

## Ishmael

### Chapter 6 - Kakadu

**“There were drones to do the surveying and a never ending supply of eager young students to do the grunt work. There were rules about unpaid interns performing dangerous tasks, but students could be sent anywhere. Students had effectively become the smoking Beagles of space exploration.”**



Sometimes luck played a part in your favour, or helped your enemy, Matt realised that. They might have spent weeks looking for the second alien, if it hadn't been for the hikers. A middle aged couple on holiday from Redditch in England on an extended vacation to visit relatives. They'd approached Matt when he and Brenda had been digging through ration packs in the back of her vehicle.

“Excuse me, are you with the army?” Asked the husband.

“On secondment with their survey team.”

“I thought your accent was from home.” Said the wife. “We're from Redditch, though we lived in Coventry for year.”

There had been a long conversation, mainly about everything back home. Matt thought that if two Brits ever reached another galaxy, they'd probably sit down and talk about how their local football teams were doing back home. He even made the couple a coffee, though it was the instant stuff with creamer instead of milk. He wasn't normally that sociable, but the couple had given them the information equivalent of pure gold.

“I know it's a National Park, but it doesn't seem right.” Said the wife. “Surely it can't be left as it is.... It's an eyesore.”

“And someone might get hurt if the boulder falls over.” Added the husband.

They'd known what the hikers had found almost straightaway, without even hearing a detailed description of the site from the couple. After their new found friends had exchanged phone numbers with Brenda and left, they collected together everything they might need for a long period of surveillance.

“Pack anything you consider essential.” Matt told them. “Just remember you've got to carry it through some tough terrain.”

They'd looked like pack mules as they'd locked the vehicles and prepared to hike cross country to the waterfall with its lake, which the couple had talked about.

“Beautiful waterfall, so sad part of it collapsed like that.”

There was a knack to walking long distances with a heavy pack on your back. Matt had been trained for it, he'd carried a pack of rocks up and over much of the Peak District on quite a few occasions. The others didn't have such training and Chris didn't even seem that fit for a cop. There had been a lot of rest breaks and it was close to dusk before they reached the lake.

“I can see what they mean, it smashed a rock ledge apart as it landed.” Said Chris.

“If we didn't know it was an alien space rock, I'd think it was a boulder too.” Said Bren.

Good luck, or well-aimed ? Despite obviously coming down at quite a speed, Matt thought the landing site was too perfect to be an accident. The asteroid, or meteorite, or whatever, had hit the top of the cliff to the left of the waterfall. After breaking apart at least two rocky ledges, it had created a shallow crater at the foot of the cliff. The space rock was surrounded and partially covered

by debris, rocks and rubble broken off the cliff. The lake was difficult to reach anyway, but any hard core hikers who managed to get there would think part of the cliff had collapsed.

"Notice anything?" Asked Matt.

"It looks just like the last one, just more rubble and less mud." Said Chris.

"Either the door is against the cliff, or it's closed." Said Bren.

"Personally I think our Ripley picked that landing spot and the door is closed." Said Matt. "If we watch and wait, I'd bet a week's wages that he comes out after dark."

It really did look so ordinary, like a huge harmless boulder that had fallen from the cliff above.

"He'll know we killed the other one, they're probably getting more cautious now. Only coming out after dark seems sensible." Said Bren.

"Why here though? There's nothing of any strategic value." Said Chris.

"You're thinking like a human." Said Matt. "There might be something here they value, or it might be their ideal place to start a colony.... Or that space rock might be what's jamming out SatLinks in the region."

"We do have limited comms boss." Said Bren. "Do we call in its location?"

"I know our government." Said Chris. "Call it in and they'll send jets to blow the crap out of it."

"Not such a bad idea if we didn't want to get an intact specimen, or reasonably intact. We'll keep this Ripley's location to ourselves for now." Said Matt. "We don't know how it sees and hears, but we have to assume it does both far better than us. We'll keep well away from the cliff and use the night vision equipment. The trick will be to keep still and hidden in the undergrowth."

"Not going to be fun, we've some nasty insects out here." Said Chris.

"We've got insect repellent." Said Bren. "Not that it ever seems to work that well."

"Hmmm my dad always said there are no elephants in Australia because the spiders ate them all. We do have some really unpleasant bugs." Said Chris.

