

Ishmael

Chapter 4 – Know Our Weaknesses

“Base Albion worked to UK standard time, it was the only sensible way to live on the moon with its twenty seven day rotation period. Some of the moon bases had experimented with a Standard Lunar Clock, but they’d all returned to using the time zone for their mission control on Earth. It made life easier, sleeping and working to the same schedule as the people back home.”



At one time everyone had flocked to London to learn medicine and many still did. The general consensus though was that the really ground breaking new ideas in surgery were coming out of South East Asia, especially Malaysia.

“The entire neurosurgical team will be visiting London next month.” Said the lecturer. “Observe and make notes, you can ask questions then.”

Pandora Gray watched the live transmission from Kuala Lumpur and took plenty of notes. Watching the procedure on the other side of the world was useful, but mainly intended as a way to keep the students busy. Many of the senior staff at the medical school were attending meetings with government departments, or had already been seconded into the military.

“Another two or three days and I think we’ll be sent home.” She’d told her mum that morning.

“So short sighted, they’ll need all the doctors they can get if things get really bad.”

“I was thinking of volunteering to help anyway mum, perhaps in our local hospital.”

There had been that moment, when they both realised they’d been making plans in case the unthinkable happened. Would she volunteer though, if things looked bad ? Pandora still hadn’t decided, there was Ish to consider.

“Note the surgeon and the robot working together.” Said her lecturer. “The AI learns from the human surgeon and can carry out procedures more quickly, reducing the anaesthesia time for the patient.”

“Damn, that’s never happened before.” Someone muttered.

Phones had been playing up, many were blaming the volume of traffic on PopNet. The links at the medical school were on a different system though, supposedly routed directly via a ring of satellites. After flashing a few times, the three metre wide screen went dark.

“Calm down, it’ll reroute via Indonesia, or Australia Pacific.”

Her lecturer was wrong, the screen remained stubbornly dark. There was a call to the tech department and a few cables were plugged in different places. Nothing brought the transmission back and their lecturer admitted defeat after about fifteen minutes.

“Go for a coffee or an early lunch.” He said. “I’ll try and get a recording of the procedure for next time.”

It was ridiculously early to go to lunch and her next compulsory lecture wasn’t until three. Instead of the refectory, she headed towards the library, meeting her friend Penny on the way.

“I thought you had surgical procedures with Doc Heartthrob for another hour ?” Asked Penny.

All their regular lecturers and tutors had nicknames, most of them rude or suggestive.

“We lost the satellite link. I’m going to the library for a couple of hours.”

“No coffee there Pandora and it’ll be packed... Let’s go to the Luna Blue for a coffee and a sandwich.”

The coffee at the nearby café was one of Pandora's guilty pleasures.

"Alright, but I have to be back by three or McGregor will have my teeth for cufflinks."

One huge plus at the Luna Blue was that the ubiquitous view screen was usually left with the sound very low. The screen was giving the news at high volume as they entered the café, some of their fellow students clustered around it.

'.....Are the six disabled Asia Pacific region satellites a one in a million coincidence ? Luckily PopNet is routed through undersea cables, so we can ask our sister station in Melbourne...'

Pandora held her breath until a smiling face appeared on the screen, the caption underneath giving her name as Lucy Hannigan from Channel 8 in Melbourne.

'.... Hello London..... The Australian government are blaming unusually powerful solar activity for the loss of.....'

The owner of the café turned the volume down as low as it would go, ignoring quite a few protests.

"All you'll hear is lies." He said. "It's them, we all know they've done this... The aliens."

"Well, I suppose if PopNet is working, things can't be that bad." Said Penny.

They ordered the wonderful coffee the place was famous for and a tuna melt each, which could be a little hit or miss. There was a member of the UK government on the screen, another minister for something or other, there seemed to be an endless supply of them. His words were automatically translated into several languages and sent across the bottom of the screen.

'The current communications problems on PopNet are due to unexpected solar activity....As the PM said last night, no UK forces are engaged against an extra-terrestrial enemy in Australasia. The very idea is preposterous...'

"They're in it with the aliens." A student shouted. "You wait, the rich people will start getting on rockets to Mars.... You just watch."

