

Watchdog (Short Story Sample)

Lennox winced as the familiar hum of the Watchdog seeped into his ears. All three-hundred prisoners of the Reintegration Camp stopped what they were doing, eyes sliding upwards, as the pale-white drone descended towards Cabin Nine.

They knew this would happen, Lennox told himself as the Watchdog bobbed, like some sort of hideous wasp, less than a metre from the Cabin's entrance. Even from where he was standing, his wiry frame propped up by a rusty shovel, Lennox could see the faint ripple of movement behind the closed curtains of the Cabin's window. Lennox recoiled as the Watchdog started to emit a high-pitched whine and the three glaring lights that crowned its hunched body flickered from a neutral orange to a furious red. Its twin guns, like fangs, clicked into place.

"Give it up," whispered Dalton. The lank-haired, skeletal boy had collapsed against the wall of the trench and was glaring at the rebellious Cabin with a mixture of contempt and pity. "You can't fight a Watchdog with *twigs*."

Regardless of this obvious truth, the doors of Cabin Nine remained stubbornly closed. Again, Lennox observed the shift of Nine's curtains, as some dark, rigid shadow was suddenly pressed against the wavering green fabric.

Lennox winced again. If the Niners thought that some homemade shield was going to protect them from the Watchdog's bullets, then they were bigger fools than he thought - and their leader, Sutherland, was the biggest fool of them all for leading his Cabin in such an absurd campaign.

Sure enough, the Watchdog's fangs flashed yellow and, a fragment of a second later, Cabin Nine's doors were blasted into splinters. The Watchdog bobbed forward, its crimson eyes burning with murderous rage.

"First wave!" Sutherland's faint screech exploded out of the Cabin. Lennox recoiled in surprise as several projectiles whizzed through Cabin Nine's ruined doorway. Whether they were rocks, or bricks or daggers of wood, Lennox couldn't tell. They flew too fast for his eyes to follow.

Two of the projectiles missed their intended target. The rest, however, struck the Watchdog right on its blank, sloping face. The drone shuddered to a halt, its advance on Cabin Nine cut short. The Watchdog let out a buzz of alarm as two Niners rushed forward, egged on by Sutherland.

"The camera! Aim for its camera!" Lennox heard Sutherland bellow.

The Watchdog's cyclopean camera withdrew slightly, like a snail jumping back into its shell, as the two Niners jabbed upwards with their crude spears. One spear got snagged in the Watchdog's propellers and was immediately shredded into a million useless pieces.

The second spearman, with Sutherland's commands ringing in his ears, ducked beneath the Watchdog's loathsome blades and grabbed a fistful of wet mud. The Niner, moving like lightning, brought his fist up in a big, sweeping arc and slapped the wet mud right on the Watchdog's camera.

The Watchdog, temporarily blinded, slithered backwards, its guns twitching with blind, impotent rage. Three more Niners charged out of Cabin Nine, led by Sutherland himself. The tall, dark-skinned boy was wielding one of the camp's shovels like a club and his two companions were similarly armed.

"I don't believe it!" cried Leigh, the self-appointed leader of Cabin Six (Lennox's own Cabin), her pale green eyes almost bulging out of her skull. "They've got it! It's blind!"

"Don't get too excited, Leigh," muttered Dalton. "Can't you hear that? The rest of the swarm is on its way."

Dalton, acknowledged Lennox, was right, as usual. Two more Watchdogs were soaring towards Cabin Nine. Sutherland, screaming obscenities, tried to jam his weapon into the blinded Watchdog's propeller blades. He was too slow. The Watchdog, like a yo-yo snapping back on its string, leapt into the air. This Watchdog was joined in the sky by the two reinforcement drones.

For a moment or two, the three of them hung in the air, peering down on the Niners in an almost disdainful manner. Sutherland made a gesture and the rebel Niners fled back into their Cabin. The three Watchdogs lowered themselves, until they were less than a metre from the ground and, buzzing, they resumed their advance on Cabin Nine.

The first Watchdog crept through the destroyed entrance, followed by one of its fellow drones. The third Watchdog darted around the side of the Cabin and hovered outside the crudely barricaded window.

Lennox closed his eyes as the chatter of gunfire cracked across the camp. Mercifully, the Watchdog's guns were so deafening that they blocked out the dying screams of the Niners. One of them, Lennox recalled with a thick knot of revulsion in his stomach, had only been eleven years old.

"I knew Sutherland was an idiot," hissed Dalton, "but I never knew he was *suicidal*. Those poor kids..."

“Sutherland wasn’t an idiot!” retorted Leigh, practically spitting on Dalton in the process. “He was brave! The bravest one of us! He-”

Leigh’s impassioned defence of Sutherland withered to a halt as the two Watchdogs emerged from the now silent Cabin Nine. The third Watchdog let out several piercing whines and, graceful as a swan, glided away from Cabin Nine and swept eastward, heading for the beginning of the trench, just behind Cabin One.

The other two drones split up, one gliding for the other end of the trench, whilst its partner began to advance southwards, towards Lennox and his fellow Sixes and Sevens. Dalton swore and hurriedly resumed digging. Lennox and Leigh followed suit as the Watchdog settled in mid-air, a metre away from the trench’s wall.

Lennox’s eyes turned to slits as the drone’s blades whipped up a thick cloud of dust and dirt. Though his vision was blurred, Lennox could make out the faintest scratch on the Watchdog’s face, just beneath its camera. Had Lennox been a more daring boy, he might have smirked at the wound that Sutherland’s followers had managed to inflict on the drone, however slight. Instead, Lennox lowered his eyes back towards the mud and returned to digging.

Synopsis

Watchdog is a science-fiction short story set in a dystopian version of Britain. The government has been overthrown by a faction of political extremists calling themselves The Revivalists. The protagonist, Lennox, and his friends are the children of politicians, journalists and other figures of cultural significance. They have been imprisoned in a Reintegration Camp, officially to re-educate the children and prepare them for an eventual return to The Revivalists’s new society...in reality, they are trapped within a work camp, forced to carry out gruelling and pointless labour under the supervision of the camp’s mechanical guards: the Watchdog drones. Any form of resistance is immediately and brutally crushed by the Watchdog’s. The campers do have one sliver of hope: a rebellion calling itself the Revisionists. Many of the campers believe that, one day, they will be rescued by the Revisionists. Lennox isn’t so sure. Then, one day, Lennox sees soldiers marching towards the camp...