

Walking with the Creep

Chapter 1

The Hunt

Most of the Walker family, although they were in many regards more content than they had ever been in their previous lives, had to occasionally and willfully subdue the burdensome awareness of isolation. This exercise in sanity maintenance had evolved from the constant feeling of imprisonment, so they considered it an improvement and carried on cheerily enough, especially since their circumstances weren't far from idyllic. The only one spared any of these thoughts was the boy, Noah, who was alone in having been born and raised here. Here was all he had ever known, and it is difficult to want for anything but what you have gleaned an existence of. You will not feel caged in a granularly curated paradise if it is the only home you have ever had the pleasure of occupying.

In this case, a lack of curiosity was encouraged by the fact that the walls of Noah's home were by far the tallest things that had ever been accessible to Noah's eyes. Their heights were at least tenfold the next largest things in his shallow reservoir of visual references, the beautiful cherry and apple trees that so generously populated the land that was his roaming home life. These walls framed the entirety of his world, and so there was little else to dream of.

The walls to either side of the Walkers' eternal trek forward were referred to as the Guardians. Polished stone-like structures parallel to each other, they stood in the most modest of the family's estimations at least two hundred feet tall. Between the two of them were several hundred yards of diverse vegetation, a drawling river and the occasional pond, a bounty of small animals, the Walkers, and an open path of pleasantly soft clover that cut through their center, like a line demarcating which side of the room belonged to each Guardian. The Guardians took quiet watch over the residents of their walled-in Garden of Eden and were generally disregarded.

A third and final wall—as far as the Walkers knew, for they were yet to reach a fourth barrier on their years long journey in a single direction—was perpendicular to the Guardians, at the family's rear, and more often in their thoughts than the other two. The Creep. That's what it did so that's what they called it. Noah had of course not seen much else in his life, but this behemoth structure was unlike anything the others had ever seen in theirs. The Guardians were solid, still, tangible. The Creep, besides being equal in height, was their opposite. It was made of a dense fog with a pulsing red glow so dark it could be mistaken for black, but was flattened as if held back by some giant windowpane. More disconcertingly it moved, crawling forward at all times. And so the Walkers, with their aptly adopted family name that they decided to share once they spent so much time together that they figured they might as well be one, kept walking. The Guardians set the course and the Creep set the pace, making them the only truly nomadic people whose home never really changed.

Noah's father, Ty, was one of the Creep's most ardent detractors.

"It's like some haunted thundercloud masquerading as the back door to our little paradise, hoping we get so lost in the peaceful routine of life we have ahead of us that it can sneak up and rain on our parade," he said as he moved his cold gaze from the Creep down to Noah at his side. "Don't let it."

"So are we in paradise or a parade?" Noah teased. "And what's a parade again? Look, I get it by now. You're the one that takes me this close to it when we hunt. I never come this far back on my own." The subject had come up more than enough lately in Noah's opinion, and the notion that the Creep was to be avoided after all these years was one that did not need further reinforcement. It was like reminding someone to blink or breath or scratch an itch.

"I know, I know. But you're getting older now. We figure you'll probably be sixteen in a couple of

weeks, unless that already happened within the last couple of weeks. Anyway, you might start shifting gears on me. Who knows how weird you'll get," he said, softening his tactic. "Anyway, I just don't want teenage curiosity to get the best of you. And, by the way, a parade is like a roving display of excellence, and that's basically what our life is here." He gestured broadly.

"Puberty," Noah said as he slowly shook his head in disgust, although he was really thinking about his father's use of 'here', a faux pas they had talked about many times before since the contextually necessary 'there' was like a big inside joke that the other nine Walkers had without him. He suddenly called for silence with an authoritative shushing finger which he then pointed at what they came for.

"That's the biggest turkey I've ever seen," Ty whispered. He was only sort of exaggerating. The thing was huge. "You want the shot?"

Noah didn't answer with words but instead drew his bow in affirmation. He held his breath and tried to reach the calm steadiness needed to hit the rather far target. For a moment he did, and all was quiet in his mind as he focused on the fowl prodding its beak at the ground. Before he loosed his arrow, the hum of the Creep found a crack in his attention and began whittling away at the entry point.

That thing sends its own warning signals, it doesn't need dad taking up the job too. They were close enough now that it was hard to ignore; their pack usually stayed so far ahead of the Creep that it was out of mind, but now the two of them were close enough to hear its dull song.

The turkey must have noticed too. It lifted its head and turned just as Noah finally released his arrow in its direction.

