

Ishmael

Chapter 3 - Induction

“Pam looked at the map of the side of the moon which constantly faced the Earth. About half the bases built on that side of the moon had neat red crosses through them, there had been a lot of accidents in the early days, a lot of deaths.”



Kata Malovic had gone up to her bedroom, leaving her mum and brother to watch something dreadful on BBC Midlands. For Kata, her world revolved around her F-phone and PopNet.

“Don’t be stupid Gemma.” She tapped into her phone.

Gemma was her bestie, her BFF, they rarely disagreed about anything. Her phone connection went strange for a fraction of a second, the edge of the screen flaring bright yellow.

“Oh, that again, everyone’s phone at school is doing that.” Said Gemma. “I’m not lying to you, look at this..... If the link gets to you ?”

The link did, a speech by Crazy John. John Lane was now a government minister, but his past refused to let go. In his lonely days on the back bench, John had championed a lot of strange campaigns and groups. So wild and varied had his interests been, that the media christened him Crazy John and the name stuck.

“Oh him..... My mum says he should be locked up.” Typed Kata.

“Just watch it.”

Crazy John was giving an after dinner speech somewhere and it was being filmed by someone in the audience. The camera wobbled about while John made a few incautious jokes about migrants. It was his usual stuff, her mum said he did it to keep his name in the papers.

“This is boring Gemma.”

“Wait, he doesn’t realise he’s being recorded.”

Kata wasn’t sure if she believed that. At sixteen she’d learned to assume everything she did and said was being recorded by someone. Crazy John looked to be at a friend’s wedding though and he looked a bit drunk, or stoned.

“Tell them about the space rocks John.” Said the bride. “Tell them what you told Felix and me.”

“I’m surprised anyone believes the asteroids are just lumps of rock.” Said John. “Every hospital in the country is preparing for the worst, all police leave has been cancelled. Local councils are assisting in the rejuvenation of the much neglected civil defence network. Yet somehow the secret has largely been kept..... I can only assume people don’t want to hear the truth.”

“Tell us John.”

“Tell us John.” The crowd chanted.

Kata noticed the view count for the link was creeping over twelve million. If Crazy John had still been a back bencher it wouldn’t have mattered so much, but he was now a ministers for something or other, she wasn’t sure what. Kata was shocked at how easily John Lane gave in to chants from the crowd.

“Fine.... I’ll tell you, I’m amazed anyone believes the official story. They’re assumed to be visitors from another planet, intelligent visitors. The UK government believes they may be arriving with hostile intent, so does every other major power on the planet. I’m reliably informed that British soldiers are actively engaged against these alien visitors, though I haven’t been told where.”

Of course he hadn't been told where, the MOD obviously realised John was a lush and a motor mouth.

"What a wanker Gemma, he'll cause panic."

"Told you."

"Must go, need to show it to my mum."

"Send it to everyone you know, I am."

John went on to mention numbers and UK special forces operating out of Heslington camp. Someone in the audience must have realised he was going too far, there were shouts for him to shut up. The recording ended with Crazy John being screamed at by the bride.

"You ruin everything Uncle John."

It seemed a bit unfair, she had been urging him to tell all. Kata told her F-phone to save the recording, after noticing the view count was now twelve and a half million. If all those viewers showed it to just three or four other people.... The secret was well and truly out in the open.

"Aliens are coming, some are already here." She muttered.

Kata took her phone downstairs, placing it on the cordless sync pad. The large lounge view screen went silent, as her phone uploaded the recording.

"Oh, I was watching that." Said her mum.

"You never ask, ever." Muttered Antun, her brother.

"Wait.... Watch it mum, you were right about the space aliens."

As the recording of Crazy John began, Kata pushed herself between her mother and brother on the sofa, feeling comforted by their closeness.

"You're such a nuisance."

"Quiet Antun, let mum watch."

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Pamela Rath had been the science officer of Base Albion for almost a year, her annual rotation back to Earth was only a month away. She was lucky, her window was in the outer edge of the shield dome, giving her a view right across the Mare Tranquilitatis. At first her eyes had rebelled at seeing the horizon just two and a half kilometres away, but now it looked normal. Planet Earth was there of course, the one constant in the lunar sky over Base Albion. Nearly everyone else in the UK moon base would have given their right arm for a window, but Pam often looked out past Earth and shivered, wondering what might be heading their way. There was a knock on the door, before Richard Martucci walked in, the base commander.

"You look deep in thought Pam."

