Wilds and humanity’s place in the ecosystem. He may be able to identify the difference in the chemical composition between our soil and the soil outside the fence.”

“That means we need a soil sample from out there, in the Wilds.”

“Precisely.”

“I’ll get it,” said Trundle.

“No one is allowed outside the fence,” said Bean. “You’d never get past the gate.”

“I have an idea how I can.”

“And it’s dangerous, too. Those wolves are still out there.”

“I won’t go far.”

“Very well. But promise me you won’t stray out of sight of the community. You could get lost.

Promise you’ll stay close.”

“I promise.”

“I hope this isn’t an elaborate scheme to get out of mucking duties.”

Trundle laughed. “I owe you a day of mucking. And I’ll keep my word.”

With that, Trundle made her way to the chemistry building. She found several containers in the lab, which she took back to her pod and stuffed into her backpack.

No one was allowed outside the fence without permission, and the gates were heavily guarded. But Trundle had a balcony overlooking the Wilds, and since there were no fire escapes in the buildings, each pod came with a fold-away rope ladder.

Trundle attached the rope ladder to her balcony railing. The vultures had made quick work of the wolf carcasses. Only a few bones remained, along with a lot of bird droppings. Trundle barely noticed, however. She didn't take a moment to think, because if she did, she would realize the folly of leaving the safety of the community and talk herself out of it.

Instead, she fastened on her backpack and climbed over the railing. The ladder was nothing like a stationary ladder. It swayed heavily to the left or right, wherever she might be leaning her weight. She held on for much longer than she'd expected before summoning the courage to climb down another rung.

It took an age to reach the ground, and Trundle was out of breath. Climbing back up would be worse. She steadied herself, glancing right and left to make sure no one had seen her.

As she rushed out into the open field, she felt exposed. She expected to hear a siren or a whistle announcing her escape. And then what? She had no idea what they'd do to her if they caught her. Dock her a full letter grade? The thought made her nervous despite herself.

After several moments, Trundle reached a wooded area. She relaxed a little but not completely. There was a giant pack of wolves to contend with, hungry and desperate enough to attack a lone human. Trundle wondered how foolish she would feel if she ended up walking right into the middle of a pack. They could be hunting her right now, hiding in the thicket.

Trundle stopped and looked around. She adjusted her backpack and plundered on. She wanted to get deep enough into the Wilds to get a soil sample starkly different from the one collected within the community. She couldn't get far on foot, but she had all day. An hour's walk would be sufficient.

She passed the wooded area and was again in open fields. She crested a small hill, then turned to

look back. She had never seen the community from this vantage point. It was strange from far away. The three tall buildings that housed the entire population looked like giant silver blocks blotting the landscape.

Trundle turned back around. She was now staring at a part of the Wilds she had never seen from her balcony. It didn't look much different here, but the thought that she was seeing something for the first time that so few had seen before was exciting. So she kept going. The ground was mostly flat, with new patches of forest growing here and there, except in places with large swaths of bleached cement running south to north and east to west. They had cracked and buckled over the years. In fifty years or so, the cement would be dust, and there'd be no sign that humans had ever lived here.

Trundle paused for a moment. She now stood on a wide stretch of highway next to a bridge. Beyond the railing on the west side of the road was an embankment that led down to a shallow river. A hundred yards beyond that and fully visible from the road were a dozen large craters. Each crater was 40 feet in diameter at least.

Trundle had seen photos of craters in her science book in school. Some could be miles in diameter, so these were small craters in comparison. But the shape was unmistakable. Only something falling from space could have caused the craters.

Trundle tightened the straps on her backpack, then climbed down the embankment. It all made sense now. She knew where the bad soil was coming from and the perfect place to get a sample. She climbed over the lip of the nearest crater. At the center of it was a round sphere roughly the size of a bowling ball. The dirt around it was black and parched, and it smelled like the blasting powder they used for fireworks on the 4th of July.

Trundle studied the sphere for a few moments, running her fingers through the soil surrounding it. She pinched a bit of it and sniffed it like Mrs. Gambit had done. But that didn't tell her anything. She walked up to the sphere and studied it as much as possible without touching it. She'd read enough H.G.

Wells to know that fooling around with alien craters was a bad idea.

