

Ishmael

Chapter 15 - Kidderminster

“Matt had been brought up on old classic films. He expected to see pincers and claws come out of the ground. Some kind of robotic bugs, probably dozens of them. Giant ants had been the enemy in most of the old movies he’d loved as a kid.”



MacLaren knew they’d got it wrong; the Fifth West supply base in Norway wasn’t just an automated warehouse in the middle of nowhere. There were too many guards and they had other defence systems. She’d counted at least five turrets and they weren’t the usual rubbish with a crap AI. Only the best for Fifth West, the turrets were the fully autonomous kind, talked about in hushed whispers by the military students who’d spent time in Albion. She thought they were still on the European Federation’s list of restricted technology.

“This is a private facility. Why did you come here ?”

It was seven against seven and the security guards looked more at ease with their weapons than the students. The one talking to them had nothing to mark him out as the leader. MacLaren unilaterally abandoned the plan to take over the base by force. She hoped a few lies and a little manipulation might work, though she still kept her pulse rifle up and ready.

“We’re from the Unicon One Lunar facility.” She said. “We just need to refuel and pick up some supplies.”

It was cold, there was a light covering of snow across the shuttle landing area. The cold weather seemed to make the situation worse in some weird way, more sinister. Plus the leader of the guards was actually chuckling at her.

“No, I’m guessing you’re Brits from Base Albion.” He said. “Our systems did a pretty good job of identifying the shuttle that landed outside of the facility. My guess is that you picked up a Unicon shuttle somewhere on your travels. There’s nothing for you here, try somewhere else.”

“I doubt if there is anywhere else.” Said Gene.

“Yeah, we’d heard that might be the case. Not our problem though. You need to leave and be on your way.”

“All we need is a little fuel and food.” Said MacLaren. “We’ll leave then and get out of your hair.”

One of the guards had probably been communicating with someone senior. He looked at the leader and shook his head.

“You have to leave, Now !” Snapped the leader. “I am now telling you to leave. If you refuse the automated turrets will begin to consider you as a threat. At some point they will open fire and we’ll be left with the job of getting what’s left of you all into body bags. As I said, you need to leave.”

If it had been deliberate timing she’d have been impressed. Kitty knew the leader had nothing to do with the turrets rising out of their armoured pods, mini-guns ready to fire.

“You must have kids.” Said Gene. “Most of our students are nineteen or twenty. Giving us a little fuel and food won’t hurt you.”

“For the second time.....I am asking you to leave.”

The turrets used a warning siren to make sure everyone knew the situation was serious. Aiming lasers began to target her people, including her. Kitty MacLaren had a decent weapon, but it wasn’t

a match for the turrets. If it came to it, she hoped to take out the leader and two of his friends, before the mini-guns cut her in two. Gene nodded at her and raised his weapon.

"We're not leaving without what we came for." She said.

That was the thing about seeing the world around you turned to crap. None of them had anywhere else to go. Ultimately threats never work on people with nothing to lose.

"This is ridiculous.....Stand down Shearman, I've deactivated the automated defences. Bring them to see me at the blue dome."

The voice had boomed out through a public address system. The speaker had to be someone important, Shearman was no longer threatening them. The guards lowered their weapons, so MacLaren lowered hers.

"Looks like you might be getting those supplies after all." Said Shearman.

"That's all we want." Said Gene.

It was surprising how much things had changed and how quickly. Kitty thought Shearman might try to take away their weapons, but he didn't.

"There are more of our students in the other shuttle." She said.

"Someone will be sent to fetch them."

The snow was getting heavier before they reached the central structure in the base. A five storey high building, topped with a blue dome. Quite a few checks and key cards to even get inside.

"A lot of security for a supply base." She said. "What are you doing here?"

"If the Science Officer wants you to know, he'll tell you himself." Said Shearman.