The base was home to just forty two people at the moment, though they could find beds for fifty at a pinch. Base Albion was a military base with about equal numbers of science projects and military ones, though the UK government liked the public to think it was purely a civilian science base. One advantage of projecting a civilian persona, was the lack of formality. No ranks, no sirs, not even a miss or mister, everyone was on first name terms.

"I'm not going home, still no confirmation of a departure date Richard." She said. "Kelly in hydroponics is a month late on her rotation.... Fuck, I'm stuck in this place."

"That might be a blessing, these things might ignore us and simply pass on by. Who knows Pam; we could be the lucky few who survive."

He was grinning at her, Richard had a famously weird sense of humour.

"Do you really believe that?" She asked.

“No, not a single billionaire has tried to bribe their way onto the quarterly supply shuttle. We have our shield dome, but we have no military defences. There is the option to accept the offer by the Chinese though.” He said. “Their Mao Zedong Base is deep underground, built to survive a missile attack. They’ve offered to let any other moon base personnel evacuate there.”

Pam knew the story about the construction of Mao Zedong Base. There had been a time, after the risk of global conflict in twenty forty five. All the nations who could afford it had headed towards the moon, even some who couldn’t afford it. All of them quickly building fairly flimsy habitations, before covering everything with a tough shield dome. Everyone had used the same basic construction pattern, apart from the Chinese.

“To think the whole world chuckled when they landed near Copernicus Crater and began digging into the ground like moles.” Said Richard.

“In all fairness they did build it during one of their regular spats with the Russian Federation. Anyway, they’ve had the last laugh, the only moon base that might survive an alien attack.”

Pam had a map on her wall, actually two maps, showing both sides of the moon. The side of the moon facing away from Earth only had two named bases and she knew there had never been any others. Building secret bases on Earth was one thing, but there was no secret construction on the moon.

“Has anyone been in recent touch with Mordor one and two ?” She asked.

It was their names for the two bases on what the public still thought of as the dark side of the moon. Two corporate research facilities, funded by a consortium of multinationals to do the sort of research the public might object to. Like a slightly odd neighbour, the bases rarely communicated with any of the other lunar facilities.

“Their Earth based offices have contacted the authorities, they’re digging in and preparing appropriate defences, whatever that means. There was a note about it in the overnight encrypted data burst.”

Pam looked at the map of the side of the moon which constantly faced the Earth. About half the bases built on that side of the moon had neat red crosses through them, there had been a lot of accidents in the early days, a lot of deaths. Living on the moon was more dangerous than any extreme sports activity, even without an alien invasion. Now there were just bases belong to India, China, North America, The Russian Federation and the European Federation. Britain too of course, though Base Albion had been a late arrival on the moon.

“I haven’t had a chance to look at the overnights.” She said. “Any news on whether we’re being ordered to join the Chinese ?”

“They’ve left it for us to decide. No orders, we can go there or stay here for the duration. They’ve promised the next supply shuttle with arrive, but no new personnel to leave or arrive.”

“Fuck, I’m stuck here.” She snapped. “It’s alright for you single people, I’ve a husband and two kids back home. It was all supposed to be just a year, a bit of an adventure and wonderful to have on my CV..... Sorry Richard, I didn’t.....”

“Yes you did and you’re right. The base commander is always single, mainly because we’re here for three years, or until we take the June West way out.”

June West was famous in a morbid way, a base commander who’d been depressed after two and a half years of living in the confined and often stressful conditions. June had stepped out of an airlock without an atmosphere suit.

“You’re not thinking of.....Christ Richard !”

"No, not me, I'm not the sort..... Besides, they've improved the airlocks now; it'd be a lot harder to do a June West these days."

"But not impossible ?" She asked.

"No, not impossible.....I think we'll keep that to ourselves though."

Pam liked Richard, she liked him a lot. Forty or so people at Base Albion, a mix of ages and genders, all a quarter of a million miles from home and no bus service. It was inevitable that people would sleep together, there had even been a few women returning home with a child on the way.

Someone had put a sign on the mess wall for the Christmas party.

'Come judgement day, office parties don't count, or relationships in Base Albion.'

The Pam who'd arrived on the moon wouldn't have found that joke funny, perhaps Richard's weird sense of humour was rubbing off on her ? She'd never been unfaithful to her husband, but with current circumstances.....

"How about the Mars colonies, are they evacuating ?" She asked.

"Not sure, they've nowhere to go. They've no convenient hole in the ground to hide in and there are close to a hundred thousand colonists."

