

## Ishmael

### Chapter 20 - Ramingining

**“In a way the mission was already starting out with a success. No one had been eaten or even nibbled at by a salt water croc on Crocodile Island.”**



Deb Newman looked at the Rickshaw and liked what she saw. True it would look ridiculous on the roads of North Yorkshire, but with a little luck, it would get them the twelve miles to Filey. She'd oiled the chain; put a little more padding on the seat and most importantly; Deb had disconnected the tiny generator that powered the lights. Travelling during the day brought its own problems. Travelling at night though with electrically powered light, would probably prove fatal for her and Iris. “Well, what do you think ?” Asked Deb.

“Alright I'll admit it.” Said Iris. “It looks far better than I thought it would, and we can take all our things.”

Their things now included quite a bit of cutlery, plates and pots and pans that Iris refused to be parted from. At one time it would have been called looting. Now Iris treated what they were taking from The Brambles, as though they were heirlooms, passed down from generation to generation. Bedding too and even a comfy chair from the common room. It had all been piled onto the Rickshaw and secured with rope and elastic straps.

“That's a lot of weight to move.” Said Deb. “I can see it being a slow journey, but we're not in a hurry.”

“Just don't expect me to take a turn pedalling dear.”

“Oh, I won't.”

Deb and Matt had moved homes several times since they'd married, one of the dubious pleasures of being an army bride. There had always been that sinking feeling, seeing everything they possessed in the back of a removal lorry. There was a real feeling of being grounded, seeing all that Iris and she had in the world, tied to the back of a pedal driven Rickshaw.

“We could have a goodbye party and leave in the morning.” Said Iris.

“It might snow tonight..... Anyway, we said our goodbyes to The Brambles last night, it's why we've both got a bit of a headache today.”

Deb had liked living in the old building, with its store of tinned food and tanks full of water in the loft. Her love of the place was only spoiled by the body count. For one reason or another, she and Iris had killed six people during their stay in Bridlington. All a case of kill or be killed, all fighting an enemy who wouldn't or couldn't listen to reason. The world would be better off without them, but still.....Deb had been a nurse with the NHS. She'd always treated human life as something sacred.

“So, we're going..... Right now ?” Asked Iris.

“Yes, this instant. I'll need to smash off the wooden struts on the side doors. Once I begin hammering there's no changing our minds, no turning back, no remembering something in the attic you must have. Do you understand Iris ?”

“Of course I do, I'm not a complete fool. Begin, open up the doors..... Let's go.”

Deb had left the large hammer on a chair near the doors. She picked it up and began to smash the various pieces of wood she'd used to strengthen the doors. The noise of hammering was loud, probably the loudest noise they'd made in the house. She'd have to be quick, noise tended to bring the crazies.

“Get in our wonderful contraption Iris. Once the door is open I’ll push it and you out into the street.”

“I just remembered something important.”

“What.... How many times have I.....”

“Only kidding.”

Iris held her knuckles up and Deb had to laugh as she bumped them.

“Good one Iris, you had me going with that.”

Deb lost patience and began to use the hammer on the wooden struts, the locks, the bolts, anything she could smash. Quite soon it just took a good kick with the heel of her boot and the side doors flew open. It was a glorious winter morning in the Bridlington, even a few birds were singing.

“We’re on our way Iris.”

She did trust Iris not to be an idiot, but she still checked that the old lady was in there, under a pile of blankets inside the Rickshaw. Deb pushed and their hideous but wonderful contraption, ran down the slight gradient in the path and out into the street.

“Goodbye and fuck off Bridlington.” Yelled Deb.

Getting the machine going was hard work, Deb wondered if she’d ever get them moving above a snail’s pace.

“Faster Deb, faster !” Shouted Iris.

Once they were moving it became easier and they were probably doing a good fifteen miles per hour when Deb turned left for the main road going north. The sign said Filey ten miles, but Deb suspected it was being over optimistic.

“We’re off Iris..... No stopping us now.”

She could see Iris in the mirrors, just a grinning face looking out through a gap in the blankets.

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In a way the mission was already starting out with a success. No one had been eaten or even nibbled at by a salt water croc on Crocodile Island. His team were fully rested and alert as their helicopters kept to crop dusting height, as they headed towards Ramingining. It was as if the pilot felt a need to spoil the feeling of general optimism.

