

Ishmael

Chapter 13 – Maningrida

“Matt had worked with a lot of indigenous tribes in various inhospitable parts of the world. Usually if they talked about something bad going on that only they understood, they were right.”



Mateo Lopez was no stranger to the bureaucracy that comes with just about anything to do with local government. Add on the military and he knew the bunker wasn't going to be a fun place to live. With luck though, the rules and regulations might just keep his family alive. Tedium was the problem, for him and especially the children. They'd made friends with other kids in an instant, it was what children do. Apart from running up and down corridors there was nowhere for them to let off steam. Running in the corridors broke at least four rules of course.

“It's not just the children who need a little space to get some exercise.”

He told the twelfth meeting of the civilian council. Being elected to the council had been fairly easy; most people in the bunker hadn't wanted the job. They moaned when things weren't to their liking of course, but actually doing something about it....

“I have a feeling you're being driven by self-interest.” Said Ray.

Ray had been their liaison officer with the army right from the beginning and now he was a key figure in the running of the bunker. The civilian council might make decisions, but only Ray could say if they were feasible and might actually happen. Everyone laughed; the Lopez children and their inexhaustible energy were well known to everyone in the bunker.

“There is a little self-interest, I'll admit that.” He said. “We all know that store rooms F through J were organised in haste. There is an assumption that every bay needs to be accessed right now. In reality using up the dried foods will enable access to the boxes and crates at the rear.”

“Cut to the chase Mateo, this isn't the planning committee.” Someone said.

“Alright..... We push the shelving against the wall and gain somewhere for people to exercise. I know we have the gym, but a lot our older residents just want space to have a long walk. A little work and we can give them that space.”

“And somewhere for Tom and Tina to go crazy.” Said Ray.

No Torbay Council meeting had ever led to his children being the cause of him being laughed at. Mateo liked the casual feeling of the civilian council. If anyone was to blame for the slightly anarchic feel it was the chairman and he was the chairman.

“Yes, I would like to get my kids out from under foot.” He said. “How about it Ray, can you spare a few eager soldiers to help lug boxes about ?”

If anyone thought an army liaison officer being the final arbiter on any decision was a little Orwellian, they hadn't said so, not yet anyway.

“I will give you as many men as I can spare.” Said Ray. “Especially the ones from the North of England who haven't been home for some time. It'll take their minds off things, consider it a win-win for all of us.”

“Great, it shouldn't take them long, we'll all get involved.” Said Mateo.

“In fact..... I was going to suggest that you might find other jobs for them to do. Keeping the young soldiers occupied is important and to be honest, they've painted and scrubbed just about everything I can think of.” Said Ray.

“Oh, I can think of a lot more things that need a good scrub.” Said Marjorie.

They didn’t need a treasurer, but the rules said the civilian council needed one. With no money to look after Marjorie had become their self-appointed inspector of general tidiness and hygiene.

“Good.....I’ll get that in the minutes Marjorie.” He said. “Now, if there is no other business ?”

There wasn’t, there never was. Handshakes all round and a few hugs for people he knew particularly well. Half an hour after the meeting had begun and Mateo was walking back along the corridor to the section of the bunker that was now home to Helen, him and his two very active children.

As with everywhere in life, there was a hierarchy in the bunker and the population were housed according to seniority. Most people were housed in various open plan areas with a few beds and cupboards allocated to their family group. At first the curtains between the families had been left open during the day, but now they were closed all the time.

“Hi Bob.” He called out.

“Morning councilman.”

Mateo had held down several senior roles with Torbay Council, but he still got a buzz out of being called councilman in the bunker. Bob had a wife and three children, all living in close proximity to people he didn’t really know. Noises were the most common complaint, closely followed by smells.

“Something has to done about it.” Bob had told him at the time. “The council needs to put up signs or something.”

Sex had been the main problem, or rather the sound of people enjoying it. A really embarrassing thing for anyone to talk about in a meeting, including the three doctors in the bunker. The midwife had dismissed the idea of signs asking for less squeals of delight in a very polite way.