"You can always rely on Jake for the whacko view." Said Penny. "We'll be alright though, won't we ? What do you think Dora ?"

"I'm not sure Penny, but if they close the school, I'm definitely going to volunteer."

"Volunteer for what ?"

"To help in a hospital of course, or maybe civil defence."

"Shut up Dora, you're scaring me."

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There were much higher buildings in London than the UK headquarters of the Fifth West Corporation. Ish still felt a little queasy as he looked over the waist high wall at the people in the streets below. He was on a roof with lots of large heavy clouds in the sky, his idea of hell when he'd been small.

"This might not even work JV" He told Jaroslav Verga.

"You know it will Ish, stop making excuses just to avoid using the trigger."

"Go easy, he is on our side." Said Lianne.

"There is no time for gentleness." Said JV. "I can already see the ruined buildings, the unburied dead left to rot in the streets. Ish can see all that and more, if he tries."

"Just give me a moment." Said Ish.

There were probably a lot of DaHus in the street below; he was too high to see details. He never had seen damaged cars or buildings, just people. Ish had never seen damaged animals either, not a solitary injured cat or dog. Always his hallucinations had been about dreadfully injured humans. He didn't want to see the ruined streets of London below him, his curse extended to seeing every detail

of the destruction that was to come. He had to though, so much relied on it. Lianne sat on the wall quite close to him.

"You're older now Ish, your mind is stronger." She said. "What might have trapped the mind of a child won't trap you."

"I'm certain you'll be able to control the visions of the future." Said JV.

"You both mean well, but you're not helping... Just be quiet for a while."

No way to talk to his boss of course, but triggering his skills for precognition hadn't been mentioned in the job offer letter.

"There must be notes about medication in my files." He said. "Do you know what to give me if this goes wrong?"

"We do." Said Lianne.

Ishmael McGrath looked up at the sky and released the blocks in his mind which he'd gradually built up over the past fifteen or sixteen years. There was no willing himself to see things, his curse had always been a totally passive experience. Ish looked at the darkening bottoms of the clouds moving slowly above and allowed it to happen.

"It'll rain later." He said.

It all started with that phrase, as his mind saw the rain begin. The rain became torrential, though not a drop was touching his skin, or the dry rooftop. As a child he'd seen monsters appear out of the clouds, now as an adult he saw strange flying devices in the skies over London.

"What do you see?" Asked JV.

Ish looked east towards Bart's Hospital and couldn't see any landmarks he recognised.

"They've gone, the buildings..... Everything destroyed." He said. "St Paul's is still there, its dome rising out of the flames."

Ish spun around and looked west, hoping to see something he recognised, a few landmarks still intact.

"Lincoln's Inn Fields.....Something has landed there. It's dreadful, as though the entire city to the west is on fire..... It's hell, they've turned London into a living hell."

Ish felt relieved when he saw something intact, the Centre Point tower rising above the ruins in the direction of Tottenham Court Road.

"Further into the future Ish, you need to look past the invasion." Said JV.

"Don't push him too hard." Said Lianne.

"I see only darkness." Said Ish. "I can't breathe..... I can't breathe.... They know our weaknesses..."

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Base Albion worked to UK standard time, it was the only sensible way to live on the moon with its twenty seven day rotation period. Some of the moon bases had experimented with a Standard Lunar Clock, but they'd all returned to using the time zone for their mission control on Earth. It made life easier, sleeping and working to the same schedule as the people back home.

"Damn, I bet that's the Chinese." Said Pamela Rath. "Just because they're all on Beijing time."

It had happened quite a lot over the past day few days, other bases calling during in the middle of her sleep period. Sometimes the reason for the call had seemed fairly flimsy, as if they just wanted to make sure the other bases were still there.

"The moon base equivalent of the bird's dawn chorus." Richard called it.

Richard was asleep until she climbed over him to get to her communicator, though she did give him a quick kiss on the way across.

"Those damn Chinese again?"

"I expect so." She replied.

Pam pulled on her dressing gown, calls at night usually meant someone wanting a face to face conversation. The Ident coming up on her communicator wasn't the Chinese Mao Zedong Base.