So a science officer was running the place. It wasn't a lot of information to work with, but every little helped. An elevator took them to the top floor. It was almost an ordinary office on the top floor, there was even a secretary sat at a desk. Only the blizzard hitting the windows spoiled the feeling of normality.

"Andy said to take them straight in." Said the woman at the desk.

Two large doors opened up to reveal an office that said the occupant ran the place. Just enough expensive furniture to indicate the man behind the desk was the boss. Even the paintings on the wall looked to be the genuine article, no cheap prints for the boss. It was a bit disappointing when the man walked round the desk to meet them. Jeans, trainers and a Led Zeppelin T shirt, didn't suit the décor.

"Hi, I'm Andy Korenberg." He said. "Sorry about all that.....You're welcome to enough food and fuel to get you where you're going."

"Any ideas where we might go next?" Asked Gene. "We've only just arrived back from what's left of Base Albion."

They were soon chatting like old friends. Something was nudging at the back of Kitty's mind, something important. As often happened, the memories arrived in her consciousness when she stopped trying too hard to remember.

"I know you..... You're THE Andy Korenberg, the space craft designer." She yelled.

She'd said it with far too much volume. Kitty had everyone's attention, though she wasn't sure what to do with it.

"He's famous..... He designed Billy."

"Billy?" Asked Andy

"Our shuttle from Albion." Said Gene.

"Actually I designed all the Diaspora Class Shuttles." Said Andy.

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Stourbridge to Kidderminster was only eight miles. Before the invasion there had been buses doing the journey many times a day, and a direct train service. The main road went too close to Hagley though and the unidentified monsters coming out of the ground. Probably another type of robot, but would their weapons deal with them? Ish had decided it was safer to keep to the back roads, a lane that went through Whittington. The lane wasn't that well maintained and there had been a few attacks by drones. When their convoy of vehicles stopped so that an abandoned car could be pushed off the road, Ish made a decision.

"I'm a bit worried about Horace." He said. "All the bouncing about and constant delays. I'm going to travel in the back of the truck with him."

"It stinks Ish." Said Biff. "It may be a natural smell wherever he comes from, it may even be attractive to lady aliens. To us it's a dreadful stench though and being close to it will be like torture." "If the tubes going into him aren't supported properly.....He might die Biff."

She was collecting up cushions and bedding as she talked. Out of the two of them, she was always the more practical one.

"I know Ish, he's unique, probably the only one to be captured. If we could just communicate with him..... Yada-yada. I've heard it all, no selling required, I'm already convinced."

Biff was small and most of her seemed to be covered in blankets, cushions and a bag over her shoulder.

"Come on then, don't give me time to change my mind." She said. "You can carry the bag with food and drink in it..... And bring a weapon, just in case."

There was a fight with the colonel of course. He talked a lot about all their eggs ending up in one basket, but in the end he agreed to them travelling with Horace. There was more space in the truck than he remembered, enough room for them to make a sleeping space.

"It might be my imagination, but he seems to stink less." He said.

"Definitely just your imagination."

As the convoy moved out, the truck hit a pothole.

"Look, I was right." He said. "That must be painful.... Assuming he feels pain."

One of the tubes connected to a sphere had come loose. As the truck did any kind of sudden movement, it was pulling away from Horace's flesh. A yellowish fluid was coming out of the open wound.

"This must be his blood, or digestive fluid." He said.

Probably digestive fluid, the yellow fluid was burning his fingers. Ish wiped it off, before supporting the tube and sphere with bandages and duct tape.

"Not an elegant solution, but it gets the job done." Said Biff. "Do you think we need to try feeding him?"

The question had come up before. The assumption had been that the creature's food and other essentials were being supplied directly by the spheres. A sensible assumption if it weren't for the fact that Horace was losing weight.

"There is definitely less of him now than there was." Said Ish. "My main worry is giving him a food that might poison him, or damage whatever he has for a stomach."

"He's an intelligent being Ish, not an animal at the zoo. We should try him with something."