“You’re joking of course, the teenagers will treat that as encouragement.”

He’d quickly learned that teenagers will treat just about anything as an encouragement to have sex. He was genuinely beginning to dread his own children reaching puberty. In the end there had been a small group of council members taking the worst offenders to one side for a quiet word. The complaints had stopped, but all the partition curtains had remained permanently closed.

“The Americans had the same problems in their missile defence bunkers.”

Ray had told him once the worst was over, though he didn’t seem to know how they’d dealt with it. The bunker was made up of five circular sections, all having sleeping areas for each council hierarchy and the soldiers who kept them safe. There was only one prison though, in circle three where he lived. Six large cells, each designed to hold three prisoners, more if they put mattresses on the floors. At the moment the cells were empty, but Mateo knew that eventually someone would do something that couldn’t be fixed by a quiet word.

“That bad huh ?” Asked Helen, his wife.

He had a look when he was thinking about something, he thought Helen was used to it by now.

“It was good meeting, we’re getting soldiers to help us shift boxes.”

His own living area had ceiling to floor solid partitions, though solid was probably the wrong word for reinforced chipboard walls. They weren’t soundproof; nothing seemed to be soundproof in the bunker. Mateo still couldn’t get used to hearing other families live their lives, in so much detail.

“Good, Tina needs to run, it’s her thing.” Said Helen.

“What was that ?” Asked Tom, his six year old son.

A low rumble, a sound his kids would have probably ignored in the world outside the bunker.

Everyone knew what they were there for though, they were all waiting for the war against the aliens out at sea to move inland. Another rumble and a tiny amount of dust fell from a lamp hanging from the ceiling.

"Are we going to be alright dad?" Asked Tina, his eight year old daughter.

"Of course we are, that's why we came down here."

He exchanged a meaningful look with Helen. It had to be bad out there, they'd been told they might hear nothing happening when the war above began in earnest. Mateo remembered Ray's comments about the importance of keeping people busy.

"Alright, who's for playing indoor cricket in the laundry room, until they chuck us out?"

"Yay." Yelled Tom.

"I bet I win again." Said Tina.

"I'm only coming if I don't get the blame this time." Said Helen.

He was chairman of the civilian council, he was supposed to set a good example. Firstly though he was dad to two kids and they didn't even notice the next rumble from above, or the one after that.

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Maningrida had been a thriving aboriginal community on the coast of the Northern Territories. The aliens hadn't destroyed any buildings, the local population had run off into the bush when the tower had been built. The Fifth West helicopters had landed quite some distance from the small town, but Owen had found them fairly quickly.

"Something landed, something big." He'd told them. "It hit the ground so hard that people began running away straight away. Some left Maningrida with just the clothes on their backs."

"Will they be alright?" Matt had asked him.

"Yes, everyone knows someone who lives out in the bush. No one will starve, though I doubt if anyone will ever return to Maningrida..... There's a bad feeling about the place."

Owen was incredibly well informed for a man without a phone. He knew about the digging in the ground near Ramingining and it appeared that community now had a bad feeling about it too. What exactly was the bad feeling? Owen explained that at least seven generations of your family needed to have been born in the Northern Territories for you to understand.

"Usual aboriginal mumbo jumbo." Chris called it.

Matt had worked with a lot of indigenous tribes in various inhospitable parts of the world. Usually if they talked about something bad going on that only they understood, they were right.

Owen hadn't needed much persuasion to remain with them as a civilian consultant. He wanted a ride out once the tower was destroyed, but otherwise he hadn't asked for anything other than a hot meal. Matt was currently looking through binoculars at the tower, which had to be close to five hundred feet high.

"Tell me about them building it?" Matt asked.

"Nothing happened for a day after the thing hit the ground." Said Owen. "Then it opened up and all these robots came out, like metal men on wheels. They began to build the tower. It only took them three or four days to take apart the thing that had landed and turn it into..... That."