"Shit," Noah said. "He moved at the last second and that damned—"

Ty laughed off his son's frustrations. "Relax, you got him."

"It wasn't a clean kill shot though. Let's go put it out of its misery." He started for the bird, which lied limp in the grass.

"I don't know, it looks like you did the job," Ty said as he followed Noah and thought of how different his son was from himself at fifteen. *He's much cooler than I was. It was a luxury to be a nerdy kid.* He had a moment of nostalgic yearning as he thought back to the comics and video games and cult classics of his own childhood that now remained ever out of reach.

Noah was proven right as they neared their fallen prey. The robust creature was sprawled out with an arrow sticking through it, but it was breathing and looking in their direction with hateful eyes.

"It's alright there big guy," Ty offered as they closed in. The turkey was seemingly offended by this patronization. It protested with a collection of hoarse, gurgling squawks that had a chilling effect on Ty and Noah.

While they were temporarily stopped in their tracks—was a turkey shaming them?—the bird wasted no time in getting itself up and bursting into flight towards the top of the nearest cherry tree, in full blossom, where it perched with arrow in tow.

"You've got to be kidding me, that tough bastard. You *did* have a great shot. Your arrow is right where it should be!"

"He can't have much fight left in him. I can climb that tree and—"

"Absolutely not," Ty answered. The Walkers had quickly learned to be risk averse given their lack of advanced medical supplies. They frequently came across aloe plants and had certain leaves and vines that they had trial-and-errored into being best for bandages and slings, but that was about the sum of it. Ty had little confidence in their ability to effectively treat a tree fall.

Noah acquiesced. He didn't know exactly what he'd do once he climbed up anyway. The injured turkey somehow still looked well enough that it might just fly to another treetop or even mount an offense. Besides, they were losing daylight and would need to run for well over an hour to their

current campsite if they wanted to be back for a reasonable dinnertime and a good night's rest before packing up to continue their perpetual pursuit of Creep-less bliss. Such a run meant little to them whose legs had logged more miles than a free man's could ever be bothered to walk or run, even for those that made a hobby of it, but there was no reason to linger for the fowl given the haul of rabbits that they had already secured.



The large, wounded bird was fixated on the man and the boy and was relieved as it watched them turn and head the other way. As they faded away so did its adrenaline, which in turn sunk it into a restful trance. It drowsed in and out in fits and starts for a long time.

A perceived eternity had passed and as its life-force nearly slipped away in tranquil resignation, another adrenaline dump was brought on by a vibration so potent it was deafening. This engaged every primal flight instinct that the turkey had with blaring fury. The ensuing panic was enough to fuel a gliding descent from its perch to the ground in the opposite direction of the Creep, but that was all. It landed ungracefully in the clover path, its legs and wings all too weak to flee any further. Instead of greeting death in a quiet and peaceful haze, the creature now helplessly watched in wide-eyed terror as a ghastly wall of crimson stormcloud approached to introduce death with an industrial hum.

Until it didn't. The Creep engulfed the turkey but brought no harm to it. Instead, the bird lay motionless for lack of a better option, swallowed and lost in the phenomenon with all senses muted. After some time, it passed through the other side of the Creep, which casually carried on in its typical fashion. The bird stood up, brimming with unnatural vitality. It was able to snap Noah's arrow off at the point of entry through its breast and point of exit through its back with two effortless bites, paying little mind to the piece left lodged within its body. It flew with ease to the peak of the same cherry tree that it had previously used to escape from its assailants. The tree was no longer blossoming—it was saturated with perfectly ripe cherries. The bird's eyes, now glossed over and engorged, resembled the fruit. They were a glistening deep red but, instead of a tart sweetness, offered only violence and rage.

In an undisclosed office free from the confines of the Guardians and the Creep, the face of a man with far too low a rank to deal with what he had just witnessed flushed cherry red. He regretted how old the recording was.

Chapter 2

First Contact

"You and your father spoiled us with all that rabbit yesterday. I'm still stuffed," Noah's mom said to him as she helped the group pack up camp in the morning.

Her name was Shay and she was unnerved about how close her son and her beloved got to the Creep the evening prior. Her nearly two decades here had been peaceful and free from any sort of real adversity, but that was not for lack of a healthy dose of worry, caution, and dread. Sure, she dealt with the initial withdrawal and shock of leaving a hyper-advanced technological and industrial (albeit near-dystopian) society in favor of a barebones earthly lifestyle, and she deftly waded through the interpersonal drama that is expected when nine strangers are thrown together in a foreign, isolated environment for an unspecified but sure-to-be-long amount of time, but she was still alive. Better yet, Shay was her happiest and healthiest self here, which simply transmuted her old anxieties into new ones. Whereas she used to bare the pressures of wanting and overworking for things—*so many things*—that always seemed intentionally unattainable, now she just wanted to protect the few

things that she did have: Noah, Ty, and a communal family of fuckups that she loved more than anything she ever had on the other side. If being here in an experimental capacity was her penance to pay for her own fuck up, well that was a deal she would take a thousand times over.

