

Ishmael

Chapter 2 – Mills of the Gods

“The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceeding fine.”

Plutarch – 1st Century AD



Ishmael McGrath was beyond pleased to have been offered a second interview with Fifth West Corporation. There was a slight buzzing feeling at the back of his head, as if he'd been given a mild electric shock. Only pleasurable excitement caused the buzz, like collecting his certificates on school graduation day. Just over two weeks since being there before, Ish was once again looking at the Fifth West building.

“Just don't screw it up.” He muttered.

There had been half an hour on the phone to Pandora before leaving home, but now he was on his own and worrying about what the interviewer might ask. It wasn't a new intake interview day; he'd made it past that hurdle. There was no long queue at the security desk; he was inside the building in seconds.

“Good morning Ish, I hope you slept well last night ?” Said Lianne.

“Hi, I didn't think I'd see you again.....Yes I did, actually no, I had a terrible night.”

She was grinning at him, once again dressed in clothes that probably cost more than his usual subsistence wage jobs earned him in a year.

“Oh you're mine Ish McGrath; I recommended you for this interview, so don't let me down. This interview is on the second floor, with Thabo. He'll ask you all the questions you're probably dreading, but he's fair.”

For some reason the second floor felt like a demotion, his first interview had been on the twelfth. Proper offices though, no huge open plan arrangement. Lianne stopped outside a door without a nameplate or a number. She knocked on the door, before leaning in very close, close enough for the collar of her expensive blouse to brush his cheek.

“Don't fuck it up Ish.” She whispered.

“I will try very hard not to.”

Had she kissed his cheek ? The feeling was gentle and fleeting and he was on edge. It might just have been his imagination. Ish opened the door and walked in, to be greeted by a tall thin man with skin the colour of a double espresso.

“Hi Ish, I'm Thabo.... Sit, can I get you something ? Water maybe ?”

“Yes, thank you, water would be nice.”

Thabo seemed pleasant and the water was cool and refreshing. Ish decided he'd been over thinking the interview, everything was going to be fine. His optimism didn't survive the first question.

“So Ish, your teachers hint at lots of untapped potential. To be honest your school records make you look lazy, but I'd love your test scores. It's just that..... With all that going for you, why are you doing such a crappy job ? Are you lazy Ish ?”

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Tyler Bates had moved from Bromsgrove to be nearer to his wife's ageing parents. A black family with three children moving to Tottenham in North London. Once he'd have been a cliché, reinforcing

a stereotype. Now though the children of West Indies decent were moving out and many of their neighbours were now Muslims fleeing from the wars in Yemen.

"Things go in cycles dad, we did it in history." Tonya had told him, his thirteen year old daughter.

"The Jews came here and made Tottenham their home. Then the Windrush generation arrived, and now the refugees from Yemen. Eventually it'll be another ethnic group setting up home here."

Tyler didn't care about politics of any kind, he'd never seen a politician on TV he trusted, and that included Akoni Lusk, the first black man to be Prime Minister of the UK.

"The shovel may be the right colour for once, but it's shovelling the same shit."

He'd told Liza, his wife. It wasn't just his wife who'd heard his comment; synchronicity had been hard at work again. Judy Gray had been there, Pandora's mother. She'd been there to talk to his wife about feminism in the new black culture of the twenty seventies. Much to his wife's annoyance, his same shovel quote was used by several tabloids. Not that it did him any harm; Akoni's approval rating was never that high and most of their neighbours hadn't voted for him.

"Will you turn that noise down, please?" He yelled.

Tyler was currently involved in a battle with Tirsia, his eighteen year old daughter. She was about to start a college course, though her main interests seemed to be unsuitable young men and loud music. His wife was out, doing an evening at the SelfCharge car battery place a few streets away. Tyler had taken over his wife's role as keeper of the peace and maintainer of discipline.

"Lower Tirsia, it's just as loud."

"Oh, dad."