"It's Mordor One wanting to chat." She said.

"I didn't think they were on our SatLink system."

"It's Mordor, they probably hacked our link." She said.

She looked behind her and Richard was completely naked.

"Before I hit the accept button....I mean you're good for your age." She Said. "I just think you need to wrap a sheet around yourself."

"Oh Christ, yes of course."

Eventually there'd be a corner of her wardrobe for his things, they just hadn't reached that stage yet. Richard wrapped himself in a sheet and sat next to her, as she accepted the link request from the semi-covert base on the far side of the moon.

"Hello this is Science Officer Pamela Rath and I have Base Commander Richard Martucci with me."

Links were always high definition and flawless, the SatLink system had been designed to have enough resources for twice the number of bases using it. On her view screen there was the badly distorted image of a man.

"I thought our system were supposed to be interference proof." Said Richard.

"Hello UniConsortium One, can you hear me ?" Asked Pam.

"I'm Gregory Ustinov, Chief Officer of UniCon One. We are having a few problems here."

The screen was a snowstorm, which was supposed to be impossible with all the error correction built into their links. Ustinov kept looking over his shoulder and Pam could see movement.

"What is the problem, are you under attack ?" Asked Richard.

"Maybe.....There have been a few deaths, so we might be under attack....I suppose we must be....."

Richard looked at her and shrugged his shoulders under her bed sheet.

"Greg, what do you mean by might be under attack ?" She asked.

"Some of the staff in the Zero G Lab went missing, but there's nowhere to go. Searches were organised, we even went outside and ran a grid pattern on the lunar surface. Nothing there, they simply vanished.... Then we there were the deaths in the Fusion Lab.....Rodriguez doesn't agree, but I think we must be under attack."

There was movement behind him again, quite a lot of movement.

"We've a shuttle with a little spare fuel." Said Richard. "We could come and help, if you think that's needed ?"

"That would be....."

The screen went dead, the link cut. Pam tried a few tricks and even traced the route right back to the receiver dish.

"It's not our end, he simply stopped transmitting." She said.

"What do you think he meant by 'That would be' ?" Asked Richard. "That would be great, that would be a bad idea, or that would be fucking stupid ?"

"Easy way to find out, we go there." She replied. "It's perfect Richard, the Nest will only hold twenty people anyway. We'll draw lots to see who gets a place in the Nest and take the remainder with us to have a look at Mordor One."

"The Nest was intended as a hazardous waste store Pam, it hasn't even been fully fitted out as a panic room. Besides, the guys in mission control on Earth would go crazy."

"Oh Richard, where is your sense of adventure ?" She asked.

"It's currently hiding under the desk and hoping this is all a bad dream."

She had to laugh, especially because he probably meant it. Richard had been chosen for the post of base commander because he'd experience of working in lunar gravity and he was single. She was sure no one had mentioned rescuing shadowy corporate types at his job interview.

"Earth have other problems than us, we'll be lucky if the supply shuttles keep arriving. We could always send them a note about where we're going in the overnight data burst." She Said. "To arrive after we've left of course. There might be nothing wrong over there, Ustinov did seem a bit.....Weird."

"He looked scared and desperate to me, but anything is better than sitting here waiting for God knows what to happen. We'll go, but no drawing lots, you and I will decided who goes into the Nest and who joins the Mordor rescue team....And I know you won't like it, but everyone will be fully armed, we'll take half the armoury with us."

"Actually Richard..... I was going to suggest that myself."

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Alejandro Lopez, son of Luis and Jada, was having his usual problem with curious Torquay tourists. He was always polite, but pointing out where he'd seen the object hitting the water was becoming a bit of a chore.

"Yes I am the Alejandro in the papers, the one who saw it come down." He said.

"Where exactly ? Point it out."

The motor dealership he worked for was right on the seafront, a brilliant position for passing trade, the footfall as the sales magazines called it. Alejandro was the sales manager for a Navajo hydrogen powered cars dealership. So, no matter how often he was asked, he pointed to where he'd seen it land, whatever it was. He did of course give them all his business card and a booklet on Navajo cars.

"There, can you see that small island ?" He asked.

"Yes, I see it."

