

Ishmael

Chapter 24 – The Armada

“Matt Newman had always thought he’d survive every battle he was in, every firefight. It was the way many soldiers handled the danger and stress, and it was usually nothing but well managed denial.”



Pandora Gray sat under the trees in Green Park, using a crate of equipment as a seat. London felt familiar in some ways and like a stranger in others. The trees were still there, though some had lost their leaves. The birds still sang in the trees, there were even a few squirrels playing in the grass. Even parts of Piccadilly looked as they always had done for at least a hundred years.

“Not long now Biff.” Said Ish. “The helicopters should be here any second.”

“I used to love this park Ish. Now there are bodies here, though we’re all pretending we can’t see them. An entire row of buildings has gone too, as though they’d never been there. Seeing destruction elsewhere was bad enough, but this.....”

Inka’s children were having a tussle, less than fifty feet from what had to be the remains of what had once been a person. In Green Park of all places.

“I’ve been wondering about my mum.” Said Ish. “For a long time I assumed she was still out there, helping old ladies panic buy from supermarkets. Now.....I’m not sure when I started thinking differently, but I now assume she’s gone.”

“I haven’t thought about my parents for weeks.” She said. “Like you, for a long time I thought they’d be alright. I assumed mum was out doing a freelance piece on the top twenty foods to eat during an alien invasion. As for dad..... He was too ordinary for anything bad to happen to him. Now though, you’re right.....Something has changed and I accept that they’re both probably dead.”

Ish held her hand.

“I suppose we should both be grateful that we’re only children.” He said. “No brothers and sisters to worry about.”

“I would have liked to have had a sister.” She said. “Mum was crap when it came to discussing problems..... You know.... Girl stuff.”

“I can see the helicopters.” Yelled Kata.

“Saved by the helicopter, from talk about girl stuff.” Said Ish.

She playfully thumped him and together they picked up the really precious crate, the one with the samples from Horace inside. Not that it was labelled up to indicate the contents, just a hand written label with ‘Bio Samples 66d11,’ written on it. Kata came over and gave them a hand.

“No sign of the aliens.” She said. “It has to be a good sign.”

“They might not have seen us.” Said Dora. “Or have better things to do today. We still need to keep watching the sky.”

“I know.”

It really did seem that for once they were having a spell of good luck. No sign of any alien drones, crazy people, or anything trying to eat them. It took a long time to get the equipment crates onto the helicopters and secured. All the time expecting an attack that never came.

“We waited on the ground near Vauxhall Bridge.” Said the helicopter pilot. “We didn’t see any alien activity at all, not even one solitary drone. That is rare, so rare it’s unheard of.”

“Oh, I do hope they’ve gone home.” Said Inka. “All the aliens gone forever.”

“Who’s gone forever ?” Asked Penny.

“Inka was just joking about the aliens.” Said Ish.

“Not a suitable thing to joke about.” Said Penny.

Not now, but Dora was going to have it out with her old friend once they were in Filey. Penny Brownie simply wasn’t her old self anymore. Dora blamed JV for giving her old friend control of the London laboratory. It was too much, too soon, for someone with a few control issues. She was going to get Penny good and drunk and try a little therapy. Her old friend was still in there somewhere, she just needed digging out.

“Anyway..... I’m travelling on the second helicopter.” Said Penny.

No one gave a sigh of relief, though Dora could have sworn she heard it. After Penny had gone, Ish rolled his eyes at her.

“I will do something about her, I promise.” She whispered to him.

Five minutes later the helicopters rose into the air and headed north.

“Will we be travelling faster than sound ?” Asked Antun.

“We might, somewhere over Birmingham.” Said the pilot. “I’ll let you know when.”

“Oh wow.”

Of course he was now going to ask if they were over Birmingham every ten minutes, but it was worth it for the smile on the boy’s face.

“See, not a drone in sight.” Said the pilot. “My guess is that they’re up to something, planning something really big and nasty.”

“I hope you’re wrong.” Said Kata.

Dora hoped so too, though JV was sure the big invasion was on the way, the armada of huge alien spacecraft. London looked remarkably peaceful, apart from where the smoke from fires rose into the air. Whole streets of buildings had gone, reduced to rubble in battles no one would probably remember. She’d heard the army had fought bravely. They’d been out gunned by a more technologically advanced enemy. Dora had heard the losses had been dreadful.