The music went down, he could now hear himself think and just about work out what the newsreader was saying on the TV news.

"Where's your brother?" He yelled. "Is he coming home for dinner?"

"No dad, it's his soccer night..... Every Thursday night Zane does soccer practise."

That tone in her voice, to think he'd once been her hero. Tyler turned up the volume on the kitchen view screen.

'.....The UK government has condemned the Indian Space Research Organisation for releasing unconfirmed data.....Images disputed.....'

Condemnation by the government hadn't stopped the news channel from showing the pictures and the short recording taken by an Indian probe orbiting Io, Jupiter's fourth-largest moon.

'Really irresponsible for the ISRO to legitimise a fake news scare story.....'

Tyler knew the face on the TV, though he couldn't name the government minister. The news went back to the recording, just a few seconds of moving images.

"They scare me..... Why are they coming here?"

He hadn't noticed Tonya come into the kitchen. He put his arms around her, wanting to shield her from the objects on the screen. They weren't just harmless lumps of rock, any fool could see the official government position was crap. Over a hundred asteroids, all moving as one, changing course together, heading for Earth. The Indian space people were showing off their new space telescope, predicting that the dots in space out past Uranus were another thousand similar asteroids, perhaps more than a thousand. Tyler kissed the top of his daughter's head. No lies, he was determined not to be one of those parents, the sort who're never honest with their kids.

"They're coming a long way to see us Tonya." He said. "I don't think anyone would travel all that distance just to hurt us, it doesn't make sense."

"Where are they coming from dad?"

"I don't think anyone knows, but it must be light years away."

The probe around Io had taken pictures, really sharp pictures. Some of the asteroids were quite small, but others were huge, the news people had even put a picture of HMS Jeremy Corbyn up on the screen for comparison. The largest piece of space rock was three times the size of the largest aircraft carrier in the UK fleet.

"Mrs Porter at school said they're just rocks, but they're not, are they dad?"

"No they're not."

Tyler held his daughter tightly, until he realised the meal he'd been cooking was about to be ruined. The weird alien space things were a long way off and his hungry kids were right there, in the house, expecting to be fed.

"Alright honey, can you get the plates out for me?"

"Ok.... Why did Mrs Porter lie to us?"

"Not really lying Tonya, just trying to protect you. Some things are so huge, so out there, that adults think kids needs protecting from the truth."

"I'm not a kid dad, I'm thirteen."

"I know, but you'll have to forgive Mrs Porter, she meant well. I don't think the government will be telling us they're just pieces of rock for much longer."

Tyler Bates used the remote to find a cartoon channel to watch while they ate. Cartoons were always harmless and never mentioned thousands of asteroids heading for Earth. Part of him knew that Mrs Porters had told the children a lie to make herself feel better, though he wasn't going to tell Tonya that. Official government positions served as security blankets for a nervous population, at least for a while.

"Dinner time Tirsia, no last minute phone calls, get in here." He yelled.

"What is it?"

"Find out as you eat it."

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Pandora Gray had just gone into the kitchen to get cold drinks and nibbles, when her mum pounced. It was a flaw in her mum, the idea that she could fix anyone by fussing over them.

"Is he feeling better?" Asked her mum.

"Of course he isn't mum, they really hurt him. The interviewer accused him of being lazy, at least four times. Ish thought..... He really did think he was going to get the job. You have to give him space mum."

"I could organise some counselling for him, I know people."

Crap, her mum could be persistent. It was word for word the same conversation they'd had several times, since Ish had come over to stay the night. There were times when Pandora wanted to hit her mum over the head with a stick, a big heavy stick.

"No mum, leave him alone and he'll come out of this. He's done it before, you know Ish."

"I do sweetie, far too well.... But he was your choice, so I said nothing."

At that moment she hated her mum, though she knew the feeling would quickly fade. For an intelligent woman Judy Gray had a bad habit of following the crowd. Most people thought Ish was weird, so her mum sometimes went with the pack. It didn't last and Ish was a decent person, her mum would be different tomorrow.