An elderly couple, probably staying at a local bed and breakfast. It was the wife who was the curious one, the husband just peering out to sea.

"There was a huge splash as it came down, probably at least half a mile out to sea."

"Wow, is there anything out there, are we close to France ?" She asked.

"Eventually, though it must be close to a hundred miles away. There's nothing between us and the French coast, apart from miles of open sea. Here, please take my card.... And perhaps you'd like a test drive in the new Navajo Galaxy ?"

She took his card and her husband pushed a few leaflets into an inside jacket pocket. They weren't likely to be back, but he had sold a three year old trade in out of the back lot, to one family of gawpers.

Alejandro noticed Valentina Lopez, his abuelita, walking slowly down the road. She must have taken the bus, despite everyone in the family telling her the bumps and jolts weren't good for her arthritis. He wheeled a leather office chair outside, ready for her to sit on.

"Oh Alejo, you're a lifesaver." She said, collapsing into the chair.

"There's fresh coffee, or some cold bottled water in the fridge."

"The cold water sounds wonderful."

His grandmother, his abuelita, visited the showroom about once every five or six weeks. After half an hour of small talk, she'd get down to the real business, telling him it was high time for him to marry Tracy. Things had heated up considerable since their son had been born seven months ago, even his

mother was giving him a hard time. Alejo grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge and a glass off the shelf, his abuelita never drank straight out of a bottle.

“Do you get many people like that, asking about the thing hitting the sea ?” She asked.

“Yes, more and more all the time. It’s good for business, I’ve already sold one trade in and someone left a deposit on another.”

“So you’re doing alright for money then ?”

Here it came, the beginning of the bullying. If he wasn’t short of cash he could afford to marry Tracy and stop their child being a bastard. It was all said far more politely of course, but the meaning was always the same. The truth was that Tracy wasn’t worried about getting a piece of paper to say they were married and neither was he. The peace of an idyllic sunny Torbay morning was ruined by a loud bang coming from the ocean.

“What was that ?”

“I have no idea....Two navy ships have been patrolling the ocean, perhaps they’re test firing their guns ?”

Alejo had to put his hand up to shield his eyes against the sun and even then he couldn’t see much. There was a large Royal Navy ship out past the small island, but it was some distance from shore. Another bang and he saw a puff of white smoke in the distance.

“They fired at something abuelita.” He said. “Yes, there’s something in the water some distance from them. Metal I think, it’s reflecting the light..... Yes, it’s dark silver.”

“We need to get closer.”

She was trying to use her feet to shove the office chair into a busy road.

“Stop that it’s dangerous.”

Whatever was happening between the navy vessel and the object in the ocean wasn’t waiting for them. There were two more loud bangs.

“Then push me, we have to get closer.”

“Not in the chair, use your stick and I’ll bring the chair.”

The coast road was busy, especially on a sunny day. A coach driver took pity on the man trying to help an old lady across the road. Once the sightseeing coach came to a halt, a van coming the other way stopped too. Alejo led his abuelita across the road and onto the small grassed area on the other side. Past the coloured blooms placed to make the Torbay coat of arms, he put the chair in front of a low stone wall. For a seventy seven year old woman with mobility problems, his abuelita was as close to the sea as she was going to get.

“I still can’t see anything... Tell me what’s happening Alejo ?”

They weren’t alone for long, two girls who worked at the nearby hotel came to stare at the Royal Navy ship. A middle aged couple ran across the road, the people who ran a gift shop. Alejo had that moment, when reality felt like watching a movie. The dark silver object rose from the ocean and hovered, about fifty feet above the waves.

“It’s sphere, about a third the size of the navy ship.” He said. “They’ve fired something at it.....Looked like a torpedo.”

“No it’s a missile.” Someone shouted. “Definitely a missile..... And another.”

He saw the bright flash before hearing the sound of the explosion booming across the ocean. Cars were stopping, jamming the road, their drivers joining the growing group by the wall.

“Did they hit it Alejo ? Has it gone ?”

“Yay, they hit it.” Shouted one of the girls from the hotel. “Good old Royal Navy, they’ll sort them out.”

"It's still there abuelita."

