

Ishmael

Chapter 19 – Central London

“They dived, climbed again and seemed to lean far too far to the left. All the time the view in front of the pilot was full of flames. Dora even saw a saucer drone explode. A large one, a good thirty metres across, maybe larger.”



“I know it seems a strange thing to suggest.” Said Ishmael McGrath. “We know you all now though, you’re like family..... Actually no, you are family.”

“The colonel thinks we’re crazy.” Said Pandora Gray. “He’ll do as we say though.”

“He’s military, that’s what they do.” Said Ish. “He may not like us, but he’ll obey our orders.”

“More like requests really, but he will look after you and the children.” Added Dora.

“So, will you come with us to London ?” Asked Ish. “Or stay with the soldiers ?”

Inka Malovic just looked from one to the other of them, knowing what her heart wanted to do, even if it made no sense. Her sixteen year old daughter picked that moment to take offence at something.

“I’m not a child.” Snapped Kata.

“Me too.” Said thirteen year old Antun.

Instead of being annoyed, Ish and Dora were smiling at her kids like proud grandparents, even though they still looked like kids themselves.

“Why can’t we all stay together ?” Asked Kata.

A little self-interest at work with her daughter, she was quite keen on one of the young Fifth West fighters called Darius. He seemed a decent young man, though Inka hadn’t invested much time in getting to know him. Her daughter’s crushes tended to last no more than a week, ten days if she was really smitten.

“There’s been fighting to the north of London.” Said Ish. “Our vehicles won’t be able to get past the wrecked cars and rubble in the streets.”

“Mr Verga has arranged for a helicopter to take us to London, a really fast one.” Added Dora.

“You didn’t say where the soldiers will be going.” Said Inka.

“A few will be going with us.” Said Ish. “The rest will go wherever they’re needed.”

“Which soldiers are going with you ?” Asked Kata.

“Don’t worry, Darius is coming with us.” Said Ish.

Oh dear, Ish didn’t understand sixteen year old girls. She might have a huge crush on the guy, but no one else was supposed to know or comment on it. Emotions were raw at that age, Inka wasn’t surprised that Romeo and Juliet had ended up as corpses. Her daughter was glaring at Ish.

“So it’s a really fast helicopter ?” Asked Antun.

“Yes, it can fly at almost the speed of sound.” Said Ish.

“Cool.”

“Very nice, though my concern is the safety of my kids.” Said Inka.

“Oh Mum.” Said Kata.

“I don’t care, you’ll always be my kids.” Said Inka. “So Ish, you do your work in the lab below the Fifth West Headquarters. What then though, do we still get to travel with you ?”

“Of course.” Said Dora.

“Let him answer.” Snapped Inka.

“We have had a lot of fights to get JV to agree to you coming with us.” Said Ish. “If you’re asking where we go after London, that depends on a great many things. You will always be a part of our plans though.”

“I want to go with them.” Said Kata.

“They have a really fast helicopter.” Said Antun.

She couldn’t let it go to a vote, that way led to family chaos and anarchy. There were two of them, she’d never win a decision ever again. In the end it didn’t take much effort to decide, Inka followed her heart.

“We’ll go with you.....Just keep my kids safe.”

“We will, I promise.” Said Ish.

~ ~

Kitty MacLaren loved flying the Volta Seven, the closest thing to a flying car ever built in production line numbers. It wasn’t really a flying car of course, just a hover platform with a low power jet engine attached to the back. Add on the side thrusters and drive shaft to the back wheels and the Volta Seven used fuel and air at a truly prodigious rate.

‘.....a truly ludicrous rate for a planet trying to go green’

According to the best read car magazine in several time zones. The wealthy bought the car to impress, it had even featured in several action movies. The public wanted a flying car, but not one that threatened to empty their bank account every times it was refuelled. Even the moderately wealthy began to take their names off the waiting list for a new Volta Seven.

“This is amazing Andy.” Said Kitty. “I’m surprised the Volta Car Company went bust. I want one, even though I can’t afford it.”

“That was the problem, few could afford it.” Said Andy Korenberg. “I picked this one up at a classic vehicles auction and reworked the motors to run on hydrogen.”

“How much did you pay for it ?”

“More than I’m happy to talk about.....Don’t put a dent in her.”

“Her Huh..... Must be love.”