“They’ve done so much damage.” Said Ish. “So much has gone.”

It was a relief when the helicopters climbed, leaving the roads of North London to look like a street map below them. The smoke was still visible though and the dark patches were rows of houses had once stood.

“Are we over Birmingham yet ?” Asked Antun.

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Matt Newman had always thought he’d survive every battle he was in, every firefight. It was the way many soldiers handled the danger and stress, and it was usually nothing but well managed denial. For some reason the idea that he was going to survive and travel back to Britain, refused to be labelled as wishful thinking or a delusion. He knew it, with all the certainty that he knew breathing out followed breathing in.

“Here they come.” Said Bren.

“Crap, there are thousands of them.” Said Duncan.

The alien drones, robots and strange biological machines had ignored them completely. Until they’d crossed an invisible line in the dirt, about half a mile from the huge landing site structure. Now everything was heading towards them, though the saucer shaped drones were going to arrive first.

“Don’t panic..... We know our weapons can destroy them.” Said Matt.

The bronze coloured drones filled the sky. Like a solar eclipse they blocked out the light from the sun as they approached. Bren probably wanted to tell him the attack was a mistake, but she didn't. There she was, head right up against the comms unit, relaying his orders to everyone.

"Move slowly, let them come to us." He shouted.

He knew the Fifth West weapons worked, he'd seen them bring down dozens of drones, maybe hundreds. Matt heard the electrical buzz as the soldiers fired and breathed a sigh of relief as vast numbers of drones fell from the sky.

"Lizards approaching.....Use Penetrating rounds HD7." Shouted a unit commander.

The number and variety of their enemies were large, and most required a different type of weapon, loaded with a specific type of ammunition. Easy to do against a low scale attack. Confronted with the number of enemies approaching, mistakes were inevitable. Matt had ordered all unit leaders to call out the correct ammunition to use and keep calling it out.

Success at destroying the drones brought its own risks. A large thirty metre wide saucer crashed into the troops to his left, sending many of them hurtling high into the air. No screams from the wounded, Matt knew those would begin after the shock wore off. He signed for Bren to kneel and knelt next to her, almost shouting into her ear.

"Remind everyone that we've no medics, everyone fights. No one is to stop and look after the wounded. Tell them it's my order."

Her eyes could have called him a bastard, but they didn't. Bren knew they simply didn't have the manpower or resources to look after the fallen. If anyone survived, the wounded would be looked after once the battle was over. As Bren shouted his orders into the mic, he stood up and carried on walking. The battle was being fought all around him, yet he felt removed from it. He had a pistol and an assault rifle over his shoulder, both useless against the alien machines. The war was being fought by the Fifth West soldiers using Fifth West weapons. The problem was there simply weren't enough of them. The noise of battle wasn't helping; it was pure luck when he heard Duncan shouting.

"Those.....Christ, have they turned people into machines?"

To Matt they'd been bumps in the ground. If he'd looked carefully, he might have thought they were the remains of those who'd once lived in Ramingining. Perhaps they were, though it didn't stop them getting to their feet. Four rows of them, evenly spaced and spread right across their path. Matt knelt and reached for his assault rifle, as he saw two soldiers fall to the ground.

"What happened Bren? I didn't see it." He shouted.

He turned and Bren Grundy was some distance away, still yelling into the comms unit. Luckily she'd been born with a good loud voice that carried.

"It's carrying a stick or something that must be a weapon." She shouted. "I'm just warning all the squad leaders."

He could see it now, the thin narrow stick each of them carried. One of the things that looked like men aimed its stick and another soldier fell to the ground. Without much hope of achieving anything, Matt fired a few rounds at the creature. It went down and stayed down. Bren was by his side by then, he could hear her giving instructions to their troops.

"Assault rifle fire kills them." She yelled. "I repeat.... Ordinary bullets kill them."

"That has to be a first." Said Matt. "They must have run out of super tough lizards."

"Never tempt fate like that." She said.

She was pointing past him, towards at least a dozen of the huge gecko like creatures. They were slowly but surely crawling over the ground, moving towards them. In a way he preferred them to the things that looked like zombie humans. The giant lizards were a known quantity. It was new threats

that really worried him. The sky above them became clear of drones. There had been so many that the daylight definitely improved as they flew away. Not that he was cheering.