"It's not going to be easy to blow apart." Said Brenda Grundy.

"Pretty solid looking." Added Chris Crawford.

The tower had a look of the Eiffel Tower about it, starting from a solid wide spread girder construction that narrowed towards the top. Everything glistened, like polished grey, blue stainless steel. Because of the dead zone the air force hadn't been able to bomb it and two missiles fired from a distance had failed.

"I just hope it's not as tough as it looks." Said Matt.

"When will you attack?" Asked Owen.

That was the question that had filled his mind since arriving in Maningrida. Attacking at night had its appeal, but they wouldn't be able to see the alien's drones, the flying saucers they weren't officially allowed to call flying saucers. A day time attack was great for visibility, but they'd probably start being attacked as soon as they got anywhere close to the tower. But part of their mission was to gather intelligence, which required daylight. Matt weighed up the various pros and cons and threw a mental set of dice.

"We'll rest up tonight and attack in the morning." He said. "Are you coming with us Owen?"

"Can I have a rifle?"

"Do you know how to use one?"

Matt had met people before who viewed carrying modern weapons as a security blanket. There was no way of knowing how they'd react under fire. For some reason when Owen nodded at him he trusted him.

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Pam Rath hadn't needed to get involved in the refuelling of Billy. Normally she avoided suiting up and putting her life in the hands of an atmosphere suit that many other people had used and abused. As MacLaren had said many, many times.

"One resin sealed seam busts open and.....Not a good way to die."

Usually Kitty MacLaren ran her finger over her throat for effect. Was there a good way to die? She'd had an aunt in her eighties who's settled down for an afternoon nap in her favourite chair. She'd never woken up again and most of the family had called that a good way to go. Personally Pam wanted to know when death was coming for her with his scythe. She was determined to yell abuse at him and spit in his eye.

"How are you doing out there?" Richard asked.

"Fine..... Stop fussing. I'm about to connect up the oxygen umbilical."

Not a good thing to say to him, he was her boss and the comms link might have been overheard. He was probably wondering why she'd volunteered for a crappy routine grunt job, which she was usually very keen to offload onto a student. The truth was that she needed a bit of time on her own to think about the death of Norma and the others. Time to grieve in her own way.

"MacLaren is coming into land..... I think she's calling this shuttle Gerald." Said Richard.

"I'll give her a wave..... All umbilicals connected, you should see Billy's tanks filling up."

Gerald wouldn't be able to use the Albion tanks of course. There was a standard connector, but everyone ignored it and used their own. Often proprietary and protected by patents, it didn't help in emergencies, though MacLaren did say the shuttle had enough fuel and oxygen for the journey to earth. To where on Earth? That was the next big decision.

"I can see you Pam." Said MacLaren.

"Just don't land on top of me."

Pam waved at the shuttle now named Gerald. It was long with beautiful slender lines. A Geraldine rather than a Gerald, but she wasn't about to start an argument with Kitty about it. Unlike Billy the shuttle hit the ground softly, so softly that little dust and rubble was disturbed.

"Good landing, I'd applaud if there was any air out here." Said Pam.

"I'd love to claim the credit, but that was all Gerald." Said MacLaren. "UniConsortium may have had their faults, but this is a wonderful piece of technology."

"So, do we come to you, or are you coming to us?" Asked Richard.

"We have a proper galley with a coffee machine and waffles." Said Gene.

"I'm on my way." Said Pam.

Not a long trudge to the shuttle and she resisted the urge to hop or run in the low lunar gravity. The outer airlock door opened when she was about four paces away. It moved out a little, before sliding effortlessly into the side of the shuttle.

"Wow..... If Unicon are still hiring, I want in." She said.

"We're in the galley, one of the students will show you the way." Said Gene.

There was a moment when Pam almost turned on her MAG74. It was what looked like a wall of students walking towards her while she was taking off her helmet. It was probably less than six kids, but some of the students in Mordor One had smiled before trying to kill her. These were the ones who'd remained behind though. If they were after anyone's blood it was Sylvie's.