The car had been designed to be driven by the public with a minimal number of lessons. The new high power hydrogen motors took some getting used to, even for an experienced pilot like Kitty. She’d taken it easy for a mile or so, but now she was swooping down, zooming over the tree tops of the Norwegian forest below.

“In the end it was The Americans who killed the car.” Said Andy. “Their aviation authority demanded a full pilot’s license to fly it. The company went bust four months later.”

“It handles like a dream..... So much power.”

“Slow down a bit, we must be close to Alta.”

It was just them in the car, everyone else was in the helicopter following behind. Pam Rath had wanted a few things that weren’t available at the base, mainly clothing that didn’t look quite so teutonic. One of the guards had mentioned the shops in Alta being mostly intact and free from the attention of looters.

“Norwegians are too civilised and polite to be looters.” Andy had said.

After discussing it with Shearman, it had been decide to go on an expedition to Alta. Pam was in the helicopter, with three excited students and several heavily armed guards.

“We’re there.....There’s more town than I expected.” Said Kitty.

The town of Alta began straight after the forest, appearing out of the trees like a magic trick. A coastal town with the ocean catching the morning sun.

“The population was about twenty thousand.” Said Andy. “They had to have shops to buy food and clothing.”

“Do you think anyone is alive down there ?”

“No idea, probably a few hiding in their homes.” Said Andy. “Not our concern, so don’t get any ideas. Let the helicopter lead now, Shearman knows the best place to land.”

Kitty hung back, letting the helicopter circle the town, following it in. The helicopter was large, the blades needed space. It set down in the almost empty car park of a car dealership. Not a very picturesque spot, but Kitty guessed it was close to the town centre. She landed the Volta Seven and drove it up to where everyone was getting out of the helicopter. Just in time for Shearman’s shouted warnings and instructions.

“You’ve all got weapons. Remember Alta might not be as harmless as it looks.” He yelled. “There might be alien robots here and there are almost certain to be a few human survivors. They could be more dangerous than the aliens.....So be extra fucking careful.”

“What do we do if we meet a few locals ?” Asked Pam.

“Do you speak Norwegian ?” Asked Shearman.

“No.”

“Then smile and try to avoid upsetting anyone.”

“We’re not taking anyone back with us, if that’s what you’re leading up to.” Said Andy. “I’m not going to get into group dynamics and all that stuff. I’m afraid it’s an order you will obey. We’re not here on a rescue mission.”

Pam looked a bit upset, but Kitty actually thought Andy was right. She wasn’t about to volunteer her opinion though, unless someone asked her.

“Alright, listen carefully.” Continued Shearman. “Go nowhere alone, keep in groups of three if you can. Use your weapons.....You’re all essential to the project. Comms to be used only in emergency, we know the bad guys can trace them. That’s it, meet back here in two hours..... And..... Happy looting.”

“He’s more fun than I thought he’d be.” Said Pam.

“Want to join Andy and me ?” Asked Kitty. “That’ll make up our three.”

“Five, two guards will follow me everywhere.” Said Andy. “It’s Fifth West company policy.”

“I don’t mind, the one on the left is cute.” Said Kitty.

Of course he’d heard her, she was close enough. He smiled at her rather than blushing, usually a good sign.

“So, where to ?” Asked Pam.

Kitty had to unzip her fleecy jacket and let the cold winter wind get in a little. There was an A4 piece of paper folded up in an inside pocket. She’d printed it from a compressed Google archive someone had thoughtfully copied to the server before the invasion had started.

“I have a map. I looked at it last night and most of the stores seem to be over there.”

She was pointing at a part of snow covered Alta, that looked no more promising than any other part. The map showed there was a cinema complex in that direction though and a sportswear shop. There had to be other stores close by. To her surprise everyone seemed happy to follow her.

“Fine, let’s get moving.” Said Andy.

They walked past a promising looking shop when the helicopter was still just about in view. A supermarket where someone had bent the door frame trying to get it open. Giving up on the door, they’d broken a toughened glass window, the tiny cubes of glass were everywhere.

“I want a quick look around.” Said Pam, peering through the broken window.

"We've store rooms full of anything you might need from here." Said Andy.

"Not in my favourite brand though." Said Pam. "And before you go on about speaking Norwegian, I can already see the toothpaste I like."

"Come on, we can fill up a trolley and pick it up on the way back." Said Kitty. "You must want a few things and your guards. I'm sure one trolley of our bits won't overload the helicopter."

Andy was smiling at Pam and her as he pulled a trolley loose from the others.