"No mum, say nothing else and leave him alone.... I mean it."

Pandora put together an impromptu picnic, using a tray to carry it all up to her room. Ish hadn't moved, still sat in an armchair, pretending to watch a wild life feature on penguins.

"Ok, I have the fizzy stuff you like to drink and all sorts of fruit."

"Thanks Biff, I'm just not that hungry."

She put the tray on the small coffee table she'd bought in a junk shop, part of her project to make her room a little more personal. Pandora sat next to Ish, folding her arm around his. No telling him there were other jobs, that anywhere would be lucky to get him. All that would come later, once the granite stare had left his eyes.

"I've often wondered if they secretly hate the cold." She said. "Penguins I mean."

Another news bulleting took the place of the penguins, more pictures of asteroids heading inward from the outer planets, changing course to bring them to Earth. Not to be outdone, the Chinese were releasing their own pictures taken by their Yi Xing space telescope, the largest ever put into space.

"It must be frustrating..... All that high definition, just to show lots of grey rocks." She said.

"NASA won't be outdone, the official line that it's all natural and harmless..... I give it another two days, at most Biff."

'..... and if we remove the stars in the background....'

A clever piece of AI, probably put together by the China National Space Administration. Once the stars had gone, the thousands of tiny dots on the screen looked ominous and threatening.

"There are tens of thousands of them Ish." She said.

"More than you'd send as a polite greeting."

As the news item ended Ish's phone rang, almost as if someone had been watching the same piece of news.

"It's them, Fifth West, I recognise the number." He said.

"At this time of night....Probably a good idea to answer it."

"I'm not going back for a third time Biff, no more interrogations."

She loved Ish, but he did have an annoying habit of cramming phones right up against his face.

Pandora could hear a female voice, but not clear enough to hear the words.

"I'm not sure Lianne, today was torture..... Really, I'm not....."

Ish was transformed in front of her eyes, the slight stoop straightened as he stood up and walked towards her bedroom window.

"I thought today was so bad..... You're sure about that ?"

Ish was actually grinning at her and reaching out for a can of drink.

"Your father ? Oh, yes.... Yes I understand. I'll be there and thank you Lianne."

He was reaching to press the icon to end the call on his F-Phone. For the first time she could hear the female voice at the other end of the call.

"I'm sure Biff is there Ish."

"Yes, she is."

"Tell her we must meet up, soon."

"I will."

He'd told her all about the first interview and Lianne. It was still weird to hear a stranger refer to her as Biff, only Ish ever called her that. Come to think of it, only she ever called Ish.... Ish.

"We need to celebrate....I got the job." Said Ish. "I'm going in tomorrow to sign a contract, but the money Biff, it's crazy, far too many zeros."

"What will you be doing, what's the job title ?"

"Planner, forward development, whatever that means, Lianne talked her dad into it."

"Who is her dad ?"

“Jaroslav Verga, the CEO of Fifth West Corporation. We need to go out, or stay in if your mum has a bottle of champagne in the fridge ?”

“I’m sure she has, equipped for every eventuality is my mum.”

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Synchronicity again with Jada Lopez in Torquay. It’s amazing how people will get to know someone while on holiday in an exotic location and call it coincidence when they see them again, coming out of a shop where they live. A chance of millions to one, yet people will happily call it a coincidence, rather than believing something deeper is at work, something more profound.

“I can see Mateo parking his car.” Said Valentina Lopez.

Valentina was her husband’s mother, grandmother to her two sons, their abuelita. At seventy seven and suffering from severe arthritis, she couldn’t do much around the Girona Guest House, but she never missed anyone arriving in a car, or walking up the front path.

“Oh, what does he want ? I have enough to do today.” Said Jada.

The front door was open of course, opened at about seven in the morning and not locked until after midnight. Mateo was her son and usually she loved to see him, but there’d been a few extra bookings and they were short-handed. Mateo was short and plump, just like his father Luis.

