

anything like it before. I think I can feel the heat too, on the back of my neck, and flecks of ash fall down upon us like some terrible black rain. Going up like a tinderbox, that's what they used to say. It's going to take all the water the city's got to put it out.

"Will it burn down our block? Will it burn the Palm House?" Bear asks.

"No. It's just the warehouse. No one will be hurt." The smoke reaches up into my nose and my mouth, acrid. We're both coughing.

I focus on the way ahead. Each step needs picking out and we have to keep our torches right down so we're not seen. Sometimes we need to change course to detour round the higher piles of debris. The concrete blocks are more dangerous than they look, for embedded within them are nails and shards of glass. And there are coils of barbed wire, which wrap around our feet. We keep having to stop to untangle ourselves.

It's no man's land. It's one big trap.

We try and keep to the places where you can see the actual ground. Where the scattering of obstacles has become uneven and the scorched chemical earth shows.

At some point I realize there's an actual softness underfoot. That I'm sinking into something. I shouldn't stop, I shouldn't look down, but I do and my torch floods the floor with light.

Dead feathered bodies. Soft bloodied corpses. We're walking over rotting birds.

Bear screams and I clasp my fingers over his mouth to silence him. Not that anyone could hear with the sirens wailing. Maybe it's me that doesn't want to hear. It's like some awful omen. Our first sight of wild things and they're dead already.

"What's happened to them, Juniper?" Bear's voice wavers.

"They've been shot, Bear." That's what we hear at night. They're not empty warning shots. Etienne was right.

"But why were the birds here? Why didn't they stay away?" His little body is shaking. It's too much — too close, too many. I gather him up beside me to move us on, but my legs are shaking too.

You don't see dead things in the city. Occasionally, the odd insect gets through. Once we saw a dead cockroach on the way to school, sometimes there's the odd fly or spider, but creatures don't last in the city. They don't last long enough to die. If there's a breach, if one gets through, Glyphosate Patrol gets them straight away.

Here are mounds and mounds of flesh. Broken wings and small round heads with dull eyes, staring up at us.

"Don't look, Bear. Let's get to the forest. It'll be better there." I look to the horizon for the trees, but it's too dark to make out anything. I've no idea what's really ahead. No idea where I'm really leading him.