"No arguments from me." He said. "I can see the coffee I love and haven't tasted for months."

It didn't take long for the five of them to fill a trolley with everything from one of the guard's favourite brands of scotch, to jars of sandwich spread, the sort Kitty would have happily killed for. The trolley was half hidden behind a few boxes, to be collected later. They saw the kneeling man as they left the store.

"Be careful..... Don't move any closer to him." Said Andy.

A man kneeling on the ground, toward the centre of a patch of grass about twenty yards from them. If it was a man, his features didn't look right to Kitty. She turned on her pulse rifle and held it up, ready to fire.

"Hey, it's just a local MacLaren." Said Andy.

"I'm not so sure, something doesn't feel right." Said Kitty.

"He probably needs our help, don't shoot him." Said Pam.

Guards never did take chances, it was another unwritten rule of the universe. Kitty heard two more weapons hum into life as the guards followed her lead.

"I told you..... Watch, watch as he stands up." Said Kitty.

There was something, almost intangible, definitely impossible to put into words. Kitty MacLaren knew the creature standing up wasn't human. As it raised what looked like a stick pointing it in their direction.... She fired. The slug traveling at supersonic speed, hit the creature's head, turning it into an explosion of tissue and liquid. Not liquid the crimson colour of blood, but dark black.

"Christ Kitty, you killed him." Said Pam.

"Not a man, it was one of their creations..... Something different, something we haven't seen before."

Kitty walked across the grass, the others following her. Close up it seemed amazing that they'd thought the creature was a man. The clothing looked right, but the proportions of the limbs were all wrong, probably why its movements had unsettled her.

"Something new, it looks like a man, until you get close enough for it to kill you." Said Kitty.

Andy clicked on his comms device.

"This is Andy Korenberg. We've killed a new robot device. It looks like a man, but moves in the wrong way, you'll understand if you see one. Don't touch it if you find one.... And be very careful."

"Why no touching?" Asked Kitty.

"This is new, I didn't expect anything new until the main fleet arrived." Said Andy. "It's fairly certain they will eventually use various pathogens to try and wipe us out. I suppose really I'm just being a bit over cautious, it can't hurt."

"Be as over cautious as you want." Said Kitty. "This thing was waiting, like a mine ready to go off."

"The human race has had a billion years to build up memories of how we move..... If Kitty hadn't felt there was something wrong..... They're learning, the aliens are learning all the time." Said Pam.

Andy's communicator beeped. Shearman's voice boomed out, loud enough for them all to hear.

"About this..... Manlike thing you found. Are we cancelling the looting trip?"

Andy looked at them.

"Well, are we?" He asked.

"No, I'm not wearing Fifth West uniforms until doomsday." Said Pam. "We'll just be..... Fucking extra careful as we walk about."

"Did you hear that Shearman?" Asked Andy. "Carry on as you were, just be.....Extra fucking careful, alright?"

"Extra fucking careful it is sir."

Kitty consulted her map again.

"This way."

~ ~

Deb Newman had never been into cycling. She could see the health benefits and she understood they were better for the planet. It was just that to her, they would always be the annoying things that wobbled about in front of her car. Especially if she was late and trying to hurry.

"You must have noticed this place before Iris, when we've been out scavenging."

"Don't you dare suggest that we cycle to Filey young lady, not at my age."

Deb was tempted to play with the idea a little, perhaps show Iris a pair of spandex cycling shorts. She couldn't be that mean though, not so close to the old lady's birthday.

"There's certainly money in cycling, or at least there was, this place is huge."

"You're not getting me on a cycle." Snapped Iris.

"I've no intention of even trying..... Come on, we need to get inside and under cover."

The door had been forced open and inside a few displays had been rummaged through, mainly those of cycling clothing. Otherwise the shop was unmolested. It obviously took a pretty desperate character to find anything worth looting in a shop that sold bicycles.

"This is it, I've seen it so many times through the window, as I've walked past." Said Deb.

"What the hell is it?"

"A rickshaw Iris, a pedal driven rickshaw. Part of a sales display, but it probably still works, not a lot to go wrong really. Imagine me up the front, pedalling furiously. You'll be sat in the back on the seat, there's even a cover to keep the rain off you. Plus plenty of room in the back for our things."

"It looks like I'll freeze in there."

Iris seemed determined not to be pleased. Surprising as it gave her what she wanted, a way of getting to Filey without trudging on foot for twelve miles.