A vulture flew overhead, drawing Trundle's attention for a moment. She watched as it flew east towards the community. She was farther away from home than she had ever been, but she could still see the tops of the buildings from this distance. The sun was in mid-sky yet, but she had gone farther than she'd said she would, much farther. She suddenly had a sense of the hidden danger of the Wilds.

A deep rumble shook the ground around her feet. Trundle grabbed her backpack and fastened it over her shoulders, then rushed to the embankment, climbing back onto the road. She knew she should keep moving, get a quick soil sample somewhere closer to the community, then get back inside the fence. But she was too curious not to stay a few minutes longer to figure out what was causing the rumbling. She stopped and turned back towards the craters.

It was coming from one of the spheres in the distance. Terrified, Trundle almost turned to run again, but before she could, the sphere exploded in a puff of green dust, which nearly caused Trundle's heart to stop. She didn't move, however, and the noise was no louder than the pop of a small firecracker. She glanced behind her at the three towering buildings. The sound would not have carried from this distance.

When she turned back, the green dust was settling back onto the ground. It was darker now and seemed wet and heavy, as if it had collected moisture from the air. Sure enough, it began to run in veins through the surrounding soil, like tiny streams of water. And where it touched, shoots of grass sprouted up through the soil.

The streams of green dust branched out beyond the width of the crater but didn't spread more than a few feet beyond. This was what was killing the animals, whatever was coming out of those spheres.

Trundle took a moment to gather her courage, knowing now what she had to do. She climbed back down the embankment and rushed over to where the green dust was spreading. It could be toxic. It

likely was toxic. She could die breathing it in. It could burn away her skin on contact. But she had to take it back to the chemist.

She pulled off her backpack and dropped to her knees next to a green vein. She pulled off the lid of the container, then held her breath as she scooped up the alien dust and tiny sprouts of grass. She clamped the lid down over it, then rushed to the river and cleaned off her hands.

Trundle zipped up her backpack and flung it onto her shoulders. She used her sleeve to mop the sweat out of her eyes, turned around, and climbed the embankment. Stepping onto the cracked and splintered cement, she was conscious of the potential danger behind her, so much so she barely noticed the wolf before her. But he was there, a hundred yards off, trotting in a lazy zig-zag pattern, his head low to the ground, sweeping for the scent of prey.

Trundle froze in place. She considered creeping back down the embankment out of sight and trying to find a way around, but a small explosion erupted behind her, then another, then another. The noise caught the attention of the wolf, his shanks stark and skeletal. He looked in the direction of the noise, then fixed his gaze on Trundle. A moment later, he turned his face to the sky and howled. It was a lonely song in such a quiet place, but he soon got an answer, a chorus of responses from his multitudinous companions.

Trundle slowly backed down the embankment as the air around her filled with green dust. Once the wolf was out of sight, she ran to the river. A tree with several low hanging limbs lived a few yards from the river. Trundle wasn't a great climber, but she made it high enough into the tree that she could see the old freeway.

The wolf and his companions milled at the edge of the embankment, some staring intently into the green cloud of dust as it grew heavy and dropped to the ground. But they didn't leave the road. Some put their noses to the ground, then whimpered and paced with indecision. Still, none of them climbed

down the embankment.

An hour passed, and the wolves began to disperse. Trundle made slow, careful movements to get the blood back into her arms and legs. She was tired and hungry by now, thirsty as well.

She waited an hour after the last wolf had disappeared before she quietly climbed down from the tree. Then she crept north of the stream and mounted the freeway a quarter of a mile from the craters. Once she got into the open and saw no trace of the wolves, she picked up her pace, moving south parallel to the freeway until she got her bearings.

The pack had trod down the high grass here, but there were no signs of them otherwise. Trundle adjusted her backpack and ran lightly over the field. She stopped every other minute, glancing around her, checking to make sure there were no wolves visible before she continued.

When she reached the last patch of woods before the community walls, she stopped to catch her breath. Her clothes were sodden with sweat, and she was certain there was at least five inches of water pooling at the bottom of her rubber boots.

Trundle looked west, then north, then south. She stepped out from the tiny wood and began her last dash to safety, wondering at her chances. She was weary and desperately needed something to eat and drink.

Just as she started to make out the white rope ladder still dangling from her balcony, she heard the sound of wolves baying from every side.

Trundle glanced west, then north, then south. Nothing so far. The wolves wouldn't give a full chase until they saw their prey trying to escape. Once that happened, her chance of success was increased by getting as far ahead as possible.