It was getting dark, Matt used an image intensifier to look at the space rock. The view wasn't perfect and their current position was too exposed.

"We'll need to brave the bugs and moved further around the lake and deeper into the trees I'm afraid." He said. "We need to make sure we can see him without our Ripley seeing us."

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There were items on all the media news channels about the army being sent to the Midlands in force. Something had landed near Stourbridge, something that was blocking communications and frying anything electrical. An RAF jet had captured an image of something large on the ground, before the pilot had lost control of his aircraft and ejected. The jet had crashed into a field and stopped being an aircraft and became a ball of red hot flames and debris. Not until after its onboard systems had managed to transmit a few terrifying images. Something large had landed in the Midlands and it had landed with enough force to form a half mile wide crater. Objects had been seen pouring out of it in the images taken by the jet. The most worrying thing was the sheer size of the alien craft.

"Bigger than the Albert Hall."

Said Steve Penboss, London DJ on Bruce Grove Radio, at least a dozen times during his breakfast shows. Not that Tyler Bates was going to let a little trouble near Birmingham interfere with his roofing business, there were bills to be paid.

"The army might be sending tanks to the Midlands, but my bank manager still expects me to keep to the agreed overdraft limit."

He'd told his wife over breakfast. There were a few less cars on the road that morning and there were rumours of a few suicides in their neighbourhood. A few were scared and taking what they saw as the easy way out. Another small number seemed to have decided to sit at home until whatever happened.... Happened. Much to his annoyance one of his young trainees was one of that small group.

"Has Bruno called you Alex ? Do you know where he is ?"

Alex was a good lad, he'd never failed to show up and he worked hard. Bruno on the other hand was always arriving late and trying to leave early. They'd begun to call him Dr Who, because he turned up at any time he liked. Sadly the joke had gone right over Bruno's head.

"He's shitting himself.....His mum doesn't help, a right neurotic... It's these space aliens."

"Call him tonight and tell him if he isn't on site tomorrow, he can find another job."

"Ok Boss, I'll tell him."

Finishing the roof in Chingford was a job for two experienced roofers, or one experienced guy and two trainees. Tyler really didn't want the work to drift over into another day; the client might get a bit funny about it. Upset clients rarely paid on time.

"What are those ? Looks like a dozen planes..... Trouble somewhere." Said Alex.

Trainees did that, looked up at the sky when the work was on the roof in front of them. It was a nice day though, the sun shining on the nearby reservoirs. A few Canada geese took to the air to complete the picture of an idyllic sunny day. Tyler allowed himself to look up at the passing jets.

"No vapour trails..... Different sizes too....Don't think they're jets."

"Do you think it's them, the aliens ?"

It was so hard to tell, the objects were high, higher than he'd ever seen a jet fly before, if they were jets. There had to be at least two dozen of them, all of varying sizes. As he watched other aircraft came up from north and climbed straight up to meet them.

"Those are our jets, they're going to attack them, just you wait and see." Said Alex. "Should we get down from the roof Boss ? I don't like being up here."

"Hey, don't go all Bruno on me, this place is as safe as any. They're flying high and fast, they'll be over Wood Green by now."

The jets coming up from below were probably Royal Air force jets, though they were too far away now to be certain. There were a few visible flashes in the sky, but no sounds.

"They're firing at them Boss.....Did you see that ?"

"I saw it lad."

Two of the air force jets became bright flashes of light somewhere over Central London. He saw them falling out of the sky but didn't see any parachutes open. The rest of the smaller craft pulled away and headed north.

"We lost didn't we Boss ? I should go home..... My mum will be going crazy."

"No you won't.... We have a job to finish and things aren't always as they seem. We're going to finish this roof..... Alright ?"

"Yeah, alright."

"Come into the office in the morning, see if you can persuade Bruno to honour us with his presence. Then we'll see what's what."

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For someone who'd spent nearly a year at Base Albion, Pamela Rath had rarely been on the surface in an atmosphere suit. There were drones to do the surveying and a never ending supply of eager young students to do the grunt work. There were rules about unpaid interns performing dangerous

tasks, but students could be sent anywhere. Students had effectively become the smoking Beagles of space exploration.