“Even after the fuel drop at Croc Island, we’ll need another or we’ll be walking for a good part of the way home.”

“Explosives are a bit in short supply too.” Said Duncan. “They didn’t exactly over do the generosity with the resupply drop.”

“We probably got everything they could spare.” Said Matt Newman. “We destroyed the alien tower at Maningrida; this is just a recon mission. We find out what the hell is going on and get out again, really fast.”

Ramingining was only small, but huge compared to some of the other places they’d been to. There was a school and a police station according to the maps and information he’d been given. A supermarket too and a hydrogen filling station, a real metropolis compared to Dundee Downs. At least in theory, as no one knew what was left of the place after the aliens had arrived.

“The town is coming up fast, two minutes to landing.” Said the pilot.

“Land in the south end of town, close to the filling station if you can.” Said Matt.

Not that the filling station was likely to have the fuel their helicopters needed, or at least not in huge quantities. There might be some though and it needed to be checked out. Events can undo all plans though. The pilot let out a gasp, as they flew over the southern end of Ramingining.

“Look like someone put up a fight.” Said Bren. “I can’t see a building that hasn’t been burned to the ground.”

The pilot climbed to give them a better view of what was left of the town. Everything had gone, the filling station was still burning, a plume of black smoke rising into the air. Every street was full of the blackened remains of what had once been homes.

"This happened a while ago." Said Bren. "Looks like the aliens destroyed the place and moved on. It seems to be what they do.... I saw the same thing done to Darwin."

"Our alternative landing place is near the ocean to the North East." Said the pilot.

It was a question really, the pilot was waiting for permission to fly over the dead town and go north. Matt wasn't sure if that was the right thing to do, though he wasn't going to enter into a discussion about it.

"The school looks untouched by whatever happened." Said Matt. "Let's have a look and see if we can make ourselves a defensible position down there."

Owen usually had good insights about local situations. He was in the helicopter following behind, sharing tall stories with the soldiers from Melbourne. As they circled the school, the damage was worse than it looked from a distance. There had been several explosions and a small fire. The main building was still standing though and it was surrounded by a chain link fence.

"I'd have preferred a dozen AI turrets and several layers of razor wire." Said Matt. "The fence gives us a perimeter though and the building still looks habitable. Take us down."

They landed with the usual swirl of dust that helicopters throw up. It was a few seconds before they saw the inevitable bodies. Bodies merged in with the rubble when viewed from a few hundred feet, just another dark lump of something or other. Once on the ground they became the remains of people again, or at least what was left of them.

"There are a lot of hungry animals in the Northern Territories." Said Duncan. "Not just the crows, there's a hundred and one other scavengers looking for a meal."

"We need to bury what's left of the poor devils." Said Bren.

"Only if we decided to stay here for a while." Said Matt. "We'll have a look at the main building and see if it suits our needs. If not we'll head straight for the alien mining activity on the coast."

"What if there are dead children?" Asked Bren.

"We're soldiers, we don't deal with ifs and maybes." Said Matt. "We deal with what we find on the ground. We'll deal with anything that might be a health risk, but only if we decided to make this our temporary base. There's no question of burying every dead body in Ramingining. We haven't the time or the manpower."

Matt could feel lots of eyeballs staring at him as he left the helicopter, lots of people thinking he was a monster. It was his job to be the tough one though, the commander who made all the hard decisions. He knew soldiers, they liked strong and decisive leaders, even if they moaned about them. What soldiers really hated were the wishy washy leaders who were indecisive and weak. Those kind of commanders got people killed. Matt was in the main building, deciding where to use as their comms room, when Owen found him.

"Good news, so far just four dead bodies, all adults." Said Owen.

"It's as I hoped." Said Matt. "The kids were either evacuated at some point, or simply stayed at home once the fighting started. I know you're not really on our payroll anymore. I have something for you to do, it's important."

"Yeah, sure..... Anything. What do you want me to do?"

"It seems right it should be done by the local lads. Get a few of the Australians together and bury the bodies outside the wire. If anyone gives you trouble, send them to me."

"No trouble boss, I'll get that done. So we're staying here then?"

“Yes.... Not perfect, but with the sentry robots near the gates and a few men with saucer killer weapons on the roof. I think we have a temporary base we can defend.”