"We heard about the rebellion, was it started by Sylvie?"

"She can't be allowed to get away with it."

"Is Norma really dead?"

So many questions and Pam did intend to answer them all honestly, even about her and Richard having to kill at least three students to escape in Billy.

"There will be a meeting after I've spoken to MacLaren." She said.

"We'll help you.....We can retake Mordor One."

"No..... No more killing each other."

They were looking at her with disappointed eyes, as though she'd let them down by being weak. When had kids become so blood thirsty? Perhaps they always had been and she'd simply chosen to ignore it. Not all of them wanted to go to war, some were still crying for poor Norma.

"I will tell you about everything, but first I need to see Gene and McLaren. Where is the galley?"

One of the students who was crying showed her, a young boy who seemed to have grown much older since she'd last taught him about laser communications in a near vacuum. The boy left her at the door and only Gene and Kitty were enjoying coffee in a galley that had space for at least twenty. Gene got up to pour her a coffee.

"You won't believe this..... It tastes wonderful..... And the waffles." He said.

"Almost but not quite like real food." Added MacLaren.

She'd only taken two sips of her coffee when Richard arrived. Like a magician showing off his favourite trick, Gene gave them both a freshly toasted waffle each. They must have been frozen and there was a slightly weird aftertaste, but Pam was honest when she said.

"That's the best thing I think I've ever eaten on the moon."

They all spent a minute or so, eating something that was almost like real food and drinking coffee that definitely was the real thing.

"I know we're here to talk about going home." Said Gene. "We need to get something out of the way though. A lot of the students want to take back Mordor One and stay on Lunar."

"No, no more fighting among ourselves." Said Pam.

"Sylvie is welcome to her little empire." Said MacLaren.

"A consensus would be nice, but I am still the commander of Base Albion." Said Richard. "We probably could recapture Mordor One, but only by killing a lot of kids who were sent here as part of their education. So, I'm taking any idea of fighting Sylvie off the table."

"Which brings us back to the big question..... Where are we going to on Earth?" Asked Pam.

"Are we going to together?" Asked Gene. "We could choose different destinations."

That idea hadn't even occurred to Pam. They all treated Gene differently to the other students, he was doing post grad research as part of his military training. In truth he was only a couple of years older than most of the other students, but he seemed more mature.

"We go together..... Sorry I'm using my 'I'm in charge card.'" Said Richard. "Billy is set to return to our base near Cardiff, but we can fly him anywhere once we get into Earth's atmosphere."

"Gerald has quite a few saved destinations." Said MacLaren. "The default place he heads for on Earth is a Unicon facility in the Russian Federation, not that far from the Arctic Circle."

"Hmmm..... Can't see us getting a warm welcome there." Said Richard. "What about the other destinations saved in his navigation systems?"

"We can fly Gerald anywhere once we get to Earth." Said MacLaren.

"But where are his pre-programmed destinations?" Asked Richard.

"There is a Fifth West training centre in Penrith." Said Kitty. "About four or five Unicon bases, most of them in North America..... Can I assume we're talking about running away and hiding rather than looking for a fight?"

Everyone looked at MacLaren and nodded.

"Yes, nowhere that might ask awkward questions about where we got Gerald." Said Richard.

"There is a place in Norway." Said Kitty. "An automated storage facility, Gerald went there quite a lot, presumably for food and supplies."

"Just the place to take hungry students." Said Gene.

"It's a Fifth West facility in the middle of nowhere." Added Kitty. "I doubt if we'd run into any trouble and it gives us somewhere safe to think about our next move."

"Can you guarantee it'll be safe?" Asked Pam.

"I can't guarantee anything..... But we're not exactly harmless ourselves." Said Kitty. "I'm sure we could handle a couple of guards if we had to. They'll see Gerald land and think we're their people."

"Yes..... We'll take off as soon as Billy is refuelled and head for the Fifth West storage facility in Norway." Said Richard.

