

WHITE CITY

WHITE CITY

Tales of the Wasteland
part 3

Pieter Loose

original edition

White City

Wasteland — Book Three

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Cover Design : Pieter Loose

Last Edited : Pieter Loose

Original First edition, 2026

ISBN: 9789403923536

Dedicated to my brother

“To understand a choice is not the same as having the right to make it.”
— *OTEQ Founding Principle*

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*Nobody in Rustbrook looked toward White City
after dark anymore.
The people who still did had started using the
word watched.
Jarek would soon find out why.*



CHAPTER 1

They had been out three days when it happened. Not on the way out — on the way back. That was the thing Jarek kept coming back to afterward, in the long hours before he could make himself sleep. It didn't happen when they were treading on new territory.

It happened when they were coming home. When the hardest part was supposed to be over. The patrol was Trapper Reed's idea. Trapper had been pushing the eastern range further out since the second battle — not aggression, just information. Know what's moving before it moves toward you. The patrol was Davan, Sel, Bram, and Jarek, rotating in pairs, covering ground that had been quiet for weeks.

Davan was on point.

Jarek had always liked watching Davan move. The engineer had a way of reading terrain that looked lazy from a distance — loose, unhurried, like he wasn't paying attention. Up close you understood

that he was paying attention to everything. He had taught Jarek, once, that the ground told you more than your eyes did if you knew how to listen to it. Jarek had been trying to learn that. He wasn't there yet. He still looked at the ground and saw ground.

Davan stopped.

Not because he heard something.

Because something felt wrong.

The other two — Sel and Bram, older and quiet in the way of people who had done this before — spread without being told, moving to the flanks with practiced ease.

Jarek watched them do it and felt the inadequacy of someone who was still counting his own steps.

The treeline ahead was still.

Too still.

Jarek had learned the difference. Trapper had drilled it into them — the stillness of nothing there and the stillness of something waiting. They felt different. He hadn't believed that when Trapper said it. He believed it now.

Davan turned his head slightly.
Just slightly. The smallest movement.
His eyes found Jarek's.
Back, they said. Slow.

Then everything happened at once.

One came out of the trees the way the trees themselves might move — not a figure emerging from cover but cover becoming a figure.
For one second, Jarek thought it was human.
That second cost Davan everything.
The shot was not loud.

Davan simply went down.
Not the way people fell in training—the controlled collapse, the hand reaching out to break the fall.
One moment Davan was standing. The next he was on the ground.

Sel was already firing.
Jarek was not.

Two more figures came out of the trees.
They moved the way the first had moved.
Something tightened in Jarek's stomach.

Bram was firing from the draw to the right, controlled bursts. He shouted something at Jarek. The words didn't arrive.

One of the figures took two hits.

Kept moving.

The hits registered. That was all.

The figure adjusted its path and kept coming.

Jarek realized none of them had even tried to take cover.

Sel saw enough.

The rifle went onto its sling.

The shotgun came off his shoulder.

He fired.

The blast staggered the creature.

It kept coming.

For a second Jarek forgot to breathe.

Jarek's rifle came up.

He didn't decide to raise it.

His arms just did it.

He was firing before he realized he had started.

The figure shifted just enough for his shots to pass beside it.

He adjusted and fired again.

The figure was ten meters away now.

Close enough to see its eyes. For one long second, it looked directly at him—not at his rifle, but at him, as if cataloguing what it saw.

Then it dismissed him.

That was what stayed with him: the moment it looked at him and found nothing worth stopping for.

Then it moved past him.

Sel pulled him into the draw.

“Get down,” Sel said. His voice was completely level. “Get down and move left. There’s a fold in the ground twenty meters back. You reach it and you don’t stop.”

“I’m not leaving,” Jarek said.

Something hit the ground beyond the draw with a hard wet thump, throwing dirt into the air.

Sel looked at him.

Not unkindly.

“You’re the youngest,” Sel said. “That’s not a consolation. That’s the reason.”

Something snapped through the brush overhead. Bram went down before Jarek could answer. No warning. No sound preceding it. Just Bram there and then Bram not there, folded into the earth at the edge of the draw with his rifle still in his hands. His eyes were open. Jarek looked at Bram.

“Don’t,” Sel said.
Not cruel.
Necessary.

Sel repositioned, putting himself between Jarek and the figures still advancing. One of them might reach the fold. Sel had decided which one.