Pam took a few careful steps in the heavy suit and all the training began to kick in. At least their short range personal comms weren't playing up.

"They have a standard ISN hatch somewhere." Said Richard. "The rules say they had to install one, but don't specify where. Be observant everyone, watch for the two flashing yellow lights."

"If they obeyed the rules." Said Gene. "They ignored our request for emergency medical assistance and that can get you a five year jail term."

Pam liked Gene; he was a military trainee who was a bit more disciplined than the average college student. Most importantly given their current situation, he was genuinely good with weapons, she'd seen his file.

"Everyone puts in an ISN hatch, even the Chinese." Said Richard. "It's self interest in case someone needs to come and rescue you. The hatch is powered by its own power cells and has a data port so rescuers can get an idea about conditions inside the base. Trust me, only complete fools wouldn't install at least one ISN."

The base was a bit stronger than Base Albion, but still a lot of prefabricated air tight structures under incredibly tough meteorite shields. As they were now under the shields, it didn't take them long to spot where someone had forced a way into Mordor One.

"Can you see this MacLaren?" Asked Richard.

"I see it, we can all see it."

"Any sign of trouble you take the others back to Albion, understood?"

"No problem, you won't see us for dust."

It was impossible to see expressions in an atmosphere suit. In TV and films people's faces were lit up by lights inside their helmet. Nonsense of course, such lights served no purpose and would just dazzle the person wearing the suit. All Pam saw were six dark visors, which gave away nothing. She hoped everyone wasn't feeling scared, but there was no way of knowing.

"This isn't Earth tech." Said Pam. "Trust me, every nation on the planet would pay a small fortune for something like this."

"So they might be inside there..... The aliens." Said Norma.

Norma was a student from Edinburgh studying for a doctorate in Biology. Her thesis was going to be on plant growth in a Low G, high carbon dioxide environment. Why had she kept her hand up when asked if she could fire a gun? Pam had no idea.

The technology worth a small fortune was whatever the aliens had used to cover the hole they'd made in the side of Mordor One. It looked like the aliens had broken through into a rec room, though the transparency of the resin wasn't perfect.

"It must be incredibly tough." Said Richard, while thumping the resin wall.

The aliens had done the impossible, they'd broken into Mordor One without causing the usual massive damage caused by catastrophic decompression. A corner section of the room had been cut away and a clear hard, airtight resin wall had been created over the opening. If Pam looked hard, she could see that the pressure door on the other side of the room still looked closed and secure.

"Bits of debris in there, maybe from a fight, but it still looks like there's an atmosphere in there. We need to plug into the ISN's data port to be certain." She said

"There..... Flashing yellow lights." Said one of the students.

It was like moving from full daylight to night without any dusk. One moment they were in full sunlight and within two steps they were in the total shade of the crater's edge. The lights on Pam's

suit came on automatically, illuminating the airlock with two flashing yellow lights above the door. It was built to a more up to date international standard than theirs, but the data port was in the same place.

"I've got an automatic handshake." Said Pam. "MacLaren..... I'll need you to run the data through Billy for me."

"Yes, he's keen.....Analysing it all without being asked." Said MacLaren. "Full atmosphere throughout the base, though no one has accessed the systems in Mordor One for over an hour. That's their AI's way of saying it's lonely Pam."

"I'm not getting a good feeling about this." Said Richard. "Has Billy come up with anything useful?"

"A few power spikes at about the time people stopped using the system..... And, a few attempts to open the outer lock by someone with a medical emergency."

"Why didn't their AI respond?" Aske Pam.

"It tried to, it even wanted to open the airlock... But there was no response from the base commander to its confirmation request."

"Alright, we're going inside... You know what to do MacLaren." Said Richard.

"Yep, anyone attacks you and we run away."

It was hard manual work to turn the levers and rotate the various air valves. Simply opening the airlock door took three of them. Eventually they were inside with power lights on the door that opened to give access to the base.

"It seems their AI now thinks you might be alright after all." Said MacLaren.

Normally people sized airlocks led into suit rooms, but the emergency airlock took them into a room full of shelving and engineering spares. Pam copied Richard when he took his helmet off.

"Don't put your helmets down." He said. "Carry them everywhere..... Just in case."

Outside the stores they were into a short corridor with a pressure door at either end.