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Ishmael McGrath had wondered why JV hadn't been constantly calling to find out about the captured alien. There had been one or two quick calls from Lianne, but even she had seemed preoccupied. It appeared that Fifth West were involved on several fronts.

"JV has allocated Fifth West fighters and resources to help the Australian government." She'd told him. "We've also a team trying to get important scientific data out of our offices in Jakarta, Indonesia. Plus a full science team are pinned down in Wilmington, Delaware. We're spread fairly thin Ish."

Pandora was still his constant companion as he studied the alien. Inka Malovic had brought her kids to see the strange grub-like alien, almost as though it was a trip to the zoo. The weird noise had quickly put them off coming; it was getting on Ish's nerves too. Every hour on the hour, the creature obviously had a pretty good internal clock. Its skin would begin to ripple and pulsate for about a minute or so. They had no idea how, but the rippling created a noise like a million angry crickets. Loud too, the sound level meter sometimes hit a hundred and sixty decibels.

"There are sub-sonic elements too." He'd told Lianne. "He's obviously calling for help and he's been calling for some time now. We really need to move him somewhere more secure than a science camp on a hillside."

She'd mentioned Fifth West being spread fairly thin a few times and promised to pass the information onto JV. When JV did call, it was to tell him about the attack on the training centre in Penrith.

"We were expecting the attack; our precogs had seen it coming for quite some time Ish. Even so, we had quite a few casualties and the advanced weaponry department was destroyed. Once they met

determined resistance at our training facility, the aliens spent about a day doing their best to destroy the town of Penrith. Out of a population of twenty thousand or so, we estimate less than five hundred survived.”

“Wasn’t there anything the Fifth West fighters could have done to stop that ?” Asked Ish.

Not for the first time when asked an awkward question, JV simply sighed and looked down at his notes. It was left to Lianne to defend her father. They couldn’t see her on the big screen, but they could hear her.

“I’ve told you our resources are spread thin Ish, JV did what he could.”

“There was a new type of organic robot used in Penrith.” Said JV. “Probably something we can expect to see more of once they begin to attack the civilian population. Not that effective against armed troops, but guaranteed to terrorise the general public. Here, I’ll send through a short recording taken by a static camera in the Penrith student accommodation block.”

“I was supposed to have been in Penrith.” Muttered Pandora.

It was the footage from a camera looking at a meeting point of two corridors. There was a little colour near the two low level lights near the two exit doors, but otherwise everything was a drab uniform grey.

“Look to the left of the screen.” Said JV. “Do you see the shadow above the noticeboard ?”

“No.”

“Yes, I do.....Crap ! It moved.” Said Pandora.

She jumped up and backwards as what appeared to be a shadow, ran along where the wall met the ceiling. It stopped after a few feet and looked like just a shadow again. Ish too had jumped up out of his chair, knocking it over.

“You can see why I think it’s some sort of terror weapon.” Said JV. “Imagine a few thousand of them moving through the suburbs of a big city.”

“What do they do ?” Asked Biff. “I’m assuming they have a weapon, besides scaring the crap out of people.”

“The aliens attacked Penrith and moved on fairly quickly. The clean-up crew are in Penrith and I shall be joining them soon.” Said JV. “From initial reports the creature appears to be yet another autonomous device. It hunts by body heat and spotting the carbon dioxide from human breath. Once it finds a target, it uses several rows of razor sharp teeth.... I’m sure you don’t want the details. Smaller than a domestic cat, but they have killed quite a few sleeping people in Penrith.” Another fresh horror, the moving image was in a repeating loop and Ish was still jumping every time the shadow ran across the screen.

“It’s like a nightmare come to life.” He muttered.

“I’ll know more once I’m there, but they seem to cling to the walls with lots of tiny claws. Ingenious really, something else we might be able to learn from and use.” Said JV.

“What do you mean by use ?” Asked Biff.

“Every good leader learns something from every enemy he fights Dora. Julius Caesar put it more poetically, I just can’t remember the quote off the top of my head.”