“Another new car, I thought Torbay Council were short of money.” Said Valentina.

“Leave him alone, the council think highly of him, he works hard.”

Strong synchronicity with Luis and Jada Lopez, Ishmael would have recognised them both and been happy to see them. There had been a family holiday to Devon when he was fifteen, they’d stayed at the Girona Guest House. It had been a long, hot and wonderful summer that year, Ish had many fond memories of Torquay.

“We’re honoured, your third visit this month.” Said Valentina.

Jada glared at her husband’s mother, but it was no use, the grandchildren not visiting enough was one of her things. In truth, if they all came for dinner every night, she’d moan that they were never there for breakfast.

“I need to talk to you, both of you.” Said Mateo. “It’s really important, is dad around ?”

“He’s fixing a broken window in a room at the back of the house.”

“Am I invited ?” Asked Valentina.

“Not this time abuelita, I need to see mum and dad about something urgent.”

“I’ll just watch the street then, shall I ?”

Jada ignored the sarcasm in Valentina’s voice.

“That’ll be great.”

Her husband Luis was fifty six and he became angry if anyone dared to suggest he was too old to carry out building repairs. They found him fitting a new window catch in one of the newly redecorated rooms on the top floor.

“Look who I found downstairs.” Said Jada.

“Ahhh, the man who runs the local council and visiting us during daylight hours.” Said Luis. “This must be important, you left your grandmother downstairs.”

“We all know she tells the world all our business.” Said Mateo.

“Radio Torbay I call her.” Said Luis. “For a lady who doesn’t get out much, my mother seems to know a lot of people.”

“This really is urgent, and secret.” Said Mateo. “Repeat any of this and I could lose my job.”

“Now you’ve got me worried, what is it ?” She asked.

“We’ve all got dozens of jobs and weird titles these days, it’s the cuts. I inherited the civil defence liaison post when Bob Field retired.”

“Torbay civil defence, six trucks in a shed at the local territorial army base.” Said Luis. “I can’t see that terrifying anyone thinking of invading Devon.”

“This is serious dad, please listen to me. They’re making it all operational again and not just here. The government are spending big money on civil defence, a blank cheque I’ve been told. The MOD are even opening up all the bunkers from the cold war in the nineteen sixties.”

“Why son, is it to do with these things in space ?” Asked Luis.

“Did you get a place in the bunker ?” Asked Jada.

“Yes, though just for Helen, me and the kids.” Said Mateo. “It’s the asteroids, of course it is, only a fool would believe the crap being peddled by the government.”

“They do their best son, there is nowhere for scared people to go.” Said Luis. “We’ve a moon colony of forty people, mostly scientists. Not that they’re likely to be much safer than us.... If these things turn out to be enemies.”

“There’s the Mars base.” Said Jada.

“No one wants to go there after the Ophir Base disaster.” Said Luis.

“You’ve obviously talked this over.” Said Mateo. “Helen said her parents never believed it was just harmless space rocks, even when it was only Mictlantecuhtli passing close to Earth five years ago.”

“We run a guest house son, lots people on holidays or business men passing through. They have relatives in the army, the police or the NHS. They’re all gearing up for something big and you don’t need to be Sherlock Holmes to work out what it is. Soon people will be finding holes in the ground to hide it, not that it’ll do them any good. This isn’t going to be about hiding from nukes.”

“At least get away from the coast, things have been seen going into the sea.” Said Mateo.

“We’ve talked it over and your father and I are staying put.” Said Jada. “Inland, on the coast, down a mine, it won’t make any difference. What happen will happen, nothing we can do about it.”

“Besides,” said Luis, “they could be coming here to help us, maybe even help us colonise a few news planets. God knows we need one.”