"Can Billy help us with a floor plan MacLaren?" Asked Richard.

"No, their AI is warming to you, but..... Not that much."

"We'll try left..... Keep together, no splitting up..... And where is your helmet Norma?"

"Fuck..... Sorry."

Norma went back to the stores and returned carrying her helmet. Pam knew Richard was a decent man, she wouldn't have decided to share his bed if he wasn't. She also knew he was about to show Norma the infamous wild man of the woods side of his personality.

"You're not just putting yourself in danger, how about us!" He yelled. "We don't want to watch as your face goes purple before it explodes, as the blood in your veins boils. You'll be dead, but we'll have to live with the memory for the rest of our lives."

"I'm so sorry."

A bit of Pam felt sorry for Norma, but a much larger part of her wanted to kick the girl hard up her backside. A sudden vacuum was merciless and Pam really didn't want to see what it might have done to Norma. The door took them into a large communal area.

"Oh, our base looks such a shit hole compared to this." Said Gene.

"I can hear you..... Push a suit camera feed through to us." Said MacLaren.

The second most important thing to Pam was the sheer size of the communal area, it had to be twice the entire square footage of Base Albion. The air smelt fresh and some large trees were happily growing under tastefully placed ultraviolet lights. It would have been a little taste of Eden, if it hadn't been for the first most important thing on her mind, the blood stains on the floor.

"I'm counting at least ten areas of congealed blood." Said Richard. "A lot of it too, we're not talking about someone with a nosebleed."

"No touching the blood anyone." Shouted Pam. "At the moment we can't rule out some sort of contagion."

There were a few pieces of unrecognisable body tissue, but mostly the areas of blood were just that.....Blood. It might have been better to find a few bodies, the obvious reason for not finding any wasn't pleasant.

"Why would they take the bodies?" Someone asked.

"We don't know what they feed on." Said Gene.

"Oh..... Gene!" Yelled Norma.

"Only saying what we're all thinking..... Should we take specimens of the blood?"

"Not yet, there should be containers we can use in their labs." Said Pam.

"We'll get everyone inside and then we're going to search every inch of this place." Said Richard.

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Brenda Grundy was watching when the door opened in the side of the space rock. The others might have been awake, but it was her turn to watch and record anything that might happen. She couldn't even call out to them; everything had to be done in complete silence. What she saw disturbed her; the creature was beyond anything her mind had ever imagined. The next morning they'd walked some distance from their makeshift camp to discuss what the image intensifier had recorded onto memory wafers.

"I did wonder how the creature at Glyde Point had fitted into its space rock. I watched as this one poured itself out." She said. "You can see it better when it returned about two hours later. From a solid looking being it becomes viscous..... I was almost sick."

"Pouring itself is a good description." Said Matt. "That explains how they manage to survive high impact landings."

"Sometimes it seems to walk on two legs, sometimes four." Said Chris. "I can see at least three arms before it vanished into the trees. A body that can change its parts around as required."

"Some of our robot drones are fairly sophisticated." Said Brenda. "The Ripleys might be what the aliens use as advanced scouts, they might be artificial. We might not have seen the real enemy yet." They all watched the alien walk away from its space rock and return. There were only a few minutes of the recording and the images were poor definition, but they noticed something new every time they watched it.

"Killing it might be easier when it's in a viscous state." Said Matt.

"We need to send the recording to the science team." Said Brenda. "I'm no expert on this sort of thing, we really need some help. The problem is we all know what will happen if the military see these images."

"Yep, the government will bomb the hell out of Kakadu and every living thing in it." Said Chris.

It was a dilemma, especially for Matt. It was their duty to report the sighting; the alien was a genuine threat to tourists in Kakadu and nearby towns. Not that anyone knew where they were, but that could change at any moment. She could always claim to be obeying a senior officer, so could Chris, but Matt would really be in the shit when they returned to civilisation.

"For now we continue to watch and observe." Said Matt. "We've learned so much from just one night, that we have to carry on observing this Ripley. For a start we still don't know what its purpose is for being here."

"It might have gone AWOL like us." Said Chris.

They laughed as they walked back to their camp. A decision had been made to keep waiting and watching what the alien got up to.

“Besides, how much damage can he do in two hours during the night in Kakadu ?” Said Matt.