The baying continued, and Trundle saw movement out of the corner of her eye. But she didn't slow down. She couldn't make out how far away they were yet, just that the entire pack stretched from one horizon to the next, and they were closing in on her.

Her legs were screaming, and her heart thumped heavily in her chest. She could feel the release of adrenaline in her body. It would give her enough momentum to reach the ladder, but climbing it would be another matter.

Trundle glanced to her left and right, trying to measure how far away the wolves were and how quickly they were catching up. They were hungry and desperate enough that they were fast. She couldn't make a single mistake. The ladder was not far ahead. She imagined jumping onto it, but if she couldn't keep hold of it and fell, the time it would take to get back up would cost her.

Trundle slowed to a stop at the ladder, although every part of her wanted to keep running. She quelled that thrill of panic, expecting to feel the teeth of a wolf sink into her back at any moment. She took a deep breath and grabbed hold of the ladder, then climbed onto the first rung, then the second. She was out of breath, but she had to keep going. She didn't know how high or far a wolf could jump, but she preferred to be safely on the balcony by the time they reached her.

This was not the case, however. She was halfway up the ladder when she felt something tugging it from below. She told herself not to look down, but she did anyway. Below her, every inch of the ground was replaced with a barking, baying, and slaving wolf, several of whom were tugging on the rope ladder hoping to pull her down to them.

She took another breath and continued to climb. She didn't consider whether or not she'd fastened the rope well enough to withstand the pull of the wolves below. She didn't consider what would happen if she lost her grip. She kept her mind focused on climbing.

When she reached the top, she carefully climbed over the railing onto her balcony, then unfastened the rope ladder and tossed it into the crowd of starving wolves.

Trundle was trembling, but she hadn't noticed it until now. She stood on the balcony trying to calm herself for several minutes. Then she stepped inside. She stripped out of her clothes and tossed them on the balcony along with her boots. She then climbed into the shower and turned it as hot as it would go,

which meant something between cold and lukewarm.

After cleaning off as much of the dirt as she could, she dressed in clean clothes, grabbed her backpack, and rushed down to the chemistry building.

It was locked, as she expected. So she banged on the outside of the door for several minutes before Bean came out to get her. Casanov was behind him.

“Where have you been, Trundle?” said Bean, letting her inside the building, then locking the door behind him. “You weren’t supposed to go far.”

“I’ve found something,” she replied, pulling off her backpack and rushing after them to the chemistry lab.

“You shouldn’t have gone out there alone,” said Casanov.

Trundle pulled out the container and set it on the laboratory table.

“What is that?”

“I don’t know, but it’s falling from space.”

Casanov pulled off his black-rimmed glasses and stared intently at the container.

“I found craters in the ground,” said Trundle. “At the center were spheres, small ones no bigger than a melon. One of them exploded, and that green dust is what came out of it.”

Casanov and Bean stared at Trundle as if she’d gone crazy. It was not a look she was used to seeing from other people.

“I think, whatever this is,” said Casanov, “for safety, the three of us should keep ourselves in isolation. I’m going to close down this building. There’s food, supplies, and bunk beds. No one steps outside until we can determine if it’s safe. I hope you didn’t contaminate the entire village bringing it to me.”

“I hope I didn’t either,” said Trundle. “I didn’t speak to anyone on the way. I didn’t go anywhere else, just here.”

“Good. Now, let’s see what this is.”

Trundle and Bean paced the laboratory while Casanov prepared the samples for testing. He eventually kicked both of them out, accusing them of breaking his concentration. He wasn’t wrong. Bean had a rather distracting whistle that he employed while anxious, and Trundle had been unconsciously straightening all the beakers.

Three hours into it, there was a knock at the front door. Bean glanced over at Trundle.

“It’s not an administrator,” said Trundle, moving down the hallway towards the door. She saw who she expected to see. It was Mrs. Gambit.

Trundle reached for the door, but Bean stopped her.

“You shouldn’t be here, Gambit,” said Bean, talking as loudly as possible through the glass.

“Casanov is putting us in isolation.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, let me in,” said Gambit.

“You can’t leave again if we do.”

“That’s fine with me.”

Trundle brushed Bean aside and unlocked the door, letting Gambit in. She was carrying a briefcase with her.

“I figured if you were testing samples from the Wilds, you’d want a mix of samples that I’ve been working on.”