“This place has a good feel to it.”

Owen was at the door before Matt remembered something else that had crossed his mind as the helicopters had been circling the burned out town.

“Ahh..... Another job you can delegate to a couple of soldiers. The tower is gone now and we’re in the middle of nowhere. Actually we’re in the place that the people of nowhere think of as the middle of nowhere. Get a couple of guys to try and start a few vehicles, preferably trucks..... You never know and it could save us a lot if trudging.”

“I like the sound of that, my knees aren’t what they were..... I’ll get right on it.”

His people knew their jobs well and the two days of nothing but resting and catching a few rays was paying off. Within an hour of landing he was sat next to Bren Grundy as she linked up to their headquarters.

“They’ve confirmed another fuel drop.” She said. “And two more generators to recharge the weapons. I get the feeling we’re still getting a lot of love for destroying the tower.”

“Make the most of it, see if we can get a portable Jacuzzi.” He joked.

“We’re getting some extra rations, without even asking. There’s something else..... I gave them our exact location the old fashioned way, longitude and latitude. They’re asking if we’ve decided on a name for this base ?”

There was only one name he could think of. It hovered in his mind and refused to leave.

“Crawford..... Tell them this is Base Crawford.”

“That’s really nice.”

A room full of people and she was going for a slow but definite lunge to kiss him. Luckily the noise outside saved them both from being the centre of Base Crawford gossip for a while.

“That’s a..... Fuck it’s a truck.” Someone yelled.

The trucks would need to be marked as friendly for the sentry robots, a process that still going on when he arrived outside with Bren. She was holding his hand, which didn’t bother him at all. Actually he liked it. To hell with it, the chances of him meeting his wife again were virtually nil, at least not in this world.

“Wow, that sounds like an old diesel engine truck.” Said Bren.

It was, they were in time to see the three vehicles hurtle into the newly named Base Crawford, their horns being sounded for all the world to hear.

“A diesel truck, another burning hydrogen and an electric school bus.” Said Bren. “That’s a hell of a weird mixture; we’ll have fun trying to find fuel for them.”

Owen was up the front cheering them in.

“We can now run patrols and investigate what’s happening on the coast, without putting our precious helicopters at risk.” Said Matt. “Where there are three working vehicles there will be others and we can use the fuel from those.”

For a few seconds he forgot himself, openly kissing Bren in front of his soldiers. To hell with it, he hoped Deb had found someone to share a little affection with, if she was still alive. The world still just about turned and he and Bren were still alive. Duncan was running up to him, or he’d have kissed her again.

“There’s a hydrogen tanker that’s two thirds full.” Said Duncan. “An explosion took out the motor unit and the front trailer wheels are locked. We could probably drag it here with the APC.”

“Oh, I’ve seen a training recording on bleves.” Said Bren.

“Yes, a tanker that full could vaporise Base Crawford and all of us with it, if an alien robot got a lucky hit with a laser weapon.” Said Matt. “Drag it out into the scrub to the east and leave it there, no closer than half a mile away. The vehicles can go there to refuel.”

“I’ll get that sorted out.... I like Base Crawford, that’s really nice.” Said Duncan.

The exact same words Bren had used, though much to his relief, Duncan didn’t try to kiss him.

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Mateo Lopez was never quite sure when he’d mentally switched sides. Another family had tried to get out of the bunker and none of the adults had survived the attempt. Even one of the children, an eight year old boy, had been killed in the exchange of fire with the guards.

“Our friendly bunker is now a prison in all but name Marjorie.” He said.

Quite a few of the civilian council came to one of the Lopez Sunday lunches, though only Marjorie came every week. Mateo thought it was in the Lopez blood after running a guest house, the need to feed and entertain people.

“I know and Ray is always there with his smile, explaining why the area lockdowns are intended for our protection.” Said Marjorie.

The screening on the generators had worked to a point, though the maintenance people had said the damage to their electrical systems were continuing.

“We’ve bought a few years with the work that’s been done.”

Ray had told him before clamming up completely. It seemed that the civilian council were no longer thought to be a safe organisation for the military to give information to. Mateo had his own way of finding things out, informants still loyal to the civilian council. He had to be careful though. Some days Ray seemed like a friend again, but on other days....Mateo felt sure he was on the list of people likely to join the growing population in the prison cells.