"Nonsense, we'll both be fine. I'll be nice and warm from all the exercise and you'll be sat inside, covered in a nest of blankets. You'll be snug as a bug in a rug."

The rickshaw was up on blocks, but when Deb pushed on a pedal, the back wheels moved.

"See it works and they've even repaired the cover. It's perfect Iris."

"The chain looks a bit rusty."

"Then I'll use one of the few dozen chain lubricant sprays I can see without moving."

"Hmmm I'll be very cold..... Maybe we should wait for spring." Said Iris.

Deb felt angry, though she did resist the urge to shout and scream a little. She liked Iris and she was getting to understand her strange foibles.

"Alright..... What is it?" She asked.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Going to Filey was your idea, I'm happy to stay at The Brambles. Not much of a long term plan I agree, but there is an alien invasion to be avoided. So why, after pestering me to move, have you suddenly gone lukewarm on the idea?"

"I never pester dear."

"Iris..... Tell me?"

"Well it is a strange looking thing isn't it ? You want me to sit in that..... I'll look ridiculous."

Despite quite a bit of growing anger, Deb had to laugh.

"So you're worried we might bump into someone you know ?" She asked.

"Don't laugh at me..... Strange foreign contraption. I don't want to be a laughing stock."

Deb could see her point, even if it was crazy and absurd.

"The chances of us meeting.....You've unsettled me now Iris, I'm quite keen on moving to Filey. So we either take the Rickshaw with us now and begin loading up our stuff, or.....We don't move at all. What will it be Iris ?"

"I suppose I could wear a large hat."

"So we're going ?"

"Yes, we're going.....In that dreadful contraption."

~ ~

The pilot was giving Inka and her children a funny look. He'd actually called someone to confirm that it wasn't a mistake and it was alright to take them into Central London. Pandora didn't blame him, it was an absurd decision to bring them, but everything about war is absurd.

"How bad are things in London ?" She asked him.

"Depends where you are." He replied. "In parts of the suburbs I've seen people out in their gardens, probably pruning the roses. Central London is bad though, worse after the army decided to make a stand near Bank Station."

"No pruning roses." Muttered Inka.

"Definitely no pruning roses..... You'll soon see for yourselves, not far to go." Said the pilot.

The helicopter didn't have any company logos anywhere, just the familiar Fifth West name on the outside. It was a warbird, probably a hybrid of some kind put together by JV's tech teams.

"Can she really go as fast as the speed of sound ?" Asked Ish.

"Not quite and definitely not today." Said the pilot. "You need to strap in now.....Mam, can you get your children strapped in nice and tight. Get the helmets on them too.....They're too large for them, but better than nothing."

"I'll help you." Said Dora.

Kata and Antun looked excited rather than scared. The body armour they wore was several sizes too big and their helmets wobbled about on their heads, but they were both grinning from ear to ear.

Dora grinned back, though she knew bringing two teenagers into a war zone was crazy, especially a hot war zone. They'd only just strapped in when the helicopter speeded up and seemed to turn on its side.

"Wow." Yelled Kata.

"Multiple saucer drones. Targeting the closest." Said the navigator.

They'd been introduced to the man in the second chair at the navigator. It seemed he had other duties, including targeting the Fifth West armoury of weapons on anything unfriendly. In films the sky always seemed to be full of flak, with the hero's aircraft making rapid movements to avoid it. Their helicopter was swerving about, though the sky appeared to be empty.

"Largest drone dropping chaff this time, they're learning." Said the navigator.

"Have you still got a lock on him ?" Asked the pilot.

"Of course I have."

The noise as the helicopter shuddered, sounded like someone turning on the most massive power switch in the world. A cross between a bang, a hum and a whine. At last Dora could see something happening, as a ball of fire filled the sky to their left, just over the pilot's shoulder.

"Three down..... More on the way." Said the navigator.

"Persistent little devils today." Said the pilot.

They dived, climbed again and seemed to lean far too far to the left. All the time the view in front of the pilot was full of flames. Dora even saw a saucer drone explode. A large one, a good thirty metres across, maybe larger.

"Don't undo your harness yet." Shouted the pilot. "Be ready though, the landing is likely to be under fire. Get out as quickly as you can, the entrance to the rear of the building will be on your left. You won't recognise much down there I'm afraid..... The fighting was intense."