"I know....They're leaving to wipe out Base Crawford." He said.

Another opportunity to tell him he was wrong. Another opportunity to say I told you so. Bren said nothing; she just looked at him and nodded.

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Night time in Kent and the Bates family were all in the garden. Another one in a series of particularly cold nights, their ritual required putting on coats and an extra layer of clothing. Tirsia didn't care if their nightly ritual became a permanent fixture, though it would be nicer once the warmer weather arrived.

"I always feel I should say something." Said Zane.

"You don't have to, I'm sure Tonya knows you're here and knows you care." Said her mum.

Tirsia wasn't sure if she believed that, though she'd rather die than admit that to her mum. To her it was important for them to come outside as a family. Usually just before bed, they'd sit on a long bench together and look at Tonya's grave. That felt comforting and the right thing to do. Tirsia couldn't put into words why it felt right, she just thought it was a pity that before the invasion, people didn't bury their loved ones close by. If nothing else, it brought them all together to discuss the events of the day and future plans.

"We've three rooms full of tins and dry food." Said her dad. "Is it worth doing two trips a day to the supermarket now ? There are risks involved with every full trolley."

"Others have discovered the supermarket." Said Tirsia. "We saw the young couple there again yesterday. They've never been hostile, but they've never been friendly either."

"They're taking more tins than we are now." Added her brother. "Soon there won't be much food worth taking."

"If your sister's death should have taught us one thing." Said her mum. "It's that there are no doctors anymore, or hospitals. None of us are indestructible. Just do two more trips to the supermarket and then stop going."

"But there still so much there mum."

"You mean hair products don't you ?" Asked her dad. "I've already lost one child and I don't want to risk the life of another because of a few bottles of shampoo."

"It's not just shampoo dad."

Having really nice hair meant a lot to her. It meant being normal, being pretty. It was a way of clinging to a little bit of her old life, when she'd been with all her school friends. Her mum whispered to her dad, which went against all the rules of their nightly ritual. Not that she was going to tell her parents they were breaking the rules. Her dad smiled at her, which was usually a good sign.

"Thank your mum, she told me how important these things are to you." Said her dad. "One more day getting food and then the next day you can fill the trolley with what you want. Just one trip mind you, and you have to be very careful."

"Oh, I will dad.... Very careful.... Thank you." She said.

"Anything I want ?" Asked her brother.

It was her mum's turn to look concerned, though her dad was still smiling.

"Anything you like, you've both worked hard to fill our larder." He said.

Her mum probably saw them first, though in a few seconds they were all looking up at the sky. A clear cold night, the thousands of shooting stars were giving them an impressive display. Tirsia understood what was happening, when something large moved across the sky. It looked like planet

Earth had gained another moon, actually not just one, there were three of them. Probably much closer than the moon, though they still had to be huge.

"It's them, the full invasion the people on the news kept talking about." Said her dad.

"When there still was news. We should go inside." Said her mum.

"I think the aliens will have picked their targets." Said her dad. "And I can't see them hurrying to attack the Bates family."

"Can we still go to the supermarket?" Asked Zane.

More whispering between her parents and this time her mum gave their decision.

"Alright, but after that we're all going to stay around the house." She said. "The garden will soon need a lot of care."

"Hopefully if we mind our own business, the aliens will leave us alone." Added her dad.

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Helen Lopez had noticed something odd about the air for a while, more something missing than anything unpleasant. Realisation hit her as they trudged across a field, heading towards a fairly dilapidated farmhouse. Mateo and their children claimed to understand what was wrong with the air; Tina had even teased her about it.

"Oh yes, of course." Said Helen. "The constant tickle at the back of my throat has gone and the strange smell of bad cabbage when I sneeze."

"That smell.....Really nasty mum." Said Tina. "I'm glad that has gone."

"So, you've realised?" Asked Mateo.

"We spent so long in recycled air." Said Helen. "In the end I suppose I never questioned it. The odd smell in the air, the constant stream of muck at the back of my throat."

"We all noticed it mum, you'll have to get used to fresh air again." Said Tina.

"Fresh air." Shouted Tom.

"Some of the medical team were quite worried about the long term effect on our sinuses." Said Mateo. "All behind us now though."

All good news as long as they could find food and shelter. The old farmhouse didn't look likely to provide either that well, but it would do for one night. Mateo banged on the door, just in case someone was living there.