There were staff, even a cook, but Jada liked to clean up after the evening meal had been served. Maybe it was because of the never ending stories about various types of apocalypse on PopNet, but the guest house was full, no one seemed scared enough to cancel their vacation. The kitchen had been busy, there had been a lot of dishes and cookware to wash.

“That will do, everything sparkling.” She muttered.

Jada looked over everything once again, making sure there wasn’t even the smallest grubby smudge on anything. As she turned off the lights, a shooting star went past the window. Normally a welcome sight, she closed the blinds just in case it was followed by others. She felt her heart beat a little faster.

“No use, nowhere to run to.” She muttered. “Luis is right, it is what it is, whatever happens will happen. Please God, let them be friendly.”

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Matthew Newman quite liked the Australian military guys; they just wanted to get the job done, with as little hassle as possible. It was the locals being obstructive, insisting they didn’t need outside help. He’d seen it all before, at other trouble spots around the world. Police, local pathologists, fire crews, Matt had seen them all get their panties in a bunch. It wasn’t just worrying about tourism, no

one likes admitting something unpleasant is happening in their own backyard. He'd even briefed his team on the phenomenon before leaving Heslington camp.

"They won't like us, don't take it personally. No one likes something nasty in their own town. It can be anything from terrorism, a local satanic cult, a cartel setting up a meth lab, or as in this case.... Someone killing a local character. They'll get under our feet and hate us, especially as we're Brits."

Matt was letting the Australian Special Ops people argue with the locals, it was their territory. The dead local character had been a survival nut called Bertie Johnson. There were currently two dozen heavily armed soldiers, waiting outside the general store in Gunther Springs. There was no police station and the town's only police officer owned the store.

"What can I tell you, it was all a mistake." Said the cop. "It was a Saturday night, there had been a party at Miriam's....Someone shot Bertie, it was bound to happen one day, end of story."

"Why was it bound to happen?" Asked Ward.

Ward was just Ward, no first name or rank. Matt had met them before, soldiers who went through thirty years of service, only ever being known by their surname. Ward was leading the small group of Australian soldiers, though he was currently looking pissed off with the cop.

"Bertie was a survival nut, we get a lot of them in the Northern Territories. They come here to escape from something or hide from someone. Bertie lived out there in his cabin, using a shotgun to keep strangers away. He was usually too drunk to hit anyone, but as I kept telling him.... One day someone was going to shoot back."

"But you sent pictures, showing wounds that couldn't be explained. I've seen the email, you sounded pretty scared. How do you explain that?" Asked Ward.

"It was Miriam's birthday, the whole town went. Yes I had a bit to drink and the wounds did look pretty bad. We don't have big city resources, the wounds did look strange, until I had Doc Granger give the body the once over."

"A once over, has there been a full autopsy?" Asked Ward.

"As I said, we don't have big city resources."

"I need to see the body, now."

"That might not be possible.... As I said, resources are...."

"Would you like more resources? One call to Canberra and I can have a few thousand regular army guys here. They can dig around your town until they find what's left of Bertie Johnson. They'll make lots of noise of course and need to knock on a lot of doors. The press will no doubt wonder what they're doing.... Do I need to make that call?"

"I'd do as he says if I were you." Added Matt.

"He's come all the way from England, you're making us look like dicks." Snapped Ward.

The cop was probably a huge fish in Gunther Springs, but he had the good sense to know when he was beaten.

"The body is at Smith's funeral place....They're away right now, the door will be locked."

"Show us the way, my men will get the door open."

Everyone got into the six large four wheel drive vehicles supplied by the Australian government. Comfortable suspension and air con, they were far better than the open topped trucks Matt had been expecting. Gunther Springs was a small place though and they were stopping outside Smith's Funerals, before the AC had made much difference.

"No hospital with a proper mortuary." The cop told him. "The government health people helped out Miriam with the finance. She'd got enough space for six bodies in her backroom."

"The same Miriam who had the birthday party?" Asked Ward.

The cop nodded at him.

"It's a small town."