"Alright, let's try him with a sliced up apple. On one of our plastic plates though, no trying to feed him by hand. He might be a carnivore with a thing for humans."

"Which end do we try?" Asked Ish.

"I still think the end with the pincers is his head end."

Biff offered up the plate of thinly sliced apple. At first the pincers just moved it about. Maybe it could smell its food ? Something seemed to trigger a response.

“Success.... I just hope we haven’t killed him.” Said Ish.

The pincers picked up the pieces of apple, before munching them up and passing them back through an opening in the creature. A messy process, but most of the apple was eaten.

“He was hungry, we should try him with something else.” Said Biff. “A ration pack mixed up with plenty of water, he’s bound to be thirsty.”

They’d been neglecting Horace, there was no denying it. So much else had happened though and Ish was still worried about poisoning their prisoner.

“We don’t even know if he drinks water Biff.”

“He’s intelligent and they’ve been watching us for years. He isn’t going to eat or drink anything that’ll hurt him, would you ?”

“I suppose not..... And to be honest. I did think our chances of keeping him alive for long were fairly slim.”

Like tinned food, the ration packs were designed to be eaten hot or cold. Ish emptied a pack onto a plate and mixed in enough water to create an unappetising mush. It smelt weird cold, or that might have been the constant stench of Horace.

“Can you imagine what one of JV’s science teams would say if they saw us do this.” He said.

Biff kissed him on the cheek.

“We are one of his science teams Ish.... Go on, feed Horace.”

Ish kept his fingers well to the edge of the plate. First the pincers dealt with the solids and again it was a messy business. A good fifth of everything the pincers chewed up, ended up on the floor of the truck.

“Can you imagine alien dinner parties.” Said Biff. “Hey..... That’s new.”

It looked like a miniature elephant’s trunk. The protuberance for the creature’s mouth moved over the plate, sucking up the food. It stopped sometimes, as if feeling something, tasting it. A few things were spat out and rejected, but most of the food was swallowed.

“It doesn’t like potatoes.” Said Biff.

It had to happen, the feeding snout moved over his fingers. Ish breathed a sigh of relief when his fingers remained unmolested. When Horace withdrew the feeding device, the plate looked wiped clean.

“Great, if he’s alive in the morning we’ll try him on breakfast cereal.” He said.

An attack came a few minutes later and for a while they forgot about Horace. Several drones had attempted to destroy the convoy and one land rover had been destroyed. Deaths were now rare from such attacks, everyone had been shocked. There were medics, but the colonel had asked Biff to treat one of the injured men.

“He’s lost too much blood..... With the facilities of a modern hospital..... All I can do is give him morphine and make him comfortable until he dies.”

Two men died, including the man Biff had been looking after. A nurse died too and she’d only been in the convoy to get protection until they reached Kidderminster. It was after dark before Ish and Biff returned to the truck. The convoy avoided travelling at night, so all they wanted was a drink and an early night. In the back of the truck a surprise was waiting for them, a large and smelly surprise.

“Oh wow, he must have been needed something to eat to shift that lot.” Said Biff.

Alien crap and lots of it. Unsurprisingly the dark brown balls of excreta were at the opposite end to the one they’d fed. Mercifully the balls of crap were fairly dry, like horse manure.

"The driver has a shovel." Said Ish.

The truck driver teased him a little about the reason for borrowing the shovel. He then redeemed himself by helping shovel up the mess and depositing it by the side of the road. Of course Biff had to dig into one of the shit balls to get a nice fresh sample for analysis.

"It seems they're like us, one long tube running from throat to backside." She said. "That's encouraging, their physiology may be more like ours than we thought. Their bio-mechanical robots are nothing like us."

"That sort of makes sense." Said Ish. "The last of the Mariner drones sent to Mars in twenty fifty five had a biological element to them and they were nothing like us. I'm still hoping we can communicate with Horace."