That might have remained their attitude if Brenda hadn't decided she needed a good long soak. It's a myth that if everyone is getting a little ripe then it doesn't matter. It did, Bren was fed up with her own smelly armpits. The guys were happy enough to strip off, check for crocs and use the lake.

Brenda wanted a little more privacy and had found a stream fed by the lake, which seemed ideal for soaking in. A nice sandy bottom, a flow of water that wasn't too fast or too slow. A place so perfect that she didn't notice the body until she was getting dressed.

“A male, quite young, probably early twenties.” She said. “I doubt if he came to Kakadu on his own, so there are probably people looking for him, or they're dead too.”

“I've seen some gnarly stuff the crocs have done, but that's not the way a croc feeds.” Said Chris.

The body was fresh considering how quickly the local heat and humidity encouraged bacteria and bugs to turn a carcass into a putrid mush. Something had opened up the man's ribcage and eaten the contents of his chest.

“Do you know any local wildlife that might have done this ?” Asked Matt.

“No, there is nothing that feeds like that.” Said Chris. “I know Brenda won't want to speculate, but I think we've found out what our Ripley does at night.... He's feeding.”

“I'm happy to speculate and I agree.” Said Bren. “There are no tooth marks on him, just straight cuts that follow the bones. I'm happy to say this isn't the work of the local wildlife. Now we might have a serial killer on the loose, or.....”

“Christ..... I hope they haven't come here because we're some kind of delicacy.” Said Matt. “But the other two bodies we can link to our aliens weren't eaten.”

“Might have been, there wasn't much left of Bertie Johnson after a few days in the sun and the crocs had been at him. The other body was even worse.” Said Chris. “We're just lucky that this body is fresh.”

“How fresh Bren ?” Asked Matt.

“Look, I'm a tech expert, not a doctor.... If I had to guess I'd say this young man died last night.”

“That's it then, we have to kill it.” Said Matt. “We'll record it once more as it leaves its spacecraft.

After it's gone we can get in amongst the rocks and rubble near the space rock. As it comes home again we'll be in the perfect spot to kill it.”

“It'll be easier to kill as it pours back into the rock.” Said Chris.

“Yeah, but it might just take off, or blow us and half of Kakadu apart.” Said Matt. “We need to get between it and its craft, that's the key to beating it.”

“If we let it leave tonight it will hunt again.” Said Brenda. “Other people will die.”

“Do you think I don't know that Bren ? Even if we call in the military, there's no guarantee they'll hit it. That's a pretty good spot our Ripley chose, the cliff offers a lot of protection. It's up to us.....

We've more weapons than a drug cartel and a box full of AP45 rounds. If we can't kill it, no one can.”

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Mateo Lopez knew the bunker was in the final stages of being prepared, though he wasn't expecting the visit from the army liaison officer that morning. There was a knock and his office door opened.

“Can you spare a moment ? It is important.”

“Yes of course Ray, come in.”

The council staff were getting used to seeing military uniforms in Torquay, so were the local population. Ray was always the army officer to judge others by when it came to uniforms, his was always perfect, as though it had been new and out of the box that morning.

"Help yourself to coffee, it's fresh." Said Mateo.

Once Ray had coffee, he sat on one of the chairs in front of the desk. He had a serious look on his face, which was rare. The army seemed to have chosen him as their liaison officer with the local councils in the area because of his constant smile and cheery nature.

"Sorry Mat, I'm here about something serious today and there will be a few implied threats. Can't be helped, it's time to decide who you want to take into the bunker."

The brown envelope had his name on it, but Ray seemed reluctant to hand it over.

"This procedure is secret and you will not talk about it. Some of your colleagues may want to discuss their choices. Do not engage in the conversation, the MOD will be making examples of some to discourage others. Do you want to know the possible jail time?"

"Not particularly."

"Good, so endeth the threats."

It was an official form, there was even an MOD reference on the bottom. Mateo wondered if there was a filing room somewhere in Whitehall, full of forms for every dreadful eventuality. There were five boxes for names on the form and spaces for the usual personal information required on anything official. Next to each name was a box for special needs or requirements.

"Does the five include me?" He asked.

"No Mat, your name is on a different list, and before you ask, you can't give your place to anyone else. You have five names to put on the list, a lot more than many of your colleagues. I'm only telling you that to make sure you understand the need for secrecy."