“I say we skip a hunting expedition today and keep it simple. We have plenty of prepared and gathered foods to hold us over, plus we can snack on things that we find as we go. You know I’ll be peachy on fruits and veggies all day,” Shay said to her son, although she was really proposing the idea to the entire group. It wasn’t a bold suggestion, they were never short on food and didn’t send someone out to hunt for meat every day anyway. “Mm, I wish we had peaches here,” she muttered.

The other Walkers took a vote with a quick exchange of glances, all of which were indifferent and understanding on the matter. Making group decisions had gotten extremely efficient over the years as the Walkers developed a sort of hive mind.

“That sounds like an excellent idea Ms. Shay.” Sammy was the one to vocalize the appeasement. He was a textbook Rugged Man and the most made-for-this member of the group; he made their transition from the outside world to this one a thing of ease and was foundational to the life they had built here even though they had all become adept outdoorsmen by now. He still occasionally smiled to himself thinking of the early days when nobody else knew how to start a fire or tend to a fire or properly extinguish a fire. *We’ve come so far.* He was proud and hopeful. *We’re proof that the experiment can work. Does work.*

“I’ll admit that turkey is my favorite and it sounds like there could be one big bastard somewhere behind us licking its wounds, ripe for the taking,” Sammy continued. “But I can’t resist the dark meat and I’m sure my old heart is just begging me to lay off, so it’s probably for the best to move on. We’ll just have to let our imaginations run wild on what’s become of this monster bird with an arrow in its heart that just wouldn’t die. Now *that* will make for some good ghost stories around the fire tonight.”

Later that night, the Walkers indeed took turns giving their best renditions of a tale about an evil turkey seeking revenge, many drawing inspiration from their favorite B-side horror movies from before life between the Guardians. They laughed, enjoyed each other’s company, and ate a vegan dinner (although Sammy later dreamt of a turkey leg drenched in gravy).



One man sat before a monitoring station comprised of hundreds of screens streaming just as many live and replayed feeds; concerning the latter, the system would loop what it deemed an “incident” until someone confirmed to have watched and deescalated it. Another man leaned over the first man’s shoulder with an arm rested and all of his weight placed on the head of the chair so that the first man was tilted back at a slightly uncomfortable angle. There was another chair right beside the first man’s, but the second man had to assert that he was in charge somehow and he was ignorant to that fact that his general way of being accomplished that well enough. Both were dressed as men of import in their respective fields of science and military administration even though they were currently two of the three people stationed off world with the experiment and despite the fact that they mostly kept tabs on nine prisoners and one unlucky kid these days. The first man often wondered if it would be fine to just wear his cozies. The second wouldn’t dare be seen in anything but his full uniform.

“What am I looking at Arthur? You’re sweating and all I see is a bird that got lucky,” the second man, Don, said to the first.

“Luck has nothing to do with it, and, well, that’s the issue. Project Butterfly can regenerate and reinvigorate plant life with extreme vitality. That’s the goal and that’s what we’ll need to keep our planet habitable.”

Don responded with a subtle get-to-the-point raise of his brow.

“But it doesn’t work the same way with members of the animal kingdom. In fact, every Project Butterfly experiment involving direct exposure to an animal test subject has unfortunately resulted in death. You know this! That’s why one of our very few directives for the volunteers before setting them off on their own was to avoid that wall. They could be in danger.”

Don stood up straight. “*Prisoners*. And they assumed a certain level of risk when they traded their traditional sentences for this life. Besides, what are we really dealing with here? A turkey, and as we’ve seen countless times, they’ve gotten quite good at hunting those.”

Arthur stood up and faced Don. “What we’re dealing with is the unknown. That fowl is an anomaly, and it needs to be retrieved for experimentation. You should be more interested in the possibility of bringing men back from the brink of death, General.”

“Twist my arm. That kid is almost sixteen and we’re legally bound to give him the option to leave his guardians and enter the real world soon anyway. We can kill two birds with one stone in our first visit with the prisoners since the experiment began. But hopefully not a third, right?”

Arthur was baffled by how lightly his superior was taking this predicament.