"There's a navy patrol boat arriving now." Said the man from the gift shop.

The sphere wasn't completely smooth, there were areas where things stuck out, shapes that might have been weapons or just part of whatever engines kept it hovering above the ocean. There was a flash of light from one of the protuberances and the sound of a loud explosion.

"They're firing..... The aliens are shooting back." Someone shouted.

"The navy will win, just you wait and see."

The front of the navy ship was on fire, black smoke pouring out of somewhere. As he watched there was another flash of light and an even louder bang.

"Christ ! I think they're sinking." Said someone.

"The patrol boat just fired a missile." Said the lady from the gift shop.

The unidentified Royal Navy ship was on fire from stem to stern. Alejo put out his hand to comfort his abuelita. She was shivering, the skin on her shoulder ice cold. No more questions, she'd already seen and heard too much.

"Move..... Move aside please, we need to get through." He yelled.

The crowd filled the gap by the wall and he didn't bother asking her to walk. He pushed the chair between the cars left standing in the road and bumped the chair up the kerb on the other side.

"Soon be inside abuelita." He said.

That was his one and only aim, to get them both indoors, away from whatever was happening outside.

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Matthew Newman had given his account of what had occurred at Glyde Point to the science team, and then over a radio link to his Australian Army liaison in Canberra. He'd also told a variety of eager intelligence types until the satellite link had died. The problem was that he had so little to tell them and felt as guilty as hell.

"They kept asking me how Ward died and I have no idea." He said. "They haven't found anything of him, not even a scrap of uniform."

"No use blaming yourself, it all happened so quickly." Said Brenda. "I escaped with just a few scratches, but that poor Australian girl.....Standing right next to me and.....They think one of the hands is hers."

Matt had heard that people had simply vanished in the First World War. Literally so close to an exploding shell that they'd been vaporised, blown to atoms. The science team were talking about implied yields of kilotons from whatever had propelled the alien craft.

"To create a crater that deep.....We're looking at nuclear levels of explosive power. You're just lucky there doesn't appear to be any radiation effect."

The head of the science team had told him. Really it was a combined science and rescue team, only there weren't many soldiers left to rescue. A team of heavily armed American marines had also arrived, diverted from military manoeuvres somewhere in the area. In many ways it was all too many people, arriving far too late.

"You can see Sergeant Evans now." A nurse informed him.

"Can I come ?" Asked Brenda.

"Yes, I'm sure he'll appreciate that."

Evans was a medical miracle, or at least it felt that way. He'd been shot twice by the alien creature and assumed to be dead. He'd also been close to the centre of the explosion as the craft from another world had blown itself apart. Yet Sergeant Evans lived, though minus the lower part of his

left leg. A dreadful injury, but these days they made prosthetic limbs that were hard to tell from the real thing.

"He's in tent C, third treatment bay on the left." Said the nurse.

Evans wasn't even one of his men, but Ward was dead and the huge Aussie soldier everyone called Charlie. So many had died that it was far easier and less emotionally troubling to count the living. At first the medical team had tried to quarantine everyone who'd had direct contact with the alien creature. Matt had been kept in a plastic tent for a few hours. Obviously they no longer thought there was the threat of infection. Evans was lying on a flimsy, but uncovered mobile hospital bed.

"Good to see you're alive." Said Matt. "Someone up there must be looking after you."

"Everyone thought you were dead." Added Brenda, while holding his hand.

"So did I when that thing shot at me for a second time. Twelve holes I've got in me, none hitting anything critical... I'm a bloody miracle they keep telling me. There's the leg of course, but I'm not complaining. Did many of your guys come out of it alive, the Brits I mean?"

"Just Brenda and two others..... I think three of your mob made it."

"Christ, what a fucking shambles." Said Evans.

He was right of course and no matter what the official report said, it would blight Matt's career forever. So many were dead, yet he'd come out of it with just a suspected concussion and three stitches in a cut on his arm. No matter what the truth, some would doubt his bravery and word would spread. Soon men would be finding excuses not to serve with him.

"I heard they found some bits of the alien." Said Evans. "Have you seen them?"

"Not yet, that's my next stop."

"Come back and tell me what the damn thing looked like."