Ish knew Biff very well and the way she reacted when JV spoke, said she’d gone well beyond simply disliking him.

“So, do I get any more help to move the alien ?” Asked Ish.

He knew the answer, but felt he had to ask.

“We’re over stretched Ish.” Said JV. “Besides the places Lianne told you about, we’re fighting against the aliens in another seven countries. I think any idea of hiding until they leave is now a non-starter.”

“Good, I never did like that idea.” Said Ish. “Especially after we realised they were turning us into a high energy paste to run their machines.”

Lianne was still being defensive of her dad.

“There’s no way JV could have known that.” She yelled.

“I’m quite capable of fighting my own battles my dear. You have the soldiers sent to Stourbridge at your disposal Ish and the few guards I left with you..... Let me look at the big board here. I’m not getting as much intelligence from the army now, but don’t head due west. There’s a lot of alien activity around Billingsley, though I’ve got no details. I’d say..... And it is based on out of date information. Your best bet is to get the alien onto a truck and head south west to Kidderminster.”

“There’s an MOD underground facility there, I can send you the details.” Shouted Lianne.

“Do you think it’s still operational ?” Asked Biff.

“I can’t be certain, but probably yes. For some reason the aliens have left Kidderminster alone, for now.”

“Alright, I’ll get Horace on the truck and head towards Kidderminster.”

“Horace ?!” Yelled Lianne.

“We had to call him something.” Said Biff. “I just wish he’d stop making that noise. He’s probably telling every alien on the planet that he’s in trouble and where he is.”

“I’m working on a sound proof box to put him in.” Said Ish. “Not sure when I’ll get a working version though, Horace seems to generate a lot of sounds outside of our normal hearing range.”

JV was looking off screen and muttering. It was what he usually did before ending a link.

“Have you tried a little Pavlov style conditioning ?” He asked.

“I don’t..... What do you mean ?” Asked Ish.

“You can’t talk to him, but you can try to alter his behaviour by positive or negative stimulus.”

“It’s not a he dad.” Yelled Lianne.

“You mean hurt him ?” Asked Biff.

“I’m not suggesting torture Dora, but they have killed a lot of people.” Said JV. “When he starts to make the noise, hit one of his feet with something heavy. Crude I know, but you might find it to be effective. I’m sure your Horace will soon get the idea.”

“I’m not sure I could do that.” Said Ish.

“It was just an idea. I must go now..... I’ll try to link up tomorrow.”

“Bye.” Shouted Lianne.

The link went dead and Biff was still scowling at the screen.

“I don’t like him or trust him ish.”

“Neither do I, but now definitely isn’t the time to be thinking of jumping ship. I’ll go and tell the guards that Horace needs to go back on the truck, they’ll love that.”

“You wouldn’t would you Ish..... Torture Horace I mean ?”

“Honest answer or the one you want to hear ?” He asked.

“That’s unfair Ish.”

“Alright, the truth is that it depends on the circumstances. Would I crush his feet to get him to stop making that dreadful noise ? No. Would I torture him to save a few lives ? Probably I would. Does that make you angry ?”

“A little, but I can live with it.”

Ish went to the caravan where Inka and her kids normally slept. Like everything else in the camp, where people slept and ate was a little fluid and depended on who else might be more in need. As she had two young children, no one had asked her to move into a tent.

"We'll be moving camp in an hour or so." He told Inka. "Get everything packed if you still want to come with us."

"I do.... Where are we going?"

"Kidderminster, I'm told it should be safe there."

The colonel who'd once commanded UK Special Forces in various global conflicts, didn't hide the fact that he didn't like Ish. His look told Ish that he really hated taking orders from him. He was a professional though and there was a job to be done. The colonel might give Ish and Pandora the constant stink eye, but he'd give every task a hundred percent.

"I'll get everyone ready to leave." Said the colonel. "I just heard back from the recon team out near Hagley. Looks like Mrs Malovic was right, they're talking about something nasty coming up out of the ground. We'll need to make sure we keep well to the southwest of Hagley."