Several weeks had gone by without incident for the Walkers, as had the last several years. The cost of this comfort was boredom, and that was likely the reason that everyone was still going on about Noah’s turkey. Every creature that they spotted or caught since was compared using the most active of imaginations to the mysterious “invincible monster” that escaped the father and son’s grasps. What was an inconsequential yet disappointing moment for Noah in real time became the group’s entertainment for weeks.

“It couldn’t have been bigger than this one,” Sammy said one night as a turkey he caught earlier cooked over an open flame. “Right?”

“*Much* bigger,” Ty antagonized, which he didn’t typically like to do but found easy enough when supported by the truth.

Another one of the Walkers chimed in and upped the ante, “That’s right Sammy, you’ve got nothing on Noah!”

Sammy retorted in high spirits, “Let’s remember he shot but did not catch the beast. But save your appetites! Tomorrow’s the day. I’m going for a hunt by the Creep where all the slowest, fattest of our menu options get stuck waddling along, just like these two cheats did when they had their chance at glory.”

Several Walkers played into the sporting spirit with exaggerated hoots and hollers while others simply smiled, all enjoying the fun that this harmless competition was momentarily bringing to their otherwise banal daily routine.

Sammy went to bed and woke up hours before everyone else to embark on his hopeful expedition.



A small pond somewhere between the Guardians was still and peaceful one moment, a rapid whirlpool the next. The swirling currents only lasted a few minutes as the pond drained into itself. All that was left was a cratered space out of which a small, domed platform soon arose. A footbridge unfolded from the platform to the outer edge of the would-be pond, and a door in the domed structure opened.

As Arthur and Don entered the experimental environment that they had for so long merely monitored and studied, they were in awe. The artificial blue skies and sunlight overhead didn’t feel

as such, the gentle breeze was pure ecstasy compared to the dank air of their subterranean living quarters, and the ambient nature sounds were enough to bring a tear to Arthur's eye.

"I have to admit, your work here is quite impressive," Don said.

"You don't have to admit it. You've opted to renew your contract each time it's come up. That says plenty."

"I certainly find the potential of Project Butterfly interesting enough to keep my name attached to it," Don said, winking at Arthur. "It's a shame the regulatory approvals for all of this to go live and public are taking so long when we've known for years that the science could improve quality of life for billions. Even if we never use it for habitation purposes, just to grow and harvest produce, imagine."

"Mhm," Arthur replied. It was a difficult reality for him to spend too much time dwelling on; here he had a viable solution to the greatest challenges and sufferings brought upon his world by Man's carbon footprint, stuck in orbit because a room full of string pullers weren't sure how to fit it into their plans for economic growth and profit. Stepping into the fruits of his labor for the first time proved a worthy distraction from these thoughts.

"But now that we may have proof that animal life can not only survive direct exposure to it, but heal and thrive from it, maybe that's enough."

Arthur nodded in optimistic agreement.

Within an hour the men had the basecamp that they planned to live in for the next few days set up. It mostly set itself up, auto-inflating and -unfolding until a comfortable temporary housing unit stood before them, but they manually applied the finishing touches. The two men surfaced far enough ahead of the prisoners' path to provide ample time to recover the feathered specimen of interest before they arrived.

At least they thought they had plenty of time. The turkey was proving harder than expected to find in the expansive terrain between the Guardians, especially since neither of them were practiced survivalists at this point in their lives. Several days passed until one afternoon Arthur was sitting alone at camp, Don once again out hunting their allusive prized blue ribbon fowl, when he saw them. A group of strangers that he knew intimately through years of observation were hesitantly walking in his direction.

"Hello!" He stood up, beckoning them forward. "It's been so long, I know, but you might remember me?"

"Dr. Little?" Shay stepped forward as the group closed in on the campground. "What's going on?"

"Lydell, yes close enough, excellent memory. Just Arthur though, please." He stuck a hand out to shake hers. "Oh, you're missing one."

"Sammy, yeah, he's back hunting by the Creep." She replied shakily, accepting the handshake. "The wall."

"How daring. Mr. Daybell, ever the adventurer. I happen to be missing one out for a hunt myself." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder in the direction they were headed before he intercepted them. "Which may be for the best. My colleague is more prickly than I am, and in this moment I am inclined to go against his judgement and invite you all down to the headquarters for the evening to answer any questions you have and to celebrate our collective success here. This is long overdue! You've certainly established a proper living for yourselves, but it's been some time since you've been spoiled and indulged in some modern amenities."