"Hello, anyone there?" He shouted.

The door was open, it had moved back as he'd thumped it. The building looked like an empty ruin, but Helen was learning to be cautious.

"Be careful." She said.

She remained with the children, while Mateo entered the house. She could hear him deliberately bashing about and shouting. There were a few worrying minutes of silence before he walked out of the farmhouse. He looked shaken, leaning against the doorframe for a few seconds.

"Are you alright?" She asked.

"What was in there?" Asked Tina.

"We need to find somewhere else."

"But..... Is it dry? Surely it would do for one night?" Asked Helen.

Mateo looked at her and the kids in such an odd way.

"Trust me, we need to find somewhere else."

Helen had no idea where Mateo thought he was heading as he trudged off through the trees. After about twenty minutes of following him up a fairly steep hill, she decided he'd been left alone with his thoughts for long enough.

“Are you heading for anywhere in particular ?” She asked.

“No, not a clue where we’re going. This is Devon though..... Walk in a straight line for a couple of miles and you’re bound to find something. With luck it might be a café with fresh coffee and muffins.”

“Don’t talk about food.....Now you’ve made me feel hungry.” She said.

Mateo was back to his old self, hugging her and laughing.

“I’ve got chocolate, lots of chocolate.” Said Tina.

She was holding about four confectionary bars, most of them covered in her favourite thing; chocolate.

“You said to pack a few essentials.” Said Tina.

“Not what I had in mind.” Said Mateo. “Though now I think about it..... They were the perfect thing to put in your backpack. Where did you get them all ?”

Their daughter was looking guilty and Tom was laughing his weird gurgling laugh.

“Did you steal them ?” Asked Helen.

“Tina has lots of chocolate.” Said Tom.

Ray had imposed rationing on a wide range of items and much of it seemed punitive, rather than genuinely to conserve supplies. One item strictly rationed had been confectionary, Tina’s beloved chocolate bars.

“No one takes any notice of us, me and Tom.” Said Tina. “I only took a few at a time..... There’s enough for everyone..... Do you want one ?”

Helen looked into the bulging backpack that was completely full of sweets. Ignoring the whole theft thing, the most worrying thing was the number that included nuts.

“Careful with these Tina, you know you can’t eat nuts.”

“Oh, they’re for Tom.”

Their hyperactive daughter could be..... Trying sometimes. Yes, trying was definitely the right word. Deep down though, Tina had a genuine heart of gold. Helen took a choc bar out of the backpack and gave one full of peanuts to Tom. Everyone simply stood there and chewed for a while.

“Wow, that was so good.” Said Mateo.

“I knew when the world ended, there’d still be chocolate.” Said Helen.

“It’s not ended yet.” Said Mateo.

At the top of the hill, just when she was about to suggest they tried another direction, they could see the steeple of a church in the distance.

“Where there’s a church there’s a village.” Said Mateo.

There were definitely other buildings, she could see quite a few rooftops through the trees. So much must have happened while they were in the bunker. Helen wasn’t sure if she liked the idea of exploring an unknown village. Better that though than going hungry and sleeping in abandoned barns. As usual, Tina broke her train of thought.

“I need to pee mum.”

“Alright, but hide behind the closest bushes.”

“Oh mum.”

“And take your brother, he probably needs to pee too.”

“No way.”

“Yes.....You need to look after each other.”

“Oh !”

Tina was a good flouncer, she could have won medals for it. She took Tom with her though. Now Helen had Mateo alone.

"Alright, what did you see in that farmhouse ?" She asked.

"You really don't want to know."

"I do, tell me."

"We both knew her, Maureen from Town Planning. I think you met her and her husband a few times."

"Do you mean Maureen Sands ?" She asked.

"Yes, she was in the bunker with her husband and three kids. I saw her a few times, but they were in a different section to us. They must have been part of Marjorie's plan to escape from the bunker."

"I'm still not really understanding where this is going." She said.

Mateo was crying. Not the sort of crying that meant a wet face and lots of noise. There were a few drops coming from his left eye and they were running down his cheek.

"They were in the kitchen of that farmhouse." Said Mateo. "All sat on the floor, all of them dead.

The husband did it, I can't remember his name. Shot the children, Maureen and then put the gun to his own head."

She hugged him, it seemed the right thing to do.

"Why do that ? They were out of the bunker and free."