The front door looked new, part of a recently installed aluminium shopfront. The back door was different, an old wooden door that wobbled as Ward pushed against it.

"Charlie !" He yelled. "This door needs opening."

Charlie was a huge native Australian soldier. He didn't even need to use the heel of his boot on the door, a gentle shove with his shoulder was enough.

"That lock will need to be paid for." Said the cop, as the door flew back.

The front two rooms were where clients looked at catalogues of caskets, or paid their respects in a tiny viewing room. The front rooms looked like a postcard of Australia from the nineteen fifties. The back room was different, it looked like something plucked out of a modern major hospital.

"Wow, this is more like it." Said Matt. "Looks like Bertie is the only customer."

A modern storage unit for the deceased citizens of Gunther Springs. Six drawers and a freezer unit, though only one drawer had a name tag on the front.

'Johnson, Albert DOB 11-8-2019'

The first thing Matt saw as he pulled open the drawer was a scruffy beard and a face that looked older than his fifty six years.

"Was he on anything stronger than booze ?" Asked Matt.

"No way to get it out here.... As I said, we're a small town." Said the cop. "Bertie did love his booze, a bottle of scotch a night when he could afford it."

"These must be the wounds you photographed." Said Ward. "Do they go right through ?"

"Yes, six neat holes in a nice tidy pattern. Right through his breastbone, his heart and lungs and two go clean through his spine. Never seen anything like it, neither had Doc Granger."

"So he has examined the body ?" Asked Ward.

"Yes, just not officially.... Not so he'd sign any papers about cause of death."

"Yet you were still happy to bury him without an autopsy." Said Ward.

"Look, we're just...."

"I know, you're just a small town. I'm going to call in a full medical team and leave a guard on the body until it arrives."

Matt had been looking at the six neat holes. It was wrong, all wrong, the holes still looked neat, as though they'd just been drilled or burned through in some way. A powerful laser might have got the job done, but that would have left scorching on the skin.

"Can we get Bertie on his side ?" He asked.

Of all people it was the cop who helped him turn the cold body on its side.

"They go right through." He said.

"That's not right, they should have closed up." Said Ward.

Matt knew what he meant; the body tissue and fluids should have moved to fill the holes, even if only by the natural mechanism of decay after death. By the look of Bertie he'd been lying outside for a while before being found, but the holes were still open, still neat.

"Do you have a flashlight officer ?" Asked Matt. "Let's see if the holes still go right through."

"It's Chris, Chris Crawford.... Yes I do."

Great, the cop was finally being helpful.

"Point it at the holes on Bertie's back Chris. That's it, point it straight."

Ward joined him in looking at the light coming right through Bertie. The survival nut had been a big guy, there was quite a bit of him for the holes to go through. The light was clear and bright through all six holes.

"That's definitely not right." Said Matt.

"No sign of cauterisation or tearing." Said Ward. "The wounds look as though they've been lined with something."

"Keep the light straight Chris." Said Matt.

He used a cheap ballpoint pen to probe the first half an inch of one of the holes. Matt was willing to throw the pen away if it became too covered in goo, but it came out clean.

"It is, the hole is lined with something clear and tough." Said Matt.

"That makes no sense at all." Said Ward.

"There is one explanation, though you might think I'm crazy."

"I'm listening."

"Maybe Bertie Johnson did take a shot at someone who shot back. But they used a weapon that wasn't designed to kill humans." Said Matt.

"I'm not calling you crazy..... Not yet anyway. I'll leave a guard here, I still don't trust the locals. We should go and have a look at the shack Bertie called home." Said Ward.

Chris Crawford didn't even complain when they headed north instead of taking him home. Bertie lived quite a way out of town, the AC in the vehicles actually had time to work. Not that it was pleasant to get out of a cool car and into the humid heat.

"Crap.... None of this was in your report Chris." Said Ward.

"It was getting dark and Doc didn't want to hang around....."