"Any details on what the things are?"

"Nothing yet, they're just saying something nasty."

Maningrida was hot and dry, even half an hour after dawn. Trees and bushes were normally welcome cover, but they interfered with getting a good shot at alien drones. Matt spread his forces out to form a loose arc, about a hundred metres across. Owen was with him, lovingly petting an assault rifle as though it was a pet dog.

"We'll be alright unless they've got some new tricks we don't know about." He said.

About fifty robots on wheels had tried to attack their camp in the middle of the night. Matt hadn't lost anyone, there hadn't even been any minor wounds, yet wrecked robots were dotted about everywhere. Surely it couldn't always be that easy? Bren seemed to read his mind.

"They're probably keeping something back." She said. "A special gift for when we get too close."

Bren was still with him, but Chris was still nursing a grudge about being put on a helicopter and forced to leave Gunther Springs. The cop had attached himself to two soldiers from Melbourne and was currently fifty metres away to the left.

"We're moving out." Matt said over the comms. "Be careful and take things slowly, there may be traps and mines."

They had one armoured personnel carrier, but Matt was keeping it at the back as a means of escape if everything went wrong. It was also carrying their explosives. His entire force was, for the most part, advancing by foot across open ground. Easy picking for snipers, but the enemy left them unmolested. They reached the outskirts of the town of Maningrida without coming under any kind of attack.

"That's where I live." Said Owen, pointing.

Two rows of single storey wooden buildings, each with a few plants outside. The only tall building was a church, judging by the large wooden cross hanging over the doors.

"No damage at all, that's weird." Said Bren.

"All the people ran away..... Except me." Said Owen. "They creatures never killed anyone, I didn't even see one until everyone had left."

"What did it look like?" Asked Bren.

"Big, with two feet most of the time and three feet sometimes." Said Owen. "No proper face, just a space where most living things have eyes."

"Yep, we've seen a few of those." Said Matt.

"We killed one..... With the same rounds your rifle is loaded with." Added Bren.

Owen seemed to look at his rifle and them with new found respect and affection. They waited while he quickly filled a backpack with the few things in his house that he considered important. Not really his house, he explained that he shared it with six members of his extended family.

"It's alright..... Gets a bit cramped if everyone needs to come in out of the rain at the same time." He explained.

Matt was beginning to like Owen and his matter of fact views on the world.

"Christ, that thing is huge." Said Bren.

Once through the town, the alien tower dominated the skyline and the flat bare terrain. Still a good quarter of a mile away and they'd yet to see anything resembling an entrance. It had to be destroyed though and the reason was more than just strategic. Getting proper satellite comms working in the region would prove they could win. The effect on public morale would be huge.

"Stop." Someone said on his comms.

"What's the problem ?" Asked Matt.

"Might be a mine. Only spotted it because of a shadow.....Slight depression in the ground with what looks like an antenna in the middle."

Matt used his binoculars and found a similar antenna about fifty yards in front of them, maybe a little further.

"Well spotted." Said Matt. "We've got one too. Stay put until it's been investigated."

He handed his binoculars to Owen and pointed in roughly the right direction. After a minute or so Owen began to nod his head.

"I see it..... Easy to miss but I see it."

"How good are you with a rifle ? Think you can hit it ?"

"No problem."

It wasn't Owen's first time with a modern assault rifle, he knew how to set it for single shot. He even took out the clip and made sure it was full, before expertly pushing it home again. Owen was either well-practised, or a born marksman. He hit the mine with the first shot.

"Well..... If the aliens hadn't seen us coming, they can't have missed that." Said Bren.

The mines had probably been laid by an automatic device in a hurry. They were either a little too close together, or not buried quite deep enough. The first mine had set off the one to its right, which in turn had set off the one behind, which..... In all about a dozen mines exploded in quick succession. The noise had been intense and dry dirt fell out of the sky like rain.