"Yes, of course I won't talk about this. Can I choose anyone?"

"Your choice and no one at the MOD will ask you to explain or justify your choices."

The MOD might not, but he knew the other people in the bunker might. There were his children too, they might never forgive him if he made what they saw as a bad choice.

"Keep the form secret Mat, keep it safe."

Mateo laughed out loud.

"Sorry, you sounded like Gandalf from..... You know."

"Are you alright? I know this is going to be a dreadful choice... We do have people you can talk to, if it all seems too much."

"Alright! You need to lock up anyone who seems alright." Said Mateo. "I'm being asked to pick five people I want to survive. Though they may not thank me when we come out into what's left after the coming war. No, I'm not alright Ray..... But don't worry, I won't go weird on you."

Ray drank his coffee and they talked about all sorts of rubbish for the next ten minutes. The upcoming local pageant, the odd positive effect on tourism after the sinking of a navy vessel. They chatted about anything and everything, apart from the awful choices implied by those five empty boxes on the form. Eventually Ray stood up to leave.

"There will be a lot of people with hard choices, so we're giving you seven days. I'll be back this time next week for the completed forms." He said.

"I really can choose anyone?"

"Yes Mat, anyone. If they have a disability or chronic disease, mention it on the form."

Mateo held the form in his hand for a while after Ray left, it seemed to be impossible to put down or ignore. Eventually he dropped it onto the desk, but he still felt compelled to stare at it.



There was his wife Helen of course and their two children, which left two places in the bunker to be decided. His parents were the obvious choice, but they were old. Actually not that old, Luis was fifty six and Jada was fifty four. Not old, but Helen had parents who were younger. Should age even be a factor in his decision ?

“Personally I’d like to take my abuelita.” He muttered.

His grandmother Valentina Lopez was seventy seven, with mobility problems because of arthritis. Hardly a good choice to rebuild the world, but she had a lot of wisdom in her old head. By choosing her, he could give one slot to Helen to choose.

“Oh, the children will never forgive me though....”

He couldn’t leave his parents behind, his children’s much loved grandparents..... Could he ? They might not even want to go into the bunker anyway. Mateo put his head face down on the desk.

“Fuck.” He muttered.

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Pandora Gray had been expecting to be sent home on indefinite leave. Usually such things were used as punishment, but the entire faculty and student body were being sent home. It would have been nice if one of the senior people had turned up to tell her year, but they had to make do with someone from the admin office. It was Paul, the idiot who’d mixed up her registration paperwork when she’d been an anxious fresher. She had a just grudge, there had been talk for a while about her having to resit her entire first year.

“We will keep in touch with you where we can.” Said Paul. “Keep us up to date with ways to contact you. Using several methods would be a good idea, as PopNet seems to be playing up.”

Idiot Paul at his worst, everyone knew the invaders were disrupting the satellites and cables that were the backbone of PopNet.

“You all have a letter giving your level of proficiency. Not the final exams you’d been hoping for I know, but enough to enable you to offer assistance in a medical emergency. Don’t call yourself a doctor, but try to be useful.”

It wasn’t a talk he should have been giving, Paul was hardly a respected member of the faculty. So many of the staff had already left though, many to take up posts at military hospitals.

“The building will be closed tonight and there will be no entry for students.” Droned on Paul. “If you need to contact anyone at the school on an urgent matter, please either call by phone or use our PopNet address.”

“My parents are in Uganda.” Someone shouted. “I want to go and see them, but don’t want to miss my finals. Are you definitely saying there will be no finals this year ?”

“Yes, the earliest examinations of any kind will be this time next year.”

People were drifting away and Pandora drifted with them. She had a letter in her pocket saying she was in the top five percent of her year and almost certain to become a fully qualified medical doctor. It wasn’t a framed certificate, but it was enough to work in Penrith for Fifth West Corporation.

“Are you going straight home ?” Asked Penny.

So deep in her thoughts, Pandora hadn’t even noticed her friend until she’d spoken.

“I should, there are a lot of loose ends to my life in London.”

“So you’re doing it then, volunteering I mean ?”

“Yes, I’m going help in a medical facility in the north..... We could do a bit of last minute shopping of course. Only if you fancy it ?”