There had been some sort of battle, Bertie had obviously been using his shotgun quite a bit, the area in front of his shack was covered in used cartridges.

"Evans....." Shouted Ward. "Get the men spread out.....Search the area for anything that looks out of place..... And stay alert."

There was a feeling about the place, beyond the general dilapidation of the shack and the used cartridges. Hard to put his finger on it, but Matt was keeping his weapon up and ready.

"Look familiar ?" He asked Ward.

Six holes, burned or bored in some way through the wall of the shack. Again there was no sign of heat.

"Looks like our bad guy missed.....Smooth edges to the hole." Said Matt. "Look, there's definitely some sort of..... I'm not sure what, but it's lining the holes."

"We need a scene of crimes person, Chris never reported any of this." Said Ward.

"I brought Brenda, a senior technician who has the added advantage of being able to shoot straight. If it's alright for her to take samples ? This is your show, I'm just here as an advisor."

"Take all the samples you like."

"Brenda !" Yelled Matt. "We've something here for your sample bottles."

Brenda arrived looking excited about something, constantly looking back the way she'd come.

"Sorry, you really should see what Charlie found." She said. "What do you want me to put in a sample bag ?"

"That..... Whatever is it lining the hole."

Brenda took what looked like a dental probe out of the top pocket of her uniform and prodded the edges of the hole.

"That is tough, the probe didn't even scratch it."

“Can you get a sample ?”

“Yes, I’ll cut the entire board out, right round all six holes, won’t take me long.”

“Where did Charlie find something ?” Asked Ward.

“Just a bit east of the outside toilet.”

“Dunny, we call it a Dunny.” Said Ward.

“Just follow your nose to the Dunny and walk about fifty feet to the east.” Said Brenda.

Charlie was examining something next to a waterway, something huge. Three other soldiers were spread out around him, all looking nervous, their weapons ready.

“Jeez you got a big one there Charlie.” Said Ward. “Did it go for you ?”

It looked too big for the waterway, it looked too big for just about anywhere. Charlie was pointing at the throat of a huge freshwater crocodile. Matt had been briefed by conference link on the local crocs, there had even been a few statistics on the crocs in the Northern Territories.

“Watch out for them, there’s one croc for every human in the area and they move fast for large reptiles.” The lady from the MOD had told them.

It was the size that was shocking, the sheer hugeness of the dead croc.

“Dead when I found it, throat cut through, its spine ripped apart.” Said Charlie. “This wasn’t the work of any animal I’ve ever seen.”

“Crocs have tough hides, I couldn’t have done that with a knife.” Said Ward. “I doubt if even Charlie is strong enough.”

Charlie was shaking his head as he stood up from looking at the huge beast.

“Lots of signs of a struggle, this Croc fought something and lost.” He said. “There’s nothing out here that can beat a big croc in a fight.”

“How far are we from where it fell, the asteroid ?” Asked Matt.

“About ten miles, it came down on the coast near Glyde Point.” Said Ward. “Difficult to be certain, no one has found a crater or anything. Choppers have grid searched the area, Pine Gap even diverted a satellite.... Nothing, no sign of it. It’s a desolate area, just mud roads, waterways and of course.... Crocs.”

“Lots of crocs.” Added Charlie.

“We need to talk.” Said Ward.

Instinctively they walked a little further east, away from the pervasive stink coming from Bertie Johnson’s Dunny.

“I’m close to recommending a full response by the regular army.” Said Ward. “We need a full science team out here, maybe even someone from disease control. The problem is that my orders were to keep all this quiet if I could. What were you told ?”

“Much the same thing, assist you as best we could. Keep it quiet of course..... No hassle was fairly big on the list.”

“I think we should go north, search around Glyde Point and see if we can find what landed there.”

“Sounds a good plan.” Said Matt. “Are we taking Officer Crawford with us ?”

“I think so, we’ve got him fairly well house trained.” Said Ward. “And he does know the area better than we do.”

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