“Go,” Sel said.
He wasn’t looking at Jarek anymore.
He was looking at the figures in the open ground.
His rifle moved in short precise arcs.

Jarek went.

He went and he did not look back.

The sound of Sel's rifle behind him went on for longer than he expected.

Then it stopped.

The silence that followed was worse.

He ran.

The only thing that mattered now was distance and direction.

Stopping meant dying.

He ran until his legs gave out beneath him.

He was sitting in the scrub two miles from where it had happened.

The sun was lower than it should have been.

His hands were shaking.

He could observe it.

He couldn't stop it.

The silence around him was enormous.

He thought about Sel's rifle going on longer than it should have.

Every shot had been another second.

He sat in the dirt and understood for the first time

what it meant to be the reason a person died.
Not the cause. The reason.

He had been in four fights since joining Rustbrook's patrols.

He had thought he understood what they cost.

He had been wrong.

After a while he got up.

He checked his rifle. Checked his water.

Took his bearing from the position of the sun the way Trapper had taught him.

He couldn't think clearly, but he could still follow his training.

He started walking toward Rustbrook.

He walked for three hours without stopping.

He came through the gate at dusk.

Someone saw him coming from the watchtower and by the time he reached the gate there were people there — he registered them distantly.

Trapper was there.

Of course he was.

He studied Jarek directly, without hurry, taking inventory.

One.

Walking wrong.
Alone.

Four out.
One back.

Trapper held Jarek's gaze and said nothing.
He didn't ask where the others were.
He already knew.
He put a hand on Jarek's shoulder — brief, firm —
and steered him inside.
His hand stayed a moment longer than it needed to.
Jarek didn't notice.

He would later.
Trapper followed Jarek to the hall.

Silas was already there, along with Miriam, Elmet,
Calla, Tomas, and Orianthi, who stood against the
wall.

Jarek told them what he had seen.
He told it badly — out of order, with the wrong de-
tails emphasized, the way you told things when you
were still inside them.
He told it twice. The second time was better.

When he finished the room was quiet.
Jarek looked around the room.

Tomas and Elmet were already bent over the map.
Calla had not moved. Miriam watched him without
flinching. Trapper alone seemed less interested in
what Jarek had seen than in what seeing it had done
to him.

And Orianthi...

Orianthi was staring at something that wasn't in the
room.

Silas had not spoken since Jarek began. He stood
with both hands flat on the map, watching Orianthi.
After a moment, she looked back.
Their eyes met.

Neither of them spoke. One corner of the map lifted
in the draft and settled again.

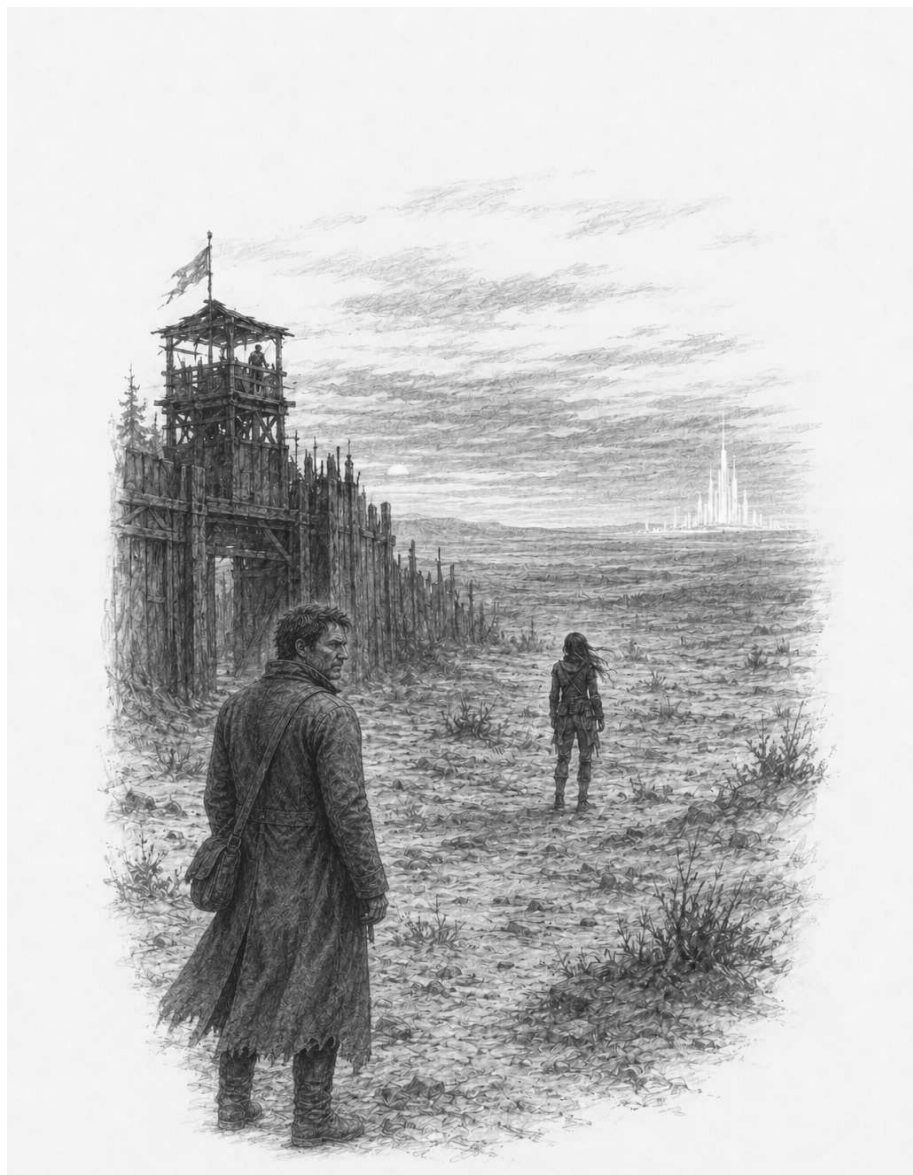
Silas looked back at the map.