They had something to eat and talked for a while. It was almost time to go to bed, before Ish realised they had communicated with Horace. At a very basic level, where feeding someone meant you weren't likely to kill them, or cause them serious injury.

"He's stopped that awful noise." Said Ish. "We were so used to it, but it's stopped."

"Do you think he trusts us now?"

"Probably a little..... Mainly it means we should get a decent night's sleep."

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Duncan had probably overdone it with the explosives. Finding the doorway had been easy once they'd found the packed down topsoil and scuff marks on the metal panelling. The doors had even rung with a reassuring hollow sound when Chris had used the stock of his rifle on them. Keeness had been the problem, Duncan had tried too hard to impress.

"Well.... I think they must have heard that in Canberra." Said Matt.

Pieces of alien metal littered the area, just what Matt had wanted to avoid. The area inside the doors was a mass of twisted metal and smoke, lots of smoke.

"I was hoping not to destroy anything inside until we'd had a look around Duncan." He said.

"Yeah, you fucked that up." Added Owen.

"Sorry, the metal wasn't as tough as I thought."

They all stood and waited for the smoke to clear. The blast had left a hole in the ground and the rubble had become shrapnel, blasting its way through walls and doors. It was chaos inside the lower floor of the tower, but not everything had been destroyed.

"There..... Luckily beyond the reach of Duncan's over enthusiastic explosion." Said Bren. "A ramp going up."

"A ramp for the robots." Said Matt. "Better than stairs in many ways. It doesn't look damaged, but we need to check it out."

His soldiers began to enter the tower and fan out, spreading themselves around in case there was an ambush. Matt got a good look at the ramp as the smoke completely cleared. It looked undamaged and the gradient was gentle. As often happened Bren seemed to read his mind.

"Looks wide enough for the APC to use." She said. "Easier than carrying the demolition charges."

It was an idea he'd been thinking about, before discarding it.

"Too risky Bren. Leave a small guard at the APC and bring the explosives inside. We'll carry everything we need."

It was all too easy, no one was expecting trouble. There was no sign of alien robots and the tower protected them from drone attacks. As Matt was beginning to realise, the aliens were always coming up with fresh surprises. It began with Owen putting his ear against a wall.

"I knew I heard something." He said. "Digging it sounds like, something coming up from below."

“Spread out.....Watch the ground.” Shouted Matt.

There had been talk about creatures coming out of the ground in Ramingining. The military didn't know details, just that the local population had suffered casualties. Quite soon the sound of digging was loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Don't assume the Fifth West weapons will work.” Said Matt. “Use your AP45 rounds if the energy weapons don't seem to be working.”

Matt had been brought up on old classic films. He expected to see pincers and claws come out of the ground. Some kind of robotic bugs, probably dozens of them. Giant ants had been the enemy in most of the old movies he'd loved as a kid. He wasn't expecting one large alien lizard to pull itself out of the ground.

“Forget electros.” One of the Fifth West guys shouted. “Go straight to penetrating type five rounds.” Green skinned, it looked like an industrial size gecko. For all he knew the aliens might have based it on the humble gecko. Only a third of the creature was out of the ground, yet it darted forward and grabbed one of his soldiers in its jaws.

“Crap ! That thing can move fast.” Said Chris.

The lizard blinked its eyes as it chewed. After one or two screams the fighter in its jaws was silent.

“Damn it, fire at that thing.” Yelled Matt.

Unfair to get impatient, everything had happened so quickly. Explosives rounds hit the lizard, but its outer skin had to be armoured. The rounds didn't penetrate its flesh, which meant they didn't even explode. Matt brought up his assault rifle and emptied a clip of AP45 rounds at the beast.

“The eyes, get its eyes.” He shouted.