"I don't know, how would I know ? Some people react differently to things I suppose." Said Mateo.

"We can't tell the kids, I think Tina was friends with Maureen's eldest."

"I agree.... Dreadful, really dreadful." She said.

Tina was pulling a face when she came back, but she was holding her brother's hand.

"Stay together when we get to the village." Said Mateo. "Remember that not everyone in the world is nice. Yes, I am looking at you when I say that Tina."

"I'm not silly Dad, I know some people are bad."

"Good..... Come on, with luck we'll find somewhere safe to sleep tonight."

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Owen wasn't in command, though the conversation with Matt Newman seemed to have implied he was to be their guru, or perhaps their holy man. The phrase 'you'll have,' had been repeated many times.

"I can't give you much in the way of resources." Matt had told him. "You'll have a few weapons and four of the Australian soldiers who were wounded in the fighting at Maningrida. Tough guys though, one survived having an arm amputated."

It seemed their main tactic was going to be stealth, keeping away from the aliens and heading south. To where in the south ? Owen had been given a map, though mention of a preferred destination had been a little vague.

"We know if you go east or west there are alien forces." Matt had said. "Go north and you'll hit the ocean. South is really your only choice Owen. You'll have the old bus to take the frail and young kids. Everyone else will have to walk. To be honest..... Your best bet is to merge in with the other people of the Northern Territory. You told me you'd done that before."

Owen had tried to explain that merging a few people from Maningrida was different to trying to find long term shelter for the entire population of Ramingining. Then there was the question of food once there were no more ration drops. Still....Even if he wasn't officially in charge, Owen currently had everyone hiding out near the rubbish dump.

“Keep the kids from running about Bill.” Said Owen. “Everyone needs to be behind or under something and they need to keep still.”

“Alright, I’ll get it done. Everyone is scared.” Said Bill.

Bill Murphy had lost his left arm, amputated in the back of a moving truck. Some local anaesthetic, but he’d been awake for the surgery. He was tough and didn’t mind yelling at the civilians. That was good, it might save a few lives.

“Get those kids under cover.” Yelled Bill. “The dump diggers aren’t going to move.....Get a few people behind them.”

The yelling and pestering would continue until Owen was happy the alien drones were unlikely to see them. It was all a risk though, everything was a risk. They were throwing the dice, he was throwing the dice. Two sixes and they’d all be heading south the next day. Throw snake eyes and they’d all be dead.

“Oh Matt, I hope I don’t screw this up. I’m too old for all this.” He muttered.

There would be an attack on Base Crawford, Matt and Brenda weren’t certain about a lot of things, but they were certain about that.

“It might be payback, we can’t really know how they think.” Bren had told him. “They will hit our base though, it’s what we’d do if we were them. Knock out our base and any reserve forces we might have.”

When Bill came and sat down next to him, Owen took a good hard look at where everyone was hiding. Good, he could only see one human hand poking out from under a digger and that was only because he was at the same height off the ground. The dump was about as far as you could get from the school building they’d repurposed as Base Crawford. Actually the dump was furthest you could go south, without running out of town. With luck the drones would obliterate the base without seeing them.

“Good, everyone’s well hidden.” He told Bill. “Let’s hope they stay like that.”

It was a hot morning and Owen hadn’t slept well the night before. He was a civilian though, even Brenda had acknowledged that. Besides, falling asleep wasn’t a crime.

“We can’t order you to do this Owen.” She’d told him. “They need you though, all the people who used to live in this town.”

Of course there was no way for him to say no, they were his people. Something brought him out of a dream, a sound perhaps, or Bill being restless.

“They’re coming.” Whispered Bill, as though the drones might hear him.

A crackle, that must have been the sound that had spoiled his dream, though he could no longer remember what the dream had been about. The first wave of drones flew unopposed over Base Crawford, using their laser weapons to destroy it.

“Crap.... They don’t piss about.” Said Bill.

The sky seemed to be full of drones, maybe over a hundred of them. They were all way out to the west of town, before they turned and headed back towards the smoking remains. There was always that electrical crackle as the huge drones turned.

“They got the refuelling truck.” Said Bill.

A few had headed north, turning the refuelling truck into another burning wreck, another plume of black smoke rising over the town.

“Damn, that could have been useful.” Said Owen.