"Alright..... We're moving forward again." Said Matt. "You know what to look for now, a slight dip in the ground with an antenna sticking out of it."

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The best view of Torbay was from the top floor, but Valentina Lopez was seventy seven with quite a few mobility problems. She might have been able to get up there with the help of Jada and Luis, but then there was all the fuss of getting down again. There was no traffic apart from the occasional horse and cart, so Luis pushed her across the road once a day, to watch the paddle steamer go past. "Where is Jada ?" She asked.

It had become a daily tradition, watching the Royal Navy do a bit of steampunk, as Luis called it.

"She's politely telling a couple from Exeter to go elsewhere." Said Luiz. "They were staying at the Excelsior until it closed. Their money is no use now, they'd just be two more mouths to feed."

Luis pushed her right up to the wall, the closest she could get to the ocean without having to negotiate a narrow path onto the beach. Valentina quite liked the tranquillity of a world without

electricity, as long as it didn't go on for too long. No noisy aircraft flying overhead, no trucks and coaches thundering past the door. Best of all the phones had stopped ringing all day.

"Here it comes, they must have got it from a museum somewhere." Said Luiz.

"I hope they use a depth charge today." She said.

A paddle boat, one with the paddles on either side. From the days before electricity, she'd noticed it only came out in good weather. There were a few large sailing vessels too, but the steamer was the jewel of the fleet, at least to her. It told the world that no matter what, the Royal Navy was still there, still patrolling the coast. The occasional depth charge reinforced that image.

"Did I miss much?" Asked Jada.

"No, they're a bit late today.... Only just arrived." Said Valentina.

"Did you get rid of them?" Asked Luiz.

"Yes, but we'll need to start putting the winter shutters on the downstairs windows. There was a look in their eyes as they went away, people are getting hungry and desperate."

"Hooray, I saw the puff of steam, they're firing something." Yelled Valentina

"Must be a depth charges, there's nothing to shoot a cannon at." Said Jada.

There was a splash in the water a few yards from the steamer and a minute or so later, the water seemed to explode. The dull thud they'd all become used to, was like a clap of thunder in the quiet streets of Torquay.

"They'll have no equipment to aim it." Said Luiz. "All for show of course."

"If it is all for show, I'm enjoying it." Said Valentina.

Unlike other days, the Royal Navy weren't having it all their own way. Something large rose out of the ocean. A device three times the size of the paddle steamer, a contraption that appeared to be constructed out of polished steel girders. A blue light briefly flashed in the heart of the device and the steamer was blown apart.

"Oh no..... Did you see that?" Asked Valentina.

"We need to get indoors." Said Jada.

The once beautiful steam driven ship was just debris floating on the water. The ship wasn't to be the only victim that day, the blue light flashed again. There was an explosion at the far end of town. Jada was pushing his mother, trying to get her wheelchair onto the grass. Another blue flash of light and the hotel less than half a mile away, became a burning pile of rubble.

"Get me indoors..... Please." Said Valentina.

"No, we need to get further away." Said Luiz. "We'll go down the path to the beach."

"I can't get down there."

"You'll have to mother, we can't stay here. I'll make sure your chair doesn't tip over."

"Nonsense, I'll walk, but you'll both need to help me."

The explosions became more frequent as they walked down the path. More powerful too, she felt the path shake under her feet once or twice. By the time they were on the beach, the air was full of the smell of burning.

"Keep going, right out as far as we can go." Said Luiz.

"I'm not sure if I can go any further."

"You'll go over my shoulder and be carried then."

Her own son, threatening her with such an indignity. Valentina hung onto him and forced her painful hips to carry her right out to where gentle waves were hitting the beach. Hearing Jada scream made her turn around.

"No..... It can't be gone..... All our things, the family photographs." Said Jada.

The Girona Guest House was no longer there. The flames where it had been were going high up into the sky. Their home and family business had been completely destroyed. She hung onto her son's arm, feeling it tremble. He was sobbing, so she held his hand.
"Why do this to us?" She asked. "We've never hurt anyone."

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