"I will Evans, I promise."

Brenda followed him out of the tent, which he didn't mind. It was nice to have a friendly face around, before he faced the inevitable inquiry into what the hell had happened.

The rescue team liked their white tents; they were springing up like weeds. One long tent had become a temporary mortuary, uncooled and full of body bags. Matt avoided the mortuary with its stink and table covered in body parts yet to be identified as a person.

"Hi, you look terrible." Said Chris.

"It's not my age Chris, it's the mileage." Replied Matt.

Chris Crawford was lurking outside of the tent where the parts of the alien were being examined. The cop from Gunther Springs, actually the only cop in Gunther Springs, was one of them, a kindred spirit...Unhurt and feeling guilty about it.

"I was there, right next to Ward." He'd told him after the explosion. "Now Ward has gone, blown to pieces and me.....I got one scorched eyebrow. Just doesn't seem right."

The alien tent as everyone was calling it, had a simple letter F on the tent flap. That tent too had been guarded, sealed up with a plastic inner tent and staffed by people in hazard suits. For some reason all those precautions were gone.

"We're going to look at the monster bits." Said Brenda. "Are you coming?"

"Been stood here a while thinking about it.... Still not sure if I want to look, they say he, she or it looks pretty gnarly."

"It can't hurt us now." Said Matt.

"Yes, but the other one can." Said Chris. "I keep telling them we reported two deaths in this area, not just crazy Bertie Johnson. They won't listen to me because Brenda's pictures show there was only room for one of those things in that space rock."

"So they've looked at my pictures, good." Said Brenda.

"You're not listening to me now." Snapped Chris. "A local hiker was killed in Kakadu National Park, the eastern edge, not that far from here. There wasn't much left of him once he'd been lying out in the open for a few days and it was recorded as an accidental death."

"Then it probably was Chris, not every death in the Northern Territories can be blamed on aliens and space rocks." Said Brenda.

"He had two holes in a thigh bone, holes that went right through. Sound familiar?"

"Then why was it recorded as an accidental death?" Aske Matt.

"I'm sure I've mentioned our lack of big city resources."

"Yeah, once or twice." Said Matt. "Come on, we all need to see what's left of the alien. If there's another one in the area we need to know what we're up against."

"Won't they send us back home after what happened?" Asked Brenda.

"No satellite link means no orders Bren and there's a lot of kit still in the vehicles we left near Bertie's place."

Matt had learned not to fill his head with the names of people he'd only ever see once or twice. The man in charge of the science team had a strong Australian accent and Dr K Holliday on his name tag.

"Can we come in Doc?" Asked Matt. "I noticed the plastic wrap and hazard suits have gone."

"Yes of course, you're the heroes of the hour, though it would have been nice if you hadn't blown our alien visitor into quite so many pieces."

"Officer Crawford thinks there's another one of them out there." Said Brenda.

"I know he does, we've had a few arguments about it. The death in Kakadu National Park is well within reach of our alien and the craft only had room for one of them. Two scout craft landing so close to each other doesn't feel right."

"Assuming this was a scout craft." Said Chris. "I think you're wrong Doc."

"I might well be and I would have reported your suspicions, but the link died."

"Come on Doc, we paid our nickel, show us the bug eyed monster." Said Matt.

There were several science team staff in the tent, yet only Dr Holliday laughed. Matt was beginning to like the guy.

"Have you finished the holographic scanning Ellen?" Asked the Doc.

"Yes."

"Then let our friends see sample forty three."

Ellen went behind a screen and came back with something on a metal tray, something heavy by the way she was carrying it. Whatever was on the tray was covered with a sheet of yellow plastic with a bio-hazard symbol on it.

"We had to call it something." Said Ellen. "Meet Ripley."

She pulled back the plastic and Matt felt his pulse quicken.

"Wow, that looks nasty." Said Chris.

"Everyone says that, it's the teeth." Said the Doc. "Several rows which grow until needed to replace the main teeth, just like a shark. Whatever our friend fed on, we can be sure Ripley wasn't a vegan."

"I always hoped that if we met aliens, they'd be like us." Said Brenda.