Of course Penny fancied the idea, her face was lit up by a huge grin. Given the opportunity they both lived to shop. There was a bridge to link the two buildings the medical school occupied. The bridge

was high above the ground with glass sides. It gave wonderful views of London on a sunny day with decent visibility. They were halfway across, the perfect spot to see two Royal Air Force jets explode as they hit the streets of Central London. People ran to get off the bridge, but Pandora didn't.

"What the hell was that ?" Yelled Penny. "Come on Dora, we need to get out of here."

Neither aircraft had crashed that close to the school, Pandora felt more in danger from the running students than what she could see through the glass. One plane had caused a plume of smoke to rise up from somewhere in the direction of the Bank of England. The other had come down a little bit further south.

"Dora..... Come on."

"No Penny, stay here until the panic is over."

Once running away from trouble probably meant escaping from a hungry predator. A useful and logical way for mankind's ancestors to stay alive. A reflex that wasn't suited to modern buildings with narrow corridors and twisting stairs.

"Breathe Penny, deep breaths.... Relax."

"I'm alright now, I think."

Pandora saw the flash light up the sky to the southwest, a few seconds before the sounds arrived. Several flashes followed by louder and louder booms. The bridge began to vibrate a little. Luckily Penny clung to her arm rather than running away. Below them she could see people pouring out onto the streets.

"Look !" Said Penny, pointing. "We have to get out of here now Dora."

Something terrible had happened to the south west, something which had created several rapidly rising clouds of smoke and flame. The dark clouds were forming into mushroom shapes which glinted from all the debris from whatever had been blown up. It all looked to have happened well away from London, but the explosions had been huge.

"Please Dora.....We can't stay here."

"Running into the street won't tell us what happened Penny. I feel it too, the need to run, to get as far away from all this craziness as I can. Trust me, we're far safer indoors, at least for now. There's always a screen turned on in GCS1, the news might have something."

It meant going back the way they'd come. Penny resisted until Pandora pulled hard on her arm, almost dragging her off the bridge. The room where Paul had talked to them was empty, as was the corridor outside. They saw a solitary crying man, sat on the floor near the elevators with his back to the wall.

"Are you alright ? Are you hurt ?" She asked him.

"I don't want to go outside."

"We're going to watch the news. Do you want to come with us ?"

She had no idea who he was, probably one of that year's new intake as he looked a lot younger than her. He simply nodded, before standing up and following them.

"Now we might find out what's going on." Said Penny.

GCS1 was officially a tutorial room, but it was seldom used for that purpose. It was a place to wait for your next lecture, a place to lose an hour you didn't want to spend in the library. It had a decent sized view screen and the faculty rarely bothered coming there. To most students it was a place to skive off in comfort. The news media were getting better at reacting quickly, there was a lot of smoke and debris being shown on C28.

'.....The attack on Heathrow is just one of several attacks across the globe. Singapore was hit first, closely followed by Moscow, Berlin, Tallinn..... In total over fifty major airports have been destroyed..... The most worry aspect is that all the targets so far have been civilian airports...'

GCS1 wasn't empty, about half a dozen students were watching the news, some of them sobbing. The fresher they'd brought with them found a chair close to the door.

"Come on Penny, there are lots of empty tables, we might as well get comfortable."

"But they're locking up the school."

"Not for a while yet, I'm sure the caretakers have other problems to deal with."

They sat and watched the number of attacked airports grow. There was that sense of unreality, as though what they were watching belonged to another reality, or a piece of fiction.

'.....Casualty numbers are difficult to judge.... Heathrow was working to full capacity on a busy day.....Plus the airport employs over ninety thousand staff inside the perimeter.....There are unlikely to be any survivors....'

"Fucking aliens." Someone yelled.

"Give it another half an hour and we can see if the trains are still running." Said Pandora.

"I don't think I could get on a train on my own."

"Come with me if you like ? Mum won't mind and we have a spare room."

"Alright, but I must call my dad or he'll really worry."

'.....These are the latest pictures from Heathrow.....Witnesses talk of several large craft appearing to guide in at least two dozen weapons of some kind..... There are mushroom clouds from the heat, but these devices were not nuclear.... To repeat, this was not a nuclear attack....'

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