"How did the army do?" Asked Ish.

"They didn't really.....I'm told the casualties were worse than a bad day on The Somme, poor bastards. Here we go, hold onto the kids.....This will be a fast descent."

Something struck the helicopter, the motors changed their sound slightly.

"I don't like this." Said Antun.

"Don't worry, he knows what he's doing." Said Dora.

Down went their helicopter, dropping like a stone. The sound of the motors changed again, becoming higher and higher pitched. It felt as though they'd never stop falling. Both of Inka's children were crying, it really did seem cruel to have brought them. They could have been safe in..... Dora couldn't think of anywhere at that moment, there had been talk about alien robots wiping out refugee centres.

"Please..... Make it stop." Said Inka.

Their aircraft gained forward speed, the motors sounds less high pitched, less like something about to explode. When Dora looked, they were flying so low that buildings were on either side of them. Blackened and ruined buildings, some still burning. In front of them was one perfect looking concrete tower, as if some miracle had saved it. Hated when it had been built, called a blot of the landscape of London.

"I never thought I'd be pleased to see the Centre Point building." Said Ish.

"Get ready, we're going to land." Shouted the pilot.

It all happened so fast, Dora felt caught up in a whirlwind of arms, mixed in with the crying faces of Inka's kids. The navigator opened the door and kept telling them to get out and do it quickly. More tears as Kata's harness caught on her leg. Ish dealt with that and they were outside, forming a heap of frightened people, all watching the helicopter climb away. Dora hadn't seen it happen, but the navigator must have thrown their bags out of the aircraft, they were in a dusty pile against the wall.

"Where are we?" Shrieked Inka.

Not just a wall behind them, a set of doors were almost flush with the grey metal wall.

"I can't see a handle." Said Ish.

A large saucer drone flew overhead, chasing after the helicopter. The children stopped crying and cheered as it blew apart, becoming nothing but a ball of flame. Dora felt like cheering herself, when the doors began to open.

"Come in, come in..... Don't worry about your bags, they'll be brought in."

Dora knew the voice, though part of her mind refused to believe who it was until she'd had a good look at the woman in the open doorway.

"Oh dear Dora, you look like you've seen a ghost." Said Penny.

Penny Brownie, her best friend from medical school was stood there, complete with lab coat and clipboard. It was surreal, Dora's mind still found it hard to believe.

"But..... When you left my house that morning....."

"I know, I told you volunteer work wasn't for me. I had a change of heart and gave a few people a call. To cut a very long story short, I met Jaroslav Verga. He is very good at talking people into things and..... Here I am."

Dora hugged her friend, who she never expected to see again. The feeling that it was all a bit unreal was still there, though it was fading.

"Come in, you must all be hungry." Said Penny. "We have the lab setup to do the analysis you requested..... Oh, you brought two children with you..... How wonderful."

With anyone else it would have been sarcasm, but not with Penny.

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Luis Lopez was still in shock from the death of his mother. There were definitely worse places to bury her than the pretty churchyard, yet it still felt wrong. No clergyman to say words over her, no heaps of flowers from grieving relatives. There probably weren't any living relatives left. Perhaps just a few like them, hiding in the middle of nowhere, living on junk food. He put his head in his hands and groaned.

"It'll get easier my dear, it just takes time." Said Jada. "Give it a few days and we'll leave this town and find somewhere else. Unless the next snow lies thick on the ground."

"I just wish I could lose the feeling that everything isn't real." Said Luis. "Every morning feels like a dream.....I wish I could wake up. Properly wake up."

Winter had arrived in a rush of snow, cold nights and overcast days. They'd begun retreating under a pile of blankets early in the evening, only to wake up far too early next morning.

"Once we leave here the memories will begin to fade." Said Jada. "Not just yours, I keep seeing that girl's face.... They seemed so nice."

"We can't leave if there's deep snow." He said. "Neither of us have winter clothing, or waterproof boots for that matter. This station is at least water proof and most importantly, it doesn't attract looters."

They should have planned for winter; it wasn't something that arrived as a surprise. With the loss of their home though and the aliens.....Luis imagined the aliens were coping with the winter weather better than they were.

"Alright, we'll stay here if the weather gets worse." Said Jada.

They'd rarely seen other people, just the occasional drifter looking in the looted corner shop over the road. Once it had been a couple, digging through the empty boxes and even emptier shelves. Luis knew the shop was empty; he'd already grabbed anything even vaguely useful.