“Daddy, Daddy..... Come and play softball with us.” Yelled Tina.

“Am I invited ?” Asked Marjorie.

“Of course you are..... Just hurry up.”

His eight year old daughter always seemed to be in a hurry, he hoped that boded well for her future. The kids were good cover, giving him a chance to talk to the other members of what he now thought of as the resistance movement. He just hoped he wasn’t about to turn his happy kids into orphans, or worse.

“I know softball in the communal laundry has become a bit of a tradition.” Said Marjorie. “I’m just surprised we don’t get told off more often.”

“Mrs Carter usually shouts at us, but even that has become a tradition.” He replied.

Tom, his six year old son grabbed his hand and held it. Tina was fast and wiry for a girl, a natural athlete. His son wasn’t, he was stocky and getting bigger all the time, all of it muscle. Mateo had no idea which side of his family the muscle man look came from, but he was glad it had picked Tom’s generation to appear. His son and daughter were friends, good friends, inseparable most of the time. Their skills complemented each other’s and Mateo hoped they made a good pairing to survive what was coming.

“Oh Daddy.... Stop dawdling.” Shouted Tina.

“Go ahead.....I need to talk to Marjorie.”

“Alright..... Don’t be too long.”

Tom dropped his hand and ran after his sister.

“Oh, they’re both adorable..... You’re so lucky.” Said Marjorie.

“I’m not sure Mrs Carter would agree with you..... So, are you ready to leave the bunker ?”

“So soon ? I thought we’d have months to plan it out, maybe even years.”

“Every day we see more restrictions on movement and what we’re told.” He said. “One of the army engineers told me a second alien device has landed above us. Once the main invasion force arrives, they’re certain to try and dig us out.”

“But why Mateo ? We’re harmless..... Completely harmless.”

“They don’t know we’re just a bunch of local council workers and town hall warriors. To them a bunker is a bunker and we might have the ultimate doomsday weapon down here.”

Tears were starting in the corners of her eyes, she cried far too easily. Mateo trusted Marjorie, but she was part of the reason he wanted to get out of the bunker soon, rather than waiting until they heard the aliens digging down towards them. Anyone who cried that easily might betray him simply by feeling sorry for the wrong person.

“I doubted you in the beginning, I don’t mind admitting it.” She said. “Every time though, your predictions have come true. Do you really think Ray will restrict our movements even further ?”

“I do, of course I do. He’s already appointed some very weird choices as volunteer guards. People like Noah Hendry, who’d love the opportunity to use a little brutality, perhaps even worse.”

“You’re right Mateo, of course you are.... We’ll leave. Have you told the others ?”

“Daddy..... Come on.” Shouted his impatient daughter.

“Go and play with you brother.” He snapped.

He hated upsetting his children, they knew nothing about escaping from the bunker, at least not yet. Tina was tough, she glared at him before going back into the laundry room.

“I’ve told those in the civilian council we can trust.” He told Marjorie. “Our friends, mainly those who attend my Sunday lunch get together.”

“How about the others ? And there must be people who want to leave in other sections. Are you going to talk to them ? I know a few names.....We can surely trust some of them ?”

There it was again, that worrying idea that everyone could be trusted. He almost wished he’d kept everything to himself, surprising Helen and the kids one night, by taking them on a real life version of the great escape.

“I’m sure Marion Travers thought the same Marjorie..... Until the guards shot her.”

“That was..... Unkind.”

“Perhaps it was, just a little. You need to be ready to leave soon and at short notice.”

“How we will get out ? All the main doors are so heavily guarded now.”

He had to tell her and the others of course, even if he’d tried to keep that part a secret for quite some time. Only him knowing the exit route, keeping it as a secret only he knew, had been a failsafe against anyone talking to the wrong person.

“I found our way out on the plans for this place, when I was allowed to look at such things. They needed heavy equipment during the construction of the bunker and a way to take out the rocks and rubble they dug out of the ground. On the lowest level of the bunker is a road that goes for half a mile, before it once came out at the bottom of a hill. A wide road for heavy trucks to run on round the clock, seven days a week. Once they’d finished with it, they poured in a thirty foot concrete plug to seal up the tunnel. To finish the job after they’d closed the outer door. They’d poured earth over it and planted grass and shrubs to hide the entrance.”