Arthur went from one stunned-silent Walker to the next, shaking their hands and reacquainting himself with each of them until he got to Noah.

"And you must be Noah. We need to have a chat later on." Noah, like the other Walkers, was

mostly fixated on the structure that ascended from what should have been a small body of water. They imagined it to be, quite correctly, an elevator to a world below theirs that they never knew existed until this moment.

“I’m sure you have a million and one questions so let me try to get ahead of them before we really get into it.” Arthur tried to occupy the silence until the Walkers eased out of their shock as he led them to the domed platform, confused and hesitant though they were, enticing them to follow with the promise of information. “Firstly, don’t worry about leaving Mr. Daybell behind. He’s actually under our employ and will know how to operate this access point to the headquarters below. He’s sure to join us once he catches up and sees it. Now comes the part where I rip the bandaid off. We are off world, as you may or may not have suspected, and I’m not here to bring you all home. Given some unique circumstances, we thought it appropriate to end our hands-off approach to cohabiting this experimental base with you all. First and foremost is the fact that Noah is of a certain legal age now, and understanding the sensitivities and complexities of this, I must say he does have the choice to leave here and join society.”

The Walkers nervously and excitedly muttered amongst themselves as they descended. Arthur tried his best to feed them information without overwhelming them too much.

Who’s the president now? Did my team win this or that title? Do you have any word from our families? When do we get to go home?

Shortly after, the Walkers’ hunger for answers was instead satiated by a feast prepared by Dr. Lydell and his assistant, Steve. Coffee, wine, a multitude of delicacies cooked with butter and spices. They ate well above ground, but this meal was enough to make them all either cry, laugh, or salivate with joy. Most did all three. The focused feasting was only interrupted when Don walked in, a rifle slung over one arm and a bound living turkey held in the other.

He looked at Noah and lifted the bird. “Look familiar kid?”

“Huh? No. I shot one almost twice the size a few weeks ago though,” Noah bragged, not knowing what he was trying to prove to this stranger. He gave the bird a closer look to be sure. “Whoah, why are its eyes all red like that?”

“What do you mean, you’re sure this isn’t the one?” Don shared a concerned, confused look with Arthur.

“No, Noah’s right,” Ty said. “Besides, why would it be the same one? The one he shot had an arrow lodged in it. No doubt it passed shortly after we left it.” By now Arthur had divulged (to a certain extent) the levels of surveillance kept on the Walkers, so it wasn’t a surprise to them that either of these two men would know about a hunting expedition as much as it was strange that they’d surface in part to hunt the same exact prey of that expedition.

“Something else is going on,” Arthur confessed at extreme risk of being chewed out by Don at a later date. “The turkey you shot was still alive as ‘the Creep’ passed over it, and, well, instead of killing the bird as we would have expected, the gases healed it.”

“We avoided it all these years and it would have just put some pep in our step?” Shay asked.

“It’s not that simple. Or rather, we don’t if it’s that simple,” Arthur offered. “The bird was physically improved but seemed unstable, deranged. Even if, as you say, that this one that Don has isn’t patient zero, it still has the same red eyes, so it’s worth studying.”

At the mention of his name and lacking a prior introduction, Don gave the group of visitors a wave. “Right, and before we use Project Butterfly to put a pep in any human’s step, we’re going to need Doc here to do plenty of what he does, which is beyond me to say anything more specific.” With that, Don dropped his bird with a careless thud to the ground. It was clear to the group that the two newest members of their dinner party hadn’t gotten off on the right foot prior to their arrival.



The Walkers and their new friends were excited for Sammy to join them in the Guardians' elaborate basement. Now that they knew the truth, that unlike them he was not a prisoner but rather a free man that volunteered to participate in this experiment as a specialized survivalist tasked with what boiled down to keeping them alive, they wanted to pat him on the back and call him a sonofabitch (with love).

When he didn't show, Arthur and Don made the call to extend the Walkers' stay in their headquarters until he was found. Given their concerns about Creep exposure and its apparent ability to spread, they also closed their initial access point. The pond refilled.

Since Sammy was a hired gun and a bit more informed about his environment than the prisoners he had spent the last sixteen years with, the closed access point wouldn't keep him out if he turned up alright. As he swam down to another access point at the bottom of another pond miles away, he wasn't alright, but he was finding his way in.

He manually engaged the access point and held tightly onto a support railing as the pond drained and the entry platform surfaced. The sun hit the reflective glass surface of the dome on the platform, and for a moment Sammy saw himself and thought it strange that his eyes looked red. Then he thought about how hungry he was, and he entered.