"There's someone over there.....In the shop." He said.

Luis instinctively jumped back, which was upsetting. Actually there was nothing instinctive about it; the anxiety about strangers was new. Luis had never been that much of a people person, but he tended to get on well with the guests at the Girona Guest House. He'd never felt afraid of anyone or anything, until those kids had killed Valentina.

"Just a man on his own." Said Jada. "He'll move on once he finds nothing to eat."

The man over the road did look harmless. A scruffy beard and a filthy jacket, though he doubted if he looked much smarter. The problem was that the kids who'd killed his mother had looked just as harmless. The usual rules, signs and signals didn't seem to apply anymore.

“Supposing he wasn’t harmless.” Said Luis. “What if he was trying to break in here, what would we do ?”

“We still have the gun.”

“With just one bullet left.”

“He wouldn’t know that.”

“Alright, supposing there are three of them.” Said Luis. “You’ve shot one and the other two are still coming. What do we do ?”

“Stop it, you’re scaring me.”

“Good, because I’ve been scared since those kids killed Valentina. I don’t think I’m ever going to stop being afraid. We need other weapons.....Something heavy and sharp will do to start with.”

He hadn’t really meant to terrify his wife, though it was too late to say that. She took a large knife out a drawer. A wicked looking knife with a long serrated edge to the blade.

“I’ve had this since the basement where we found the gun.” Said Jada. “Alright, who do I start stabbing with it ? Anyone who looks at us a bit too long ? Anyone who walks a bit too close to our door ? Who Luis, who do we start killing so that we feel safe ?”

An unfair question that had no proper answer, yet he felt the need to give her some sort of answer.

“We’ll know, of course we will.” He said. “The way they look and behave, we’ll know.”

She was actually waving the knife at him, the woman who’d given him two sons.

“Don’t you dare say that.” She yelled. “We look different to most of the people here, we’re the strangers who don’t belong.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.... You know I’m not a racist or anything like that Jada.”

“Do I know that ? I’m beginning to wonder.”

“This is crazy..... We can all tell if someone is bad. You just know.”

It wasn’t helping, he could see she was just becoming more and more angry. Jada threw the knife back in the drawer, slamming it closed. His wife was wagging a finger at him, one of the worst signs that she was seriously angry with him.

“You.....” She snapped. “You know the majority of people are decent, you’ve told me that often enough.”

“Things have changed, it’s dog eat dog now.”

“No..... The aliens have killed a lot of people, but deep down. Those like us, the ones just trying to survive are the same people they always were.”

“Sorry dear, but you’re talking nonsense.” He said.

“Right, I’ll prove it to you. It’ll be me first back through that door....Not going to shoot me are you ? After all, I might have become one of the dog eaters.”

“Jada..... Please. There’s no need for all.....”

No good, she’d hurtled out into the cold dressed only in a skirt and a light blouse. The door slammed, leaving him to wonder what she intended to do. It took her half an hour to return, the man must have left the corner shop and moved on.

“Luis, this is Oliver.” She said.

Oliver didn’t seem quite so harmless close up. He was tall, far taller than either of them. Younger too and probably stronger. Luis could feel his hands shaking as Oliver held his out to be shaken.

“Hi, I’m Oliver Reece.”

“Luis..... Luis Lopez.”

He had kind eyes, the man they’d thought looked harmless. A good firm handshake with no macho nonsense about squeezing his fingers until the joints ached.

"I'm sure Jada has already introduced herself.....My better half."

"Yes, she me invited back for a hot drink. You have tea I believe, real tea."

"We firmly believe that if you look after life's little luxuries, the essential will look after themselves." Said Jada.

It had been a silly risk bringing Oliver back with her, though Luis knew why she'd done it. They made him a cup of Earl Grey and sat around, like getting to know a new neighbour. All that was missing was a freshly baked cake and gossip about the best schools and shops.

"Are you from around here ?" Asked Luis.

"No, on my way through. I have a family in Torquay, though I have heard the fighting was pretty bad there."

"It was, we had a guest house in Torquay." Said Jada. "Nothing left of it now."

"Not much left of Torquay." Added Luis.

"Still..... I have to try." Said Oliver.

"Yes, you have to try." Agreed Luis.

"You have to stay tonight." Said Jada. "This old station was built well, there are no draughty windows and it keeps surprisingly warm."