“Then that entrance is useless.” Said Marjorie. “We can’t possibly blast our way through thirty feet of concrete and a blast door.”

“Ahhhh Marjorie, construction people think linearly and I had plenty of time to study those plans.

The tunnel goes close to the hillside for quite some way, just the tunnel wall and a few feet of earth

to blast through. We can easily do that and then we're outside..... We'll be gone, free of this damned place."

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Pandora was alone in the main Fifth West London laboratory. Alone with millions of adjusted pounds worth of cutting edge equipment. It gave her a real physical buzz, one that created a genuine tingle at the back of her neck. The AI had already not only analysed the green gunk that Horace had needed to survive, it had also synthesised more of it, several litres in a sealed glass flask. No use for poor Horace of course, but it meant that any future alien prisoners could be kept alive. There was only one problem, one that meant she called their room to wake up Ish. It took ages before she heard his half asleep voice.

"Yeah, who is it?"

"It's Biff of course..... Can you come down to the lab?"

"Yeah, alright.... What happened?"

"The AI analysed the green gas and declared it to be completely harmless. I had it synthesise quite a bit of it and then had it analyse that to be sure..... Again harmless according to JV's very expensive equipment."

"That's good news isn't it? We're not all going to die when the aliens pump millions of litres of it into the atmosphere."

"There a problem Ish. I set the parameters for full World Health Organisation standards, it's that important."

"I get it, this is this mega important Biff. So what went wrong? I'm guessing you woke me at four am because something went wrong?"

"Saint Sebastian died after seven hours of exposure to the gas."

"Shit..... What killed him?"

"According to the usual autopsy procedure, he died from a chronic infection reaction."

She knew Ish was wide awake now, his voice actually changed.

"Fuck, I'm not even going to shower. I'll be down there in five minutes."

No major lab had used animals for testing or analytical work in decades. Defence contractors were rumoured to still use primates in secret labs, but no reputable organisation used animals anymore. Human cells were grown in labs, everything from a few skin cells, right through to brain cells, liver cells and every major organ. No one died of course, nor was anyone born, yet a few fundamentalist Christian groups still objected to the use of Saint Sebastians. Not the real name for the sacrificial clumps of cells of course, that was WHO1406 Epithelial ND7.

A very boring mouthful and medical students are famously keen on renaming such things. Saint Sebastian was a martyr, some would call him a double martyr. Shot with arrows and just about survived, only to be killed by being clubbed to death. The perfect person to name the sacrificial cells after, the perfect martyr. Now every medical practitioner anywhere across the globe, knew what was meant by a Saint Sebastian.

It was exactly four minutes after their call when Ish entered the lab. Not only hadn't he showered or shaved, he was still wearing the same clothes he'd taken off the night before.

"It's obvious really, I thought about it in the elevator." He said. "We have to run everything again with a new Sebastian, before we tell JV the bad news."

"I agree, the sterilising has already started."

Ish was still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes as he read the contradictory reports on the screen.

"I love the way the AI can say the gas is harmless." He said. "Then two paragraphs later it says it was responsible for killing our Sebastian."

"Probably killed it says.... Even medical AIs know how to hedge their bets." She said.

"You're the medical expert..... What's your best bet as to what the gas does ?"

"We should rerun the tests before getting into conjecture."

"Oh come on Biff, it's just us here. You must have an idea ?"

She did have an idea and it didn't bode well for the survival of the human race. Ish was right though, there were just the two of them in the lab. If she trusted just one person in the world to keep a secret, it was Ish.

"Alright, what do we know ? It can't be one whiff and death, we've been exposed to Horace's green gas a few times, as have Inka and her kids. In two hours or so those happy and healthy kids will be running about and driving everyone crazy. We only got a mild exposure, but our Saint Sebastian got seven hours at full concentration."

"Are you saying it's just bad luck, like some people getting asthma attacks if they get a whiff of certain chemicals ?" Asked Ish.

Biff sighed and looked at the reports again, she wanted to word the next bit correctly. There could be no ambiguity.