Without its eyes it would still be dangerous, but hopefully easier to finish off. Matt had seen a lot of geckos around the world, most were welcomed as eaters of unpleasant bugs. All the geckos he could remember had yellow eyes, or sometimes red. The monster lizard had dark eyes and they too had to be protected by a bullet proof covering. Bren wasn't far away, there was just too much noise to call out to her. He ran the short distance to her.

“Get them to bring the rocket launcher from the APC.”

She nodded and began to shout into the comms. Strangely, when everything else in the world was becoming miniaturised, the comms system Bren had to lug about was still the size of large briefcase. It was supposed to use the local SatLink of course and allow comms with their base. Only there was no SatLink now and probably no base. Matt had given up on using the AP45 rounds, but pure cussedness made him load up a fresh clip.

“Damn..... Did you see that ?” Yelled Owen.

Had it been one of his rounds ? Matt's natural competitiveness hoped that it had been one of his. An AP45 round had either penetrated the eye covering or gone round the edge of it. The creature was a robot of some kind, its eye didn't bleed. It exploded, with a bright blue electrical flash. They'd been fooled by the creature looking real, like Earth's indigenous organic life.

“Use the electros..... It's a fucking robot.” Yelled Matt.

For some reason Chris ran forward, spraying the creature with his assault rifle. Matt was about to tell him he was wasting his time. It happened, one of those events in life that seem too horrific to be real. Matt had lost men in battle, far too many men. Seeing Chris Crawford grabbed and bitten almost in two by the creature was different for some reason, Chris had begun to feel like family.

“The electros are working.” Said Bren. “Not as fast as they usually do, but the thing is stumbling.”

It was, the creature had even dropped what was left of Chris. Matt dug through one of the packs the demolition team had brought into the tower. He knew what he wanted to do and he was determined to do it himself.

“What are you doing ?” Asked Owen.

“Just keep your head down.”

Matt set the timer on the demolition charge for five seconds. As the giant lizard fell backwards down the hole in the ground, he threw the demolition charge to follow it down. He was determined nothing else was going to come out of that hole.

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Jada Lopez had stopped thinking about the ruins as what was left of Torquay. It helped her to imagine they were in a strange country where such destruction seemed all too common. A delusion of course, but she considered it a harmless one. As usual her husband’s mother was moaning and trying to control everyone.

“We can’t stay here.” Said Valentina Lopez. “We’ve seen them going from building to building. It’s a small miracle we haven’t been found already.”

“There’s water here and the walls are strong.” Said Luis Lopez.

They’d wandered through the ruins for a few days, surviving like animals on what they could recover from ruined shops. After seeing the small alien creatures searching the ruins, they’d begun to only move about at night. After seeing one of the aliens eviscerate a man on a moonlit night, they’d looked for a secure place to hide for a while. Why the police station had pallets of bottled water and tinned food in the basement was a mystery.

“Probably part of some sort of planning for the emergency.” Valentina had suggested.

Valentina was always full of unasked for advice and suggestions. Jada had laughed it all off and put up with it all her married life. Lately she’d begun to really hate her husband’s mother.

“There’s a solid door at the top of the stairs.” Said Jada. “We’ve food here, water and beds to sleep on. Besides, you can’t run if we get into trouble.”

“Beds ! Beds you say. Beds in police cells.” Yelled Valentina.

“Don’t be silly mother, a bed is a bed.” Said Luis.

“We have the gun..... We need to leave the ruins and get out into the open countryside.”

Oh the gun again, Valentina seemed to think it was a miracle sent by God. A few of the shrink wrapped pallets had been cut open before they’d found the ruined police station. Whoever had been there had gone, leaving a hunting rifle behind. There had been blood on the rifle, though thankfully there had been no bodies, they’d looked everywhere. Luis had cleaned the rifle and now Valentina thought the weapon was an answer to everything.

“We have only three bullets for the rifle.” Said Luis. “And I think if these.....Things could be killed by bullets, the army would have done that a long time ago.”

“We’re going to run out of candles soon.” Said Valentina. “We’ll be down here in the dark.”