Luis no longer feared Oliver, though part of him hoped their new friend didn't decided to stay for too long. He needn't have worried.

"That would be nice, just for tonight..... In the morning I must be on my way again."

It was humbling, the way Oliver treated the food they all shared. To them it was cold beans and burgers, followed by cold rice pudding. Their guest treated it all like a banquet and it became obvious that Oliver hadn't eaten that many decent meals recently.

"I have something..... Never arrive anywhere without a gift my mum used to say." Said Oliver.

He had the obligatory back pack with a bedroll and blankets on top of it, all wrapped up in plastic supermarket bags. Oliver dug about in his pack, finally producing a long thin box.

"They were right in the middle of a shelf in a looted Sainsburys." Said Oliver. "Maybe the looters were allergic to peppermint. The use by date is a bit iffy, but I've eaten a few, they're fine."

"We've all learned to ignore use by dates." Said Jada.

A large box of Kendal Mint Cake, the smell of peppermint filled the room. Jada took a piece first, proclaiming it to be the perfect way to end a good meal. His wife was looking at him, he could almost see her thoughts after decades of marriage, sharing the same bed.

"See.....People are still basically alright."

Talk soon turned to the invasion. They sat there for hours, nibbling at mint cake and exchanging horror stories about the alien invasion.

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Matt Newman thought his team needed a spot of R & R, good old fashioned rest and recuperation. Not for long, they needed to investigate the strange goings on at Ramingining. The people in Canberra loved them, though Matt knew that might be a fairly fleeting thing. Two days wasn't much to ask for and he'd been given permission to give them a breather. There was one obvious question. "Where do we go ? Come on Owen you know the Northern Territories better than most."

Despite being given a weapon and a little money, Owen was still with them. He seemed eager to get to grips with the aliens at Ramingining, no matter what they might be doing.

"Depends..... Do you want a beach or somewhere inland ?"

"A beach would be nice." Said Brenda.

"There's Croc Island, only about twenty miles from Ramingining." Said Owen.

“Let me guess, it’s knee deep in crocs..... Right ?” Asked Matt.

“Well..... There’s a fair few of them, but there’s a decent beach.” Said Owen. “Plus the place is impossible to get too without a boat or a helicopter, so we shouldn’t be disturbed.”

“How many crocs are there Owen ? Rough numbers ?” Asked Bren.

“Twice as many crocs as there are people in that area.” Said Duncan.

Owen just nodded his agreement. Matt liked the proximity to the next part of their mission and a few hungry crocs would deter anyone from wandering too far. He wasn’t one to talk to everyone and reach a consensus.

“Alright..... Get everyone packed up..... We’re going to Croc Island.”

Just before dusk they arrived on Crocodile Island, owned by the Yan-nhaṅu people of the Northern Territory of Australia. In theory they needed a pass of some kind to be there, but that had been before the alien invasion had begun. Ahead of them were two full days of fun. To some that would mean digging out the bottle of brandy they’d been saving since Christmas. For Matt it meant finding a comfy spot well away from the salt water crocs and doing nothing for two days, not a damn thing.

“Get a few sentry devices set up.” He ordered. “Then everyone can relax.”

He could see a large salt water croc, wandering along the beach, just at the high tide mark. It was huge, like a scaly tank on legs.

“How dangerous are they Owen ?”

“Not dangerous at all if they don’t bite you. The trick is to stay away from them and not get bitten.”

“Not reassuring Owen, not reassuring at all.” Said Duncan.

“Set the sentry bots in a nice wide circle, they’ll spot a hungry croc looking for a meal.” Said Matt.

It was greener than he’d expected, lot of bushes and crab grass. A few mature trees too, more than they’d seen for days. On the whole and hoping no one ended up as croc food, it was a good place to relax for a couple of days.

“Look..... Look up.” Said Bren.

Not quite fully dark, yet the sky was illuminated with thousands of shooting stars. Some small, some large, some lighting up the sky for miles.

“It’s the main invasion, must be.” Said Duncan.

“No, that’s still months away.” Said Matt. “This probably happens most night, if you’re in the right place to see it. The next wave of asteroids carrying robots and drones, maybe even the occasional device to block the power in a city somewhere. The main invasion will be worse, far worse, it’ll fill the sky around the clock for weeks.”

“It makes me think..... We can’t win.” Said Duncan.

“We have to try though.” Said Bren.

“Yes, we have to try.” Said Matt.

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