“How did you know we were getting samples from the Wilds?”

“I saw you steal those containers from the lab, Trundle. I knew what you were up to. Besides, you’d be stupid not to. Never mind that now, though. I’ve been trying to correct the changes I’ve been seeing in the soil here inside the community. I haven’t gotten far, but then I don’t know what I’m up against. Now, where is Casanov?”

“In the lab studying what Trundle brought us,” said Bean. “I don’t think he wants to be disturbed.”

“I don’t care what he wants. I need to talk to him.”

With that, Gambit made her slow but determined progress to the lab. Just as she reached for the door knob, Casanov pulled it open. He had a frantic look on his face, and his hair was sticking up in several places.

“You look every bit the mad scientist, Cas,” said Gambit. “What did you find?”

“It’s an invasion,” said Casanov. “I’ve never seen anything like it. There is no chemical compound on earth that matches what’s in that powder you brought me, Trundle. It’s not from here. But it’s thriving here. The plants that are growing...they will be poisonous to us as a species, as they were poisonous to the animals outside the community.”

“Will it spread here?”

“I don’t know. It needs moisture and dirt to spread. It takes it from the air until the roots of the plants can dig deep enough to get water of their own. It may start as dust, but the humidity is high enough it will quickly get heavy with moisture. That means unless one of those things you talked about, Trundle, falls here in the community, the chances are slim the wind is going to carry the infection far. It’ll have taken root before then. That’s the good news, unless of course there’s a drought.”

“What’s the bad news?”

“The bad news is that our planet is being terraformed, either by random space debris, which I doubt because I believe it was engineered, or by an alien species. If it’s the latter, let’s hope it was an accident.”

Bean cleared his throat. “You’re saying the dust isn’t spreading. But our soil here is starting to change.”

“Yes,” said Casanov. “It’s responding to the invasion.”

“That’s a good thing then,” said Trundle.

“Potentially. But like with the Plague, sometimes the immune system kills the host it’s trying to

protect. Think of it like a high fever.”

“So we need to get the fever down,” said Gambit.

“But once it reverses itself, we could do more harm than good.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Right now, we need to be able to grow things. Who knows how long it’ll take the soil to return to normal? I say we do our own terraforming and make sure everyone in this community, our farm animals, and maybe even some of those wolves outside the fence have something to eat this winter.”

“Can you do that here, in the lab?”

“With Trundle’s help, yes, we can,” said Gambit. “And you, Cas, should go tell the administrators to pull their heads out of the sand. We’ll need everyone involved in this.”

“We’re under quarantine.”

“Then put on one of those Hazmat suits and go tell them.”

Mrs. Gambit had a way of speaking that made everyone feel the pointlessness of resistance.

Trundle felt lucky to have her as an ally.

But once they started the work, Trundle realized she was stuck doing the same meticulous and repetitive tasks she’d always hated. She spent hours testing soil samples, then Gambit pulled out a stack of books and ordered Trundle to read them. She stayed up past midnight trying to get her mind to hold onto words so dryly put to paper.

A half hour later, Mrs. Gambit stopped her and said, “You’ll be useless if you don’t get a decent night’s sleep.”

The rooms in the lab’s shelter were as small and sparsely decorated as the pods, so Trundle slept well. Mrs. Gambit, on the other hand, hadn’t bothered to take her own advice. The next morning, Trundle found her still awake, looking older than usual, with her hair out of place.

Before Trundle could give her a friendly chiding about it, Mrs. Gambit launched into a frenzy. “We

can't do anything of use, not quickly at least. It takes so much time for our compost material to break down. And this soil is changing fast. Come feel it."

Trundle reached out and picked up a handful of the soil, letting it drop out of her hands back into the tray. It felt light but gritty.

"It's trying to turn into sand. It's just as Casanov said. It's making itself inhospitable. Nothing is going to grow in this soil, alien or domestic. And we don't have enough compost to make much of a difference. We couldn't cover all the farmland we have. And even if we did, it'd take the winter for it to absorb into the soil. And what do we do until then?"

"We could use lime. I read about that in one of those books you gave me. We could spread it on the acreage we haven't planted and then work it into the soil around the crops already on the rise. It'll need water and tillage to alter the soil quickly enough. We may lose this year's crops anyway, but we could harvest early if need be, live sparse during the winter, use up the food stores. Of course, I'm not sure how you go about getting lime."