"Oh, I think the gas is primarily intended to keep the aliens alive, though we may never understand how and why. I also believe that there are such things as coincidences, but never ones that are so useful and convenient to our enemies. One of the unknown compounds in the gas has been added to deliberately to wipe us out. Not instantly, we're looking at a tiny dose being breathed in over a long period of time, maybe years. You were right about asthma though, our immune systems have been turning traitor on us for decades, no one really understands why. The aliens have studied us and learned to exploit those flaws in our immune system. Perhaps they even created them."

"Jeez Biff, what do you think is the next step ? We have to be able to do something."

"We need to do all the tests again, it's going to be a very long day. A lonely day too, I'm going to lock us in here."

"Right, what can I do to help ?" Asked Ish.

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Brenda Grundy was out at the perimeter fence when they began to appear. She was walking round the chain linked wires that were their first and just about only line of defence. Probably put there to deter truancy and define what constituted the school grounds. No one had intended the fence to keep anyone out.

"I've got half a dozen of them..... Keeping low, coming in from the north."

Said the voice hissing into the ear piece of her comms. The Australian summer, the days tended to be hot and sweaty. The nights could be cold though, Bren was wearing a few extra layers of clothing, which made raising her weapon a little awkward. The night sight showed her a group of green outlines who looked vaguely human. The fact that they were creeping from wrecked vehicle to wrecked vehicle wasn't encouraging. They obviously didn't want to be seen.

"Owen, you there ?" She asked

"Yes."

"Wake up the commander. Tell him we have visitors who might turn out to be hostiles."

"Oh shit..... Will do."



Bren made her way to the front gate, that was where the sentry robots had been set up. Their systems were better than any soldier looking through a night sight, they'd know if the green outlines were human or alien.

"I've got some coming in from the west." Someone said. "I can see..... Yes, there are one or two children with them."

"Be careful and keep them covered." Said Bren. "I'm going to see what the sentry bots make of them."

She had to get close for her comms unit to access the bot closest to the gate. Bren actually leant on the huge and heavy tripod base, which had been pegged into the ground. The bot was aiming a mini-gun in the rough direction of the closest group of unknowns. There was none of the usual twitchiness though, no use of aiming lasers.

"Let's see what you see buddy." She muttered.

The bots looked at dozens of key markers to decide whether a moving was target was alive, human and, or a valid target. The number of tests was run quickly, they had to be fast to deal with an enemy approaching the outer defences. The bot was relaxed though, the unknowns were considered to be unarmed human civilians, who posed zero threat.

"Relax everyone, the bots say they're people, humans like us." She said.

"I know, one of the women is carrying a baby." Said one of the guards on the roof.

"I'm going to open the front gate." Said Bren. "Send them in my direction..... And keep using flashlights to a minimum, we don't want to attract any alien drones."

Matt arrived at the same time as the quiet refugees began to enter the compound. They had that look, the tired, huddled and beaten look of a defeated people.

"There were so many bodies in town." Said Matt. "I think we all assumed there were no survivors. There are dozen of them though and more still coming."

"They must have been hiding out in the scrub, waiting for nightfall." Said Bren.

Owen arrived with Duncan and spoke to a few of the returning refugees. People who'd had to remain quiet and hidden for so long, that they still tended to form quiet groups.

"What are we going to do with them ?" Asked Duncan. "There are so many."

What was Matt going to do with the surviving population of Ramingining ? Bren thought he was a good man, though often the mission did tend to take first, second and third place in his priorities. He was quite capable of sending the refugees away. No matter what he decided to do, she was determined to give him her total support.

"We work for the Australian government Duncan." Said Matt. "What is the first duty of any government ?"

"Ermmm.... Boss people about and fill their own pockets ?"

Matt laughed and she joined in. No one ever seemed to like politicians and it seemed that Duncan was no exception to the rule.

"Maybe, but officially their first duty is to protect their people, the citizens of their country. We're going to share our food with these people and try to find a space on the floor for them to sleep on. When we run out of space some may have to sleep outside. We'll do our best to find those outside a blanket. No one gets turned away Duncan." Said Matt.

No need to ask if Duncan was happy, he and Owen were grinning as though they'd just one top prize in the lottery.

"Sure..... We'll let everyone know." Said Owen.

The numbers coming through the gate were growing, with the shadows of more approaching out of the darkness.

"I think we need to cash in on that love we're getting from HQ." Said Matt. "Explain the situation to them Bren and ask for more ration packs, lots more ration packs."