"Get some rest," he said.

Jarek nodded.

He left the hall and found somewhere to lie down.
He didn't sleep for a long time.

Every time he closed his eyes, it looked at him.
Then looked away.



CHAPTER 2

She was standing outside the gate.

Not at the wall, not on the perimeter — outside.

Past the gate, in the open ground between Rust-brook and the treeline, where the light was still grey and the frost had not yet decided whether to stay. Her back was to the village. Her face was toward the horizon.

Toward White City's pale glow.

The guard on the watchtower had seen her go out.

Had watched her for a while and then looked at Silas when he came up the steps at first light.

Silas had come down and gone through the gate without saying anything.

He stopped a few meters behind her.

Above them the watchtower guard never looked away from the treeline.

She knew he was there. She always knew. He had stopped being surprised by that.

He looked at White City's glow on the horizon — pale, steady, the way it had always been. Present. Patient.

The hum was there too.
Fainter than last night.
But different in quality.

Silas let his eyes drift to Rustbrook's outer wall.
Repairs had been made where they could.
Some damage remained.
Scars from Faction X.

"Were you happy?" he said. "Before."
She looked at him slightly. "Before what?"
"Before you joined Faction X."

She was still for a moment.
Then something shifted in her posture.
She didn't answer immediately.
He waited.
The desert cold lingered stubbornly in the earth.
Behind them a cookfire had been lit somewhere in
the village, the smoke thin and familiar against the
morning air.

"Sometimes," she said.
Her voice was different than it was in rooms. Quieter. Less arranged.
She looked at him then. Sideways.

“Before I understood what was coming,” she said.
“There was a period — not long, a few years — when I knew enough to see it and not enough to know I couldn’t stop it.” She paused. “That was the last time I was happy. When I still thought knowing was enough.”

Silas said nothing

She looked back at White City.
The glow on the horizon pulsed slightly.
Not visibly.
But something had changed.
The hum shifted.
Orianthi felt it too.
He saw it in her face.
A slight tightening.
A brief inward focus.
“It’s stronger,” she said.
She didn’t sound surprised.
“Since last night,” he said.
She nodded slowly.

“Jarek’s patrol,” he said. “You know who attacked them.”
“Yes.”

“You’ve seen them before.”

“I have a pretty good idea what they were.”

He waited.

She gestured toward White City.

“The hum,” she said. “You’ve heard it for a while?”

“Yes,”

She was quiet for a moment. Reaching for something — not the words, the memory behind the words.

“It’s not just tracking you,” she said finally. “It’s listening.”

“Listening to what?” he said.

Orianthi looked at him.

“Not what,” she said. “Who.”

Her eyes remained on his.

“Anyone who can hear it.”

He looked at her.

“There was a system.”

She stopped.

“It observed thought.”

Another pause.

“It tried to understand it.”

“That was its original purpose.”

She hesitated, as if checking whether she was allowed to finish the thought.