“Then we’ll go scavenging for more.” Said Luis.

Even in the flickering candle light, Jada could see the look on Valentina’s face. There was a special look she had, a mixture of contempt and resentment. The look always came before a verbal attack on Luis and those usually started with a phrase that made Jada shudder.

“I had this with your father.” Said Valentina. “No backbone that was his trouble and you’re exactly the same.”

“Leave him alone, he’s just trying to keep us alive.” Said Jada.

“Useless when a man needs to be a real man..... He’ll never change.”

The rifle was on the table, safety catch off and ready to use. They had it ready in case the owner of the weapon came to try and reclaim it. Jada picked it up, keeping her hands well away from the trigger.

“What are you doing ?” Asked Luis.

“Just warning her, she has to stop.....It’s abuse, always has been and it has to stop. You have to shut up you awful old witch, be quiet.” Said Jada.

“Hah, you always did have more balls than my son. His father was the same, spineless.”

Jada raised the rifle, aiming it at her husband’s mother. She’d only ever fired a rifle once in her life and that had been at a fairground. Jada aimed for Valentina’s chest. The distance wasn’t far and she had three bullets to get the job done.

“This is crazy, put the gun down.” Said Luis. “She means nothing by it..... It’s just the way she communicates.”

“You do mean it though don’t you ?”

“Of course I do..... Had this with his.....”

“Don’t you dare say you had this with his father.” Yelled Jada. “I have heard you use that as a weapon all the time I’ve known Luis. Luis is a good man, his father was a good man. It was you..... You bitch..... You put your husband in an early grave with that tongue of yours.”

Jada had her finger on the trigger and she was beginning to pull back. How much pressure to fire the rifle and finally shut her up ? The fairground rifle had needed quite a lot of pressure on the trigger before it fired a bullet. Valentina confused her by crying.

“How dare you..... I love my son.”

There had been sudden changes and mood swings before, usually when the old lady was losing an argument. For a fraction of a second Jada wanted to pull the trigger and then pull it twice again. There were no police anymore, no laws. Jada took a deep breath and placed the rifle back on the table.

“I do love him, even if I.....”

“Just be quiet for a while.” Said Jada.

She looked at Luis, who smiled and nodded at her.

“This is why we didn’t want to go into Mateo’s bunker.” He said. “Living underground, cooped up together all day. We’ll end up killing each other.”

“Alright, Valentina was right, in a way.” Said Jada. “We need to leave here and get well away from what’s left of Torquay.”

“I think it was the depth charges.” Said Luis. “The aliens do seem to have a score to settle, punishing the town like this.”

“In a way it’s nice to know they can act out of spite and anger.” Said Valentina. “Makes them almost human.”

Jada smiled at her husband’s mother, the woman she’d recently wanted to kill.

“We’ll leave here tonight as soon as it’s fully dark.” Said Jada. “We’ll need to carry as much food and water as we can..... That means you too Valentina.”

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“That was better than I thought it would be.” Said Biff. “Actually it was really good.”

Sex had become an essential part of their bedtime ritual. Not just the bonding of two young people, both in danger and far from home. The endorphins released by sex helped them both sleep soundly in an insane world. Trying to make love quietly in the back of the truck had added an edge. As it turned out, a really good edge.

"I still prefer somewhere we don't have to worry about making a noise." Said Ish.

"Yes, of course..... But that was..... Unexpectedly good."

"Oh yes."

Biff was asleep in seconds, a sleeping bag wrapped round her like a blanket. For some reason Ish felt immensely tired but unable to sleep. He leant back on the side of the truck and watched Horace move about a little. There wasn't much light, just two fairly dim night lights fed by the truck's modified batteries. Enough light to see the creature's sides vibrate at regular intervals.

"I wish I knew what makes you tick Horace." He muttered.