"This creature isn't anything like us, notice anything?" Asked Ellen.

Matt was noticing a hell of a lot, apart from the rows of sharp teeth on what looked like part of a skull. There were no eyes or ears, but Ripley had obviously seen and heard. The skin still seemed to be doing something to the light, as if his eyes were suddenly short sighted. Knowing that Ellen had only asked the question to answer it herself, he just shook his head.

"No, what do you mean?" Asked Brenda.

"I know, it doesn't stink." Said Chris.

"Well done Office Crawford." Said Ellen. "You're right there is no sign of corruption, not one whiff of decay. The flesh is still firm and the clear liquid which is probably blood, shows no sign of clotting.... It's wonderful.... So totally alien."

"So Ripley is pretty tough then?" Asked Chris.

"There are billions of bacteria and other organisms waiting for us to die." Said the Doc. "Relatively quickly they can break our body down, even the bones, turning us into recycled compounds for plants and fungi to feed on. It's just that Earth's bacteria don't recognise Ripley's body parts as food."

"There are structures in its blood and some sort of cell structure in the flesh, but none of it is remotely like ours." Said Ellen.

"So that's why you don't think it can infect us?" Asked Brenda.

Dr Holliday actually looked a little awkward.

"That was my assumption yes, but please don't remind me about it if I'm wrong." He said. "There's also the fact that a great deal of Ripley was turned to dust by the explosion and spread over a vast area of Northern Australia. The dust will be in the upper atmosphere by now, being spread around the globe by high speed winds. I doubt if there is a risk of infection, but if there is....There's nothing much we can do about it."

"Jeez, I hope you're right Doc." Said Matt.

"Now if you'll excuse us, we've a lot to do before the link is restored."

Matt wanted to say if it was restored, but the military were bound to restore some sort of comms, even if it was by commandeering space on civilian entertainment SatLinks. Once they were away from the ears of the science team, Matt asked the others to join him on a recon trip to Kakadu National Park.

"You were serious then?" Asked Chris. "Just us.... Looking for one of those things."

"The vehicles aren't far and we brought a full box of AP45 rounds." Said Matt. "I saw the alien hurt by those, it was running away when it was blown up, trying to escape."

"Three of us against another Ripley.... That sounds like suicide." Said Brenda. "None of us is exactly in the best of health, we were all bashed about in the explosion."

Matt was sure the media would come up with a name for the aliens, but for now he was happy with calling them Ripleys. The name seemed appropriate and after all, everyone on the planet had seen the film.

"I'm just suggesting we find where it came down, where it parked its space rock." He said. "Then we can watch it for a while and call for backup. Come on..... Think how nice it would be to bring back a complete specimen for Doc to look at."

"Fine, but on the way I need to tell a few people I'm not dead." Said Chris.

He looked at Brenda, who was grinning at him as though he'd offered her free ice cream for a year.

"I'm in, you had me at the bit about a box full of AP45 rounds." She said.

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Liza Bates didn't just work part time at SelfCharge for the money, though it was useful. Her husband's roofing business was doing quite well, they were thinking about a holiday abroad again, maybe the Algarve. The evenings at SelfCharge had become something she looked forward to, her little sanctuary away from the kids. It gave her a break from the never ending routine of cooking meals, but without having to make a big thing out of it.

“Number seven... The green Honda.... Yes sir, you. I need to check your card before the machine is turned on.” She said over the intercom.

It was just like an old fashioned petrol forecourt, there were still one or two of those around for people with classic cars. The forecourt she could see through the armoured glass window was mostly covered against the rain and there were comfortable chairs to sit in. The customers were provided with coffee machines and vending machines which provided everything from pizza slices to bags of junk food.

“Thank you.” She said taking the card from the guy at machine seven.

The universal fast charge connector would take the average family car from almost flat to full charge in fifteen minutes, a miracle her boss called it. Yet customers still moaned about the wait.

“How many units do you want to buy ?” She asked.

“Not sure, I don’t know until I charge it.”

That was the only drawback to the job, the general public. Most gave her no problems at all, they’d all charged their vehicles hundreds of times, they knew the routine. A few men lurked and tried to engage her in conversation, she’d even had one offer of marriage. Most though were fine, apart from the occasional jerk like number seven.