The second run by the drones totally destroyed Base Crawford, yet the flying machines turned and came back for a third time. Not content with leaving a burning ruin where the old school house had

been, they destroyed every barely intact vehicle in the vicinity. The miracle happened though, the one Owen had been hoping for. He waited, not wanting to tempt fate, or luck, or whatever deity might have shoved the dice to land in their favour.

“They didn’t see us.....They didn’t fucking see us.” Said Owen.

As the last saucer shaped craft vanished toward the east, Owen wanted to do a little dance for joy. He couldn’t though, just in case they came back.

“Keep everyone hidden; they can sleep where they are.” He told Bill. “We’ll leave at first light in the morning.”

“Some will need to take a crap.”

“Get them to ask first and make sure they don’t wander too far.”

“I get all the good jobs.” Said Bill.

“And no lights, no one is to use flashlights for anything.”

No group exclamation of shock accompanied the sight of the craft dropping through the clouds. For all Owen knew he might well have been the first to notice it. It was coming from the west, losing height as it came. A sphere, though not a perfect one. Large structures stuck out of it, ruining the smooth lines. In some places there were gaps in the blueish outer skin of the sphere, probably to allow drones to enter and leave.

“It’s the main invasion, they’re early.” Said Owen.

“They said it wouldn’t arrive for months.” Said Bill.

“Well, they obviously got it wrong. No change of plans, we’ll still leave in the morning and head south.”

The size of the sphere only became apparent when it was still moving through the clouds, yet seemed to be skimming the trees at the same time. Probably all an illusion cause by the sheer size of the thing, but Owen wanted to duck as it passed over Ramingining. He wasn’t the only one. No need to tell people to keep hidden, some were trying to dig foxholes in the dirt with their bare hands.

“They’re not after us.....Tell them Bill.” Said Owen. “We know where it’s going. It’s going to the landing site.”

As Bill yelled at the civilians, Owen hoped Matt and the soldiers weren’t still anywhere near the invasion landing site.

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Gene Lindine was trying not to feel insulted about not being in the party sent to Filey with Andy Korenberg. Pam and Richard had to go of course, which had left a choice between him and Kitty MacLaren. They’d tossed a coin for it and his lack of luck at coin tosses was legendary. Kitty had called tails and of course the coin had landed tails side up. Actually it was a European coin with a head on one side and a fountain on the other. He’d lost though, even if it was a damn fountain.

“I’m going outside for a bit.” He said.

“You’ll freeze your balls off out there.”

The young engineer was one of theirs, a post graduate student from Base Albion. He wasn’t keen on the cold and viewed every trip outside as likely to freeze someone’s balls off. Some of the other survivors of Base Albion had taken to calling him Kenny Balls Off. Gene spent a good ten minutes getting his coat, gloves and scarf ready for a trip outside into the Scandinavian winter. In many ways it reminded him of getting into an atmosphere suit to go out onto the lunar surface. He stepped outside and the cold wind bit at his cheeks.

“Christ ! Kenny Balls Off might be right.” He muttered.

For a base geared up for the big one, the main armada, no one kept a regular watch on the night sky. The main alien fleet was known to be months away and even then, they weren't likely to spend hours looking up. There were active scanners using various types of radar. Those would light them up as a target for alien devices and drones. Gene couldn't quite believe his eyes when the dark northern sky was filled with shooting stars. At first he put it down to just a busy night for aliens. Replacing the few devices mankind had managed to destroy, topping up drone numbers in key areas. Gene saw just a hint of larger craft than the usual asteroids. Light from the moon or perhaps they were still far enough away to catch a few rays from the sun. He wasn't imagining it though, huge alien spacecraft were arriving, and some of them were probably going to land.

"They're early..... That'll piss off Andy." He muttered.

He liked Andy, though there was a certain smugness about the guy. Plus he was their boss now and everyone likes to piss off the boss. Gene thought about going back inside and raising some sort of alarm. What good would that do though? There were no planetary defences, no chance of beating the alien invasion. Andy was carrying out the only plan likely to save mankind. They were constructing the Diaspora 8 craft to escape Earth, to run away.

"Be nice to have a closer look though."

There was a telescope at the top of the building with the blue dome. Nothing that powerful, just an old telescope on a tripod that Andy kept in small room right at the top of the dome. Hardly worthy of being called an observatory, though shutters opened to give a three hundred and sixty degree view of the night sky. Cold of course in the winter, but Gene had stopped noticing the cold.