There came that point when he might have been asleep and dreaming, or so tired that he was imagining things. His eyes were open, he was sure about that. A spiral was heading towards him from the direction of Horace. A spiral of small cubes, black and white cubes. Geometrically perfect and slowly forming a spiral across several feet of open space.

Ish didn't feel scared, he was certain it was all a dream, or his mind was on the edge of dreaming, where nothing makes any sense at all. The spiral speeded up until it was just a foot from his face. Still Ish felt no fear, not even a little anxiety. A line of small perfect cubes grew from the end of the spiral. When they touched his forehead, Ish was somewhere else, a different world.

"It has to be a dream." He muttered.

He was looking at a world with blue oceans and continents, though it wasn't Earth. His world maybe, the world Horace called home. Ish had expected the view to change slowly, as he seemed to swoop down towards the planet. Instead his viewpoint shifted suddenly.

"Ish, wake up..... Are you alright ?"

He was standing in a vast city, with buildings towering up into the blue sky above. No, not really a city, more like a hive or..... It reminded him of a termite mound. Thousands of creatures like Horace were moving along pathways, some walking, some using devices on wheels. Ish felt mildly claustrophobic, the buildings seemed to fill everywhere, buildings full of aliens.

"Ish..... Please wake up, you're scaring me."

Another shift to a beach full of pebbles, beside an ocean with gentle waves. His first chance to see the sky. At that moment it really hit him, the reality of observing a totally alien world. There were two suns in the sky and at least three moons large and close enough to see in the daylight. He wondered if there ever was night, real night, on a planet with two suns.

"Ish.....Wake up."

Five creatures like Horace on the beach, two large and three small. A family, perhaps Horace's family. Ish knew he wasn't dreaming, no dream had ever been that detailed and vivid. Horace was showing him his world, his life, Ish was sure of it.

"They're playing, his kids are playing." He muttered.

"Yes..... Wake up Ish..... I'm really scared now."

With recognition of Biff's voice the visions went from his mind. He awoke to find a scared looking Biff, holding a wicked looking dagger in her hand.

"I'm fine, oh if you could have seen it..... I think Horace just tried to do what I wanted to do.....Communicate."

"I woke up and you were muttering and sweating." Said Biff. "There was this thing coming out of Horace, touching you."

"Was it a large spiral ?"

"No, it was like a disgusting finger. I almost cut it off, but it went back into him."

"I'm glad you didn't hurt him Biff..... Where are we ?"

Biff looked through the gap in the truck's tarpaulin and he saw chinks of daylight.

"We're just arriving in Kidderminster, the base can't be far now. What did he show you Ish?"

The dream, or vision was already fading.

"I'm not sure if I can describe it properly, but I'll try. I'm fairly sure Horace showed me his home, his planet."

"Is it like Earth?"

"In some ways yes, in other ways it's so incredibly different."

Deb Newman had hoped the two men in the church were a one off, an abnormality. One afternoon scavenging for a tin opener became essential as theirs refused to open anything.

"No one makes anything properly anymore." Iris had moaned. "Nothing lasts."

Iris was a bit heavy handed with their precious kitchen equipment, though she did have a point. Deb went on her own so that she could move fast and stay hidden. There was a shop in the centre of town that sold that sort of thing, she'd walked past it a few times. It would hopefully be an easy task to visit the shop, grab their stock of tin openers and return to The Brambles Care Facility, their home away from home. After all, who would strip the stock out of a shop that mainly sold stainless steel cookware.

"Damn..... Please go and be crazy somewhere else." Deb muttered.

About eight of them, a mix of men and women. Some were so stoned that they'd collapsed on the pavement outside the pharmacy. Iris had told her there were quite few care facilities in Bridlington. Most were for the elderly, but a few looked after people with more serious problems than old age. Deb was amazed the people looting the Boots Pharmacy, hadn't all been killed by the regular saucer drone patrols.

"I saw those first..... Hand them over."

"Oh, think you're a hard man do you?"