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Tirsa Bates and her brother Zane knew the area for about a mile around the house they now thought of as theirs. They knew the area well enough to know every abandoned car or bus, every burned out home, every dead body that had been left where the person had died. Nature tended to take care of the bodies, given time. Tirsa was worried that nature was about to deal harshly with Tonya, her little sister.

"She's still sick..... Do you think she's going to die?" She asked Zane.

"I don't know, she's had bad guts for a while now.....Mum said there was blood in her vomit, so I suppose she might die. I hope she doesn't."

"Don't say that Zane, you're supposed to say she'll be fine, that Tonya will get better."

They were walking past a burned out house, before carefully crossing a road to reach the high street. There were no cars on the roads, but crossing them always called for care. There might be drones, just waiting for someone to come out into the open.

"I'm sorry, just trying to be honest." Said Zane. "Things are different now, all the hospitals have gone and Dad..... He's a good guy, but he doesn't know about medicine."

"Mum does, she knows a few things." Said Tirsa.

"Yeah, but not about serious stuff.....Tonya has been ill for so long now.... I heard Dad talking to Mum and he mentioned it might be cancer."

The tank took them both by surprise, there hadn't been a tank in the high street before, or the three army trucks, or the burning armoured car. There were soldiers too, the first they'd seen since the start of the alien invasion. Actually Tirsa had seen a few trucks full of soldiers hurtling through Tottenham, but they'd never stayed. The army always seemed to be on the way to somewhere else. Now about twenty soldiers were in the high street, watching the sky and looking scared.

"A drone, I bet a drone attacked them." Said Zane.

"They'll have a doctor with them."

Tirsa walked towards the soldiers, though she still tried to keep one eye on the sky.

"You need to stand perfectly still if the drones comes." She shouted. "Still.... Like playing statues. They can't see you if you keep still."

"Come back, they're nothing to do with us." Zane was hissing at her. "Leave the soldiers to get on with their business."

They'd seen her and didn't seem pleased to see her. Two of the soldiers were on the ground, a tall man was pushing against their wounds. The attack must have just happened, a badly burnt man was lying across the front of the armoured car.

"Be on your way girl, there's nothing for you here." Someone shouted.

"I need a doctor for my sister, she's only thirteen."

"Off with you girl..... We haven't even had time to bury our dead."

"My father thinks it might be cancer.... Please, she needs a doctor."

Zane had hold of her arm, pulling at her.

"They don't like us.....You'll get hurt." He told her.

The tall man stood up, his hands still covered in blood a darker shade of red than she ever remembered seeing before.

“Go away.....I’ve several already dead and three men who’ll die in pain today..... Be off with you girl, go home.” The man shouted at her.

“No....My sister needs a doctor.”

It happened sometimes, a drone which had found a target came back for a second run. Tirsia had seen four people die from laser fire, it might have been five. It was dreadful to watch and she didn’t want to see it again.

“The crackle means a drone is coming.” She shouted. “Stay still..... Don’t move.”

“She’s telling the truth.” Shouted Zane, finally backing her up. “Keep perfectly still.”

Most of the soldiers either believed them or decided there was no harm in giving it a try. They were all keeping still, playing a perfect game of statues. All apart from the tall man with dark hair, who seemed to be their doctor. He was still coming at her, with fury in his eyes.

“Keep still, or you’ll fucking die !” She shouted at him.

Her mother would have died to hear her swear at an adult. He stopped though and kept still as she heard the crackle of the drone directly overhead. It hovered for about two minutes, before flying away.

“That’s it..... They rarely come back a third time.” She said.

There was still blood on his hands as the tall man stood in front of her.

“What’s your name girl ?”

“Tirsia sir, Tirsia Bates.”

“I can’t promise anything, especially if it is cancer. I will come and look at your sister. Where do you live ?”

She turned and pointed.

“There, see the tree taller than all the others ?..... Look left at that tree and you’ll see a roof with red tiles. That’s where we live.”

“I’ve a lot to do and it will probably be dark. I will find your house though and look at your sister.”

“Please don’t forget..... Tonya is in so much pain.”

“She’s only small.” Added Zane.

“You have my word, I will be there. Tell your parents not to shoot at us when we arrive.”

“My parents would never do that, they’re good people.”

“I’m sure they are Tirsia, I’m sure they are.”

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