"Crap.....It's as big as the moon."

He knew it was an illusion caused by relative distances. His intellect knew that, but something made it terrifying, something almost visceral. It looked as though there was a new moon in the night sky. An artificial moon that hadn't been constructed by humans. Gene risked running over ice to get to the building with the blue dome, where Andy had his office.

"They're here! The main invasion has arrived."

He shouted at the two security guards who were playing cards on the front desk. Gene actually thumped the elevator button so hard that he hurt his hand. Then the doors took an age to close.

"Calm down you idiot." He mumbled at himself.

By the time the elevator reached the top floor, alarms were going off. One of the guards had wiped the condensation off a window, or braved having his balls frozen off outside. Everyone would soon be running about like headless chickens, achieving nothing. There was nothing they could do, apart from hiding and hoping to finish the project before the aliens found them.

"Shit."

There was a simple four digit key code to get access to the spiral staircase that went up to the roof. He'd been on the roof a few times, but Kitty MacLaren had always entered the code. She'd even made a comment about Andy hating remembering codes for doors.

"I don't think he changed it from the default setting." She'd once told him.

Gene entered four ones and the door opened. Young, fit and still far too hyped up, he ran up the steel stairs. As he opened the door at the top of the stairs, the wind hit him. There was probably nothing between him and the cold blast straight off the arctic tundra. No lock on what was effectively a brick shed built on the roof. It was cold in there and opening the shutters would make it worse. His communicator buzzed in his pocket.

"Gene.... Have you heard the news?" Asked Shearman.

"Yes, I told your guys. Nothing we can do, so turn off the alarms and let everyone get back to sleep."

“Mr Verga needs to be informed.”

“If he’s anywhere with a window he’ll already know.”

“So there’s nothing we can do ?”

Gene hadn’t liked Shearman, until he’d seen another side of him during their rare shopping expeditions. Actually looting expeditions was more accurate. Sherman had a well-hidden humorous side to his nature. Plus he looked after the students and so far, they’d never lost anyone while looking for supplies. Gene understood Shearman’s need to do something, anything.

“I’m in Andy’s observatory.” Said Gene. “About to look at what’s heading for Earth. Come and join me if you want.”

“On my way.”

Once the shutters were open the temperature dropped considerably. The old telescope was designed to cope with it better than him. An old refracting telescope, probably two hundred years old, maybe even older. A museum piece really. Gene removed the lens covers and looked through the eyepiece, while aiming at the sky to the north.

“I’m useless at focusing this damn.....”

What he saw shocked him, causing him to wonder if even JV was capable of saving mankind. He forgot about the cold and Shearman found him sitting on the floor, head on his knees.

“What’s wrong ?”

“Don’t move it.....Look through the telescope.”

It seemed to take Shearman a while to work out what he was looking at. Eventually the gasp came, Gene knew it would.

“What the hell is that ?”

“A small hollowed out moon.” Said Gene. “The only feasible way to visit other solar systems, according to Andy. He had plans for mankind to use the same idea to explore our galaxy. Before the world went silent, the Indian Space Research Organisation saw three of them out near Jupiter. They’re early by the way, something made them speed up.”

“How big are they ?”

“Twenty or thirty kilometres in diameter.” Said Gene. “I did wonder if Ishmael had it wrong, but this proves he was right. Three hollowed out moons of that size.....There could be billions of them, the entire population of their planet. Can I have another look ?”

“Yes, of course.”

There was a sense of unreality as he looked through the telescope. There it was, the grand plan of Andy’s for mankind to visit other solar systems. What he could see owed nothing to mankind though. The aliens had used the same idea, there might even be an alien version of Andy inside one of those moons.

“Did you see the smaller spheres moving close to it ?” Asked Gene.

“Yes, there’s quite a few of them.”

“Each of those is a vessel of the armada, probably containing millions of their soldiers. All tucked inside the hollowed out moon for decades. Now those will land on Earth, spilling out.... Who knows what. I think we’re in for some nasty surprises. Each of those craft is probably half a mile in diameter, maybe even bigger.”

“Now I know why Andy was planning to find a new home for us.” Said Shearman.

“Oh yes, we can’t win against them. Andy Korenberg has been right all along. We have to leave Earth and find a new planet, a new home.”

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