By the cursedness of bad luck, the pharmacy was opposite the shop that sold pots and pans. Until the group of drugged up crazies moved on, Deb was stuck where she was. At least it explained why the two men had been so aggressive. The group were self-medicating on drugs their doctors would never have prescribed. As to what had happened to their carers? Deb consigned that question to the ever growing pile of questions that were unlikely to be answered.

"Watch out!"

High on pills maybe, but they weren't stupid. As the drone went over the street the group simply froze. Easier for those already lying on the ground of course, though the ones standing did an amazing job of playing statues.

"Thank you.... I now know the drones look for movement, not body heat." She muttered.

Once the drone was gone the squabbling continued. It appeared that one of the men had taken some pills one of the women was particularly keen on.

"You have to sleep sometime.....Cut your throat I will.... Give them to me."

"I found these, find your own."

He was a big guy, Deb would have thought twice about angering him. The woman was thin and wiry, it looked like a very uneven squabble. She made a grab for the pills and he hit her in the mouth with the back of his hand.

"Bastard....No joking Jack, those are my pills."

Her mouth was bleeding quite badly, he'd hit her pretty hard.

"Not now they're not..... Now they're mine."

The as yet unnamed woman brought out a knife and began to wave it about. Jack seemed unconcerned, he looked to be offering her one of the pills.

“Here you are Sheila..... All you have to do for it is suck my dick.”

“Yeah, right..... If my teeth ever get near your smelly dick, it’ll be to bite it off.”

That was it, Sheila put her knife away and Jack put the pill in his mouth. End of performance, it was probably a drama they went through every day. Sheila wasn’t finished though, Deb saw her pick up a piece of broken paving slab. She moved behind Jack and lifted the stone high.

“Had enough of you.” She yelled.

She hit him three times with the piece of paving stone. Three heavy hits that left Jack lying on the ground, moaning and bleeding. Not content with her handiwork, Sheila straddled him and carried on hitting his head with stone, until all that was left was a sticky mess of bone, blood and brain. Sheila picked up her prize, the packet of tablets.

“Got any of those to spare ?” Another man asked her.

“No, I only like these.”

That was it, the total reaction from the group to the brutal death of one of their number. Deb sat and watched, as they pulled the pharmacy apart to find every last narcotic they could. Mostly opioids of course, but Deb had seen some strange addictions during her years as an NHS nurse. One guy brought into A & E had a thing about metal polish, he drank tins of it, given the chance.

“Oh come on, don’t you have homes to go to.” Deb muttered.

It was over an hour before they began to shuffle off in roughly the direction of the church where the two men had attacked Iris and her. Deb put her six liberated tin openers into her backpack and added a few other items that might be useful.

“Please don’t get worried and come looking for me Iris.”

By the time Deb was ready to leave, the gang of drug fiends was still in sight. It occurred to her that knowing where they called home might be useful. If they knew where the crazies lived, it made it easier to avoid them in future. Sheila was at the front, still squawking about something, though Deb was too far away to hear any words.

“Opposite the church, I should have known.” Deb muttered.

The building looked a ruin, maybe they liked it that way. Half the roof had gone, though there was no sign of fire damage. Deb became a little too confident in her own ability to hide. She’d probably also underestimated Sheila’s street skills. Sheila was shouting and pointing in her direction. Deb only made out two clear words.

“..... It’s her !”

‘It’s her’ implied they knew her. ‘It’s her’ hinted at grudges, perhaps because of the dead man in the church. There was a lot of whooping and hollering as the entire group began to run in her direction. Gone was the drugged up shuffle, they were obviously after blood, hers.

Deb instinctively ran towards home, The Brambles. That meant bringing trouble closer to Iris though. Deb turned right near the sea front and headed towards the station. She knew the station building well, hopefully better than the people chasing her. The most worrying thing was that the howls and shrieks were getting louder, they were catching up with her.

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