I'd never seen leaves actually *fall* before I moved to Bloomington, or, if I did, I don't recall it. I'd seen piles of leaves at the base of trees, but never the actual falling. There's a gravity to it, if you'll pardon the pun. Walking to and fro on campus, it occasionally just rains gold and crimson, with a sound like dry paper.

But that was the era of A Month Ago, B.Z. A Month Ago is ancient history; all that’s left to us is Now, and we don’t particularly like Now. Then was rather pleasant, but there’s no going back to Then now. Now is a squad of irregulars following me about, carrying implements of destruction. To them, that sound isn’t dry paper, it’s death. Someone’s death, maybe their own, but they hope not, they pray not, they’ll do anything you want to make it not so. Every rustle makes their heads jerk around, their eyes cast about. Their hands are a little sweatier on their crowbars and hatchets. I hold in my frustration.

There’re five of us on patrol in the Old Crescent, and I am, thankfully, the only one with a gun here. I’m not staring so hard at A Month Ago that I don’t see Now, and we’re alone for the moment. Nothing to get the blood pumping about.

The plan originally wasn’t to try and hold campus. Hell, the plan wasn’t to try and hold *anything*: pack up and move. My family’s got some nice guns only an hour north of here. Plan changed though; we knew some students now, some who’d be good in a fight. Dylan suggested raiding ROTC HQ for weaponry. Might as well swing by the dorms, see if we could pick up some more zombie hunters. After that, it gets fuzzy. One minute our motto was “snatch and grab,” the next it’s “hold this ground!”

Of all the places to try and hold, campus is the worst. It’s too large, too spread out, and was, B.Z., far too populated. The buildings are death traps. But we weren’t the only ones who had this idea, just the ones best suited to the task. The brotherhood’d been prepared when few others were. So now, we sort of ran things. Coordinated between the groups holding what they could against nightmares of rot and teeth and moans.

I glanced at the clock as we passed, out of habit. You see a clock, you check the time. 5:15. It should have been chiming, but one of the first things we did was disable that. Better than a gunshot for attracting the walking dead, and it just seemed too out of place. Out of time. A Month Ago, B.Z., the clock chimes sounded the time so you wouldn’t be late for class, but once the zombie swarm started to outnumber the ladybugs, it was more like a dinner bell.

“Pick up the pace,” I chided my squad. First time on patrol for most of these. “Survivors” wasn’t really the right term. The people they had been were dead. Amongst the brothers, they were a different kind of walking dead – we called em “ghosts” - and we kept our eye on ‘em just the same. The stress’ll kill them before the zombies will, the rate they’re going. Or, worse yet, they’ll kill someone else. To the brotherhood, that’s worse than being a zombie, but ultimately both conditions get the same remedy: back to the grave. For some, it’s a kindness.

And some pull through it and come back. No longer “ghosts,” resurrected to fight again. Those are the Saints. We keep an eye on them too. Second week into Now, and a Saint went apeshit: busted out of position and charged the swarm we were fighting off. Took out half a dozen before she went down herself. She was another bullet spent, another life gone, and that squad down a man still facing a large threat. Sometimes I can still hear her screaming. So we watch the Saints and pray for a Miracle – for someone to come through this calm and intact, someone rational.

There are no such things as Miracles. Even in the brotherhood. Matt’s having nightmares ever since we shot his mom. He knew it had to be done, but the thought of the torment she suffered before she succumbed and joined the horde haunts him. Jordan’s gone back to drinking, when he can. And me? Well. I just listen.

I stop the squad. This is the worst part, and if they come through this, they’ll be okay. If not, they join the professors and faculty in Lindley. Having a scenic woods with redbrick paths was charming when campus was alive. We’re all dead now, and I listen for the less-courteous kind.

There. The boy next to me, Ian, grips his crowbar tight; I told him, back at base, “Crowbar’s a good thing to have in the zombie apocalypse. Weapon, tool, heavy enough to do damage, light enough not to tire you out carrying it around.” He holds it now like a talisman.

Something moving through the leaves. A lot of somethings. The leaves crunch and rustle as they’re shuffled out of the way of determined feet. Heading toward us. We’re between them and Lindley, which is right where we should be. I glance at the rest of the ghost squad.

Mark’s eyes get any wider, they could be dinner plates; his skin’s pale enough to be porcelain, for that matter. I hand him my cellphone and give him a Look. We went over this back at base. He’s not to use it before the fighting starts. He nods and looks at me thankfully; he’ll be out of the fighting, responsible for getting us backup. The others resent him already, except for Ian. He’s watching the dark shapes clear up and come closer. He might be a Saint soon; I won’t hope for a Miracle.

“Take time to aim,” I whisper. “This isn’t the movies; they aren’t fast. Wait until you got a good clear shot at the head. And don’t worry.” I cock my Beretta. “If you go down, I’ll end it for you quick.” Mark backs away, squeezing my cellphone. All I can hear is the heavy breathing behind me and the low moan coming towards me as they scent us. Fresh meat. “Suppertime,” I whisper, and raise the pistol.

Everything happens at once, but I am the cool, calm eye of the hurricane. I see one of the ghosts lunge towards the zombies. Could be he’s snapped, but so far, he’s got one down with his shovel and is whirling on another. I am aware of Ian next to me. I hear someone yell Mark’s name and I hear running. Coward. So much for backup. I send a bullet into a zee’s eyeball and aim again. The ghost who lunged – Jake – is stabbing the point of his shovel through a downed zombie’s skull. I shoot the one about to take a bite out of his neck; he doesn’t even notice. Trouble. I take my next aim. Ian’s swinging for the fences with his crowbar; he’ll wear out like that, but it’s effective. We ever get back to baseball games and popcorn, he can be on my team. I shoot and a third goes down. Jake’s on his fourth, shouting swear words. Where’s Tim? I chance a look behind. He’s frozen, holding his rake, crotch wet-dark with fear. I turn and shoot one that was going for Ian, who looks over in brief thanks before knocking another one out of the park. Saint.

Jake’s gone, a howling, gibbering madman. I see his eyes dim as he gets a mouthful of infected blood, sprayed from the head he just caved in. That settles that. I shoot him clean through his brains and a look like relief comes over his face. It *is* relief, right? Right.

I run up and grab Ian’s sleeve, shooting another one. “We have to move, NOW. Draw them away from Lindley. Get Tim.” He nods, brains another one and runs to thaw Tim out. I fire a few more times, each one a rekilling blow, then turn on one heel and sprint after. “Move, move, Move!”