Mrs. Gambit stared off into space a moment. "You'd get it from a limestone quarry."

"Well, I doubt we'll find a working one anywhere near here."

"You know the administrators have a working pick-up truck, a heavy one. It's old and rusted. But it runs."

"On gas?"

"Electric. We'd have to charge it, though. But it'd take them a solid 50 miles on one charge."

"That won't do a lot of good unless there's a limestone quarry next door."

"Ten miles away, in fact."

"But the terrain. There aren't any roads to drive on."

"It doesn't matter. It'd still make it. And they can clear a path on the way over. They'll be loaded with lime on the way back."

“What about the wolves?”

“They can get past the wolves and will hopefully be safely away when they have to get out of the truck to clear a path. And we can do our best on this end to keep the wolves from following.” Gambit glanced around the lab. “And, now, I wonder if there’s another Hazmat suit. I’m going to see what’s holding Casanov up.”

Casanov arrived just as Mrs. Gambit was going to seek him. He had half of the administrators in tow.

“Well?” said Mrs. Gambit. “Are you going to let us all starve like those wolves, or do we plan to fight for survival like every other living creature on this planet?”

To their surprise, the administrators acquiesced without question. The team who’d been sent out to investigate the fate of the wild buffalo had finally returned and was standing with the administrators and Casanov.

“There are things falling from the sky.” This report came from a sunburnt man holding his hat in his hands and shifting his weight from foot to foot in agitation. “And they’re sprouting green dust, and that dust is growing poison plants. Our horses all died from it. We were surrounded by wolves, but we let them have the horses. Don’t know why that poison isn’t killing the wolves secondhand, but never mind. That appeased them enough so we could ride shanks’ mare full throttle back home. They gave us a chase near the end, though.”

“So we’ve got to do something,” said Casanov.

Trundle was surprised by how fervent the once reluctant administrators were to complete the task at hand once convinced otherwise. The community’s tiny coal plant was put to all night use, working to charge the truck’s batteries. A team of heavily armed men, selected and approved by the administrators, of course, climbed into the truck. And then they were off early in the morning, with a trail of wolves in their wake.

They came back by late afternoon with a truck bed full of white dust, and everyone in the village got to work. The kids pumped water from the wells and carried it in buckets to those in the fields. Men and women tilled up the soil as Trundle and Bean barked orders about how deep to till and how deep to plant.

“No more than three inches deep. Don’t over-water it either.”

The next day went the same. The truck, working on a fresh charge, drove off to fill the bed with lime once again. And they tilled and spread it until every inch of every acre was treated. Several more trips were made to the quarry, and soon there was lime stored up for use later.

And then there was nothing to do but wait. The wolves kept their vigil outside the community for a couple of weeks, but their numbers started to dwindle as starving wolves trotted off one by one to find a quiet place to die.

Some of the men built a small pen, and coaxed a few of the tamer wolves, including a pregnant bitch, into the community.

“We’ll save what we can,” said Gambit. “And if nothing else, we’ll eat them in the winter if we have to.”

They used the truck on several more outings, searching for any living creature left that might be saved. They managed to capture a couple of deer, some geese, ducks, rabbits, and squirrels.

“We’ll have to change our name to Noah’s Ark if this keeps up,” said Bean one day as he and Trundle worked on milking the cows.

“It’s not a bad thought.”

And they waited. Autumn came. Harvest was no better or worse than the year before. They didn’t need to eat the wolves, and the wolf pups were so well-behaved, they roamed the community freely.

Winter came. They lived and ate well. But the world outside the walls was changing. They spread more lime on the soil and planted in the spring. They built barriers to keep out the green dust. They saw

strange lights in the distance, bright blue and yellow lights. Trundle no longer watched the dust from wild buffalo billowing in a cloud on the horizon. Instead, she watched as the alien plant-life struggled against a growing, rebellious desert.

Twelve children were born in the early spring. Eleven mothers died, but one of them, by some miracle, lived to hold her baby and hand him to his father. It was a milestone, the first surviving family of the community. There was hope.

As harvest settled in on the second year, Trundle wondered how long life would last within the community, how long they could keep their own animals and plant-life alive. Survival was a natural instinct, as natural as the wolves that stood guard around the fence, hoping for a way in, for a few more days of life, before finally collapsing in starvation. Perhaps where they had failed humans would prevail.

The End