“You need to pre-buy the units...Your charge level indicator will tell you how many you need.”

“Hum.... Yeah, ok.”

He went away to look, leaving his card with her. She was honest but many weren’t, you never left your card with anyone.

‘...This is Steve Penboss on Bruce Grove Radio. Tonight we’ll be talking about those alien, real or just people getting scared about nothing?....’

Good, the local radio station’s talk show was about to start and there were only two cars in the forecourt. She just had to hope that number seven didn’t turn out to be a nuisance who kept pestering her.

“I need fifty units.”

She set the terminal for fifty units and hoped his card wasn’t a bad one. It was rare, but at least twice she’d had to call the police to deal with angry customers trying to break through the glass. Liza breathed easier after his card was accepted.

“You have fifty units, here is your card.”

No calling him sir again, no being over polite, she rarely used please or thank you. She’d learned the hard way that some guys treated politeness as a come on. Number seven used his card on the coffee machine and sat down. Good, she could listen to the talk show in peace.

‘...Look Steve I know everyone thinks the satellites were taken out by aliens, but it’ll be the Russians again...They did this in twenty forty five, read your history Steve. First it was the satellites and then subs to blow up undersea cables, the whole world was disconnected.....’

Liza wasn’t stupid, she knew the people who called such shows weren’t a fair representation of the human race, but their ideas had appeal. It was comforting to think the Russians were up to no good, rather than the unknown, the aliens.

“How long does it take.”

Number seven, she’d known he’d be a nuisance, she could spot them as they got out of their car.

“About fifteen minutes, we’re the fastest in North London.”

“Yeah right.”

He wandered away, but she knew he’d be back. Not enough of a pain to call the cops about, he’d just pester her every couple of minutes until his car was ready to go.

'.....No Steve the trouble in Torbay wasn't aliens, that's fucking stupid. A Royal Navy ship blown apart and sunk by something that vanished afterwards.... Come on Steve, those people must have been stoned.... It was terrorists.... Bloody obvious...'

The words were like tranquilizers, easing her mind. Terrorists of course it was terrorists, that made far more sense than aliens. Liza had never called the show, but she was tempted. All the callers sounded so knowledgeable, they understood what was really going on.

"Aliens indeed, people are so gullible." She muttered.

Damn, number seven was walking towards the window, probably to complain that the coffee was too cold, or the vending machines had run out of his favourite junk food. She stood up to talk to him, determined to keep cool.

Liza Bates had recently celebrated her thirty eighth birthday, though what she saw through the window made her certain she'd never enjoy her thirty ninth. The window was large and wide, made out of optically perfect glass so that she could see every inch of the forecourt. Number seven was crouching down, his hands over his ears. It was the sound that was scaring her too, that and a large passenger jet flying low over the rooftops, heading straight for the window.

"Fuck !" She yelled.

The aircraft wasn't on fire, it looked perfect as it came towards her over the top of the water works. Its engines were screaming but that might have been normal. Passenger jets weren't supposed to fly that low, so low that she could see the American Airlines logo on its tail. The radio was forgotten, the aliens were forgotten, Liza was certain she was going to die.

"Please God, not now.....I want to see the kids grow up." She muttered.

The plane must have been higher than she'd thought, it went over the forecourt roof and carried on flying west, the engines still screaming. It was forbidden to leave the office unattended, especially when customers were using the chargers. She ignored the rules, grabbing her phone and keys, before leaving the office. Number seven was still crouching, his head almost touching the concrete.

"It's alright, it missed us..... You can get up." She said.

He stood up hesitantly, as if doubting her.

"Where did it go ?"

"We can see from the side street."

She heard the dreadful sound of the plane crashing before they'd crossed the forecourt. By the time they were stood in the side street the large jet was a ball of flame about a mile or so away. It had hit the ground somewhere just past Wood Green, maybe Alexandra Palace way. There was another explosion and flames rising up into the sky. Liza began to cry and number seven put his arm around her.

"Don't cry, we didn't die tonight....Do you want me to call someone for you ?" He asked.

"No, I have my phone and I should get back to the office."

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