"So how do we decide whether to join our Chinese chums ?" She asked. "Are we going to vote on it ?"

"No, we're a military base, not a democracy. We decide, you and I, we're the two senior people... In loco parentis for all the students they keep sending up here."

"Yes, but this ! It's a bit big for us to simply impose a decision on them."

"Which is exactly why we need to decide. I want to stay here Pam, no running off to the Mao Zedong Base."

"So do I..... No hiding in a hole in the ground."

"Good that was easier than I expected." Said Richard. "As we've nowhere big enough for everyone to gather, I think we should go and tell everyone personally."

"They should be in their workgroups by now."

Pam led the way, letting her hand touch his as she reached to close her office door. She'd decided that if judgement day really was on the way, finding a little comfort didn't count.

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Brenda Grundy couldn't remember why she'd joined the British army, it had just seemed a good idea at the time. They'd discovered her aptitude for anything mechanical and trained her up on it, until she'd become an expert. Becoming a senior technician had been the happiest day of her life.

"It doesn't make sense to me, where's Brenda ?" She heard Matt say to Ward.

"I'm here."

It was easy to see why the helicopter search and the satellite hadn't spotted the shallow crater. The land around them was the same colour as the alluvial gunk the asteroid had disturbed. The three metres high piece of space rock was the same colour too, a sort of vomit yellow with streaks of brown. You needed to be on the ground and very lucky to find the rock, they'd almost walked past it. "The break looks like a door to me." Said Matt. "Can you look at these crystals Bren, maybe get a few samples."

It was always loose like that with Matt, which she liked. Other units had been quite stifling, but Matt relied on her using her initiative. Brenda ran a small scanner over the interior of the rock. It looked impressive, but the scanner was just an improved version of the device used by metal detectorists.

"Yes, the bit swinging back is definitely a door, there are metal hinges." She said.

"What sort of metal ?"

“Not sure, I’ll take a scraping.”

Only she couldn’t, nothing in her tool belt would even scratch the metal. She had a carbide drill bit in her tool box, it had easily cut through titanium in the past. That too screeched off the surface of the metal hinges.

“No luck, I’ll look at the crystals, some seem to be loose.”

“Careful how you clamber in there Bren.” Said Matt.

There was no seating in the interior, just a hard crystalline surface. The space was big and hinted at a creature at least nine feet tall and far broader than her. Three stone shelves were in front of her and some of the uniformly grey crystals looked loose, as if they’d been placed on the shelf.

“I’m going to put one of the little ones in a sample bag.” She said. “Might be a good idea if you all moved back a bit, just in case.”

They all shuffled back a bit, but they were still all far too close. That wasn’t her fault though, Matt was her boss, she couldn’t order him to move further away. Brenda took a sample bag out of her tool box and put on a pair of strong latex gloves, before picking up a small grey crystal.

“Christ Brenda, was that you ?” Asked Matt.

“Yes, maybe....I’ll try another one.”

As she’d picked up the crystal the inside of the rock had pulsated with a dark red colour and there had been a sound resembling a heartbeat. Brenda put the crystal back and picked up another. The colour was bright green, the pulsating sound louder, more intense.

“Put it back and just take pictures.... Get pics of everything Bren.” Said Matt.

Brenda used several cameras to take a variety of pictures targeted at different parts of the spectrum of visible and invisible light. All the time she could hear Matt and Ward deciding what to do next.

“It’s your show, I’m just here to help.” Said Matt. “I think we should guard the site and call in a science team.”

Ward paced about, before looking inside the space rock and running his hand over the wall.

“I’m trying to think like our friend the alien.” He said. “He’s landed for a scouting trip, only to get into a fight with one of our local crocs. He then finds Bertie Johnson and gets into another fight, maybe even shot a few times. If I was him, I’d wait until tonight and fly my rock out of here, back to somewhere with less aggressive locals..... We should set a trap for our alien, a little present, an explosive goodbye present.”

“Might be dangerous, we don’t know how this rock is powered.” Said Matt. “It might explode with enough of a bang to take out half of Northern Australia.”

“That’d improve the place.” Yelled Charlie.

“What do you think Brenda ?” Asked Ward.

“I’m thinking through what you said. The aliens haven’t shown any aggression up to now. This one was attacked by a croc and when it met a member of the human race, it was a crazy old survival nut who shot him. I see nothing but self-defence by this creature..... But if we blow him up.....”

“If they weren’t hostile before, they certainly will be.” Added Matt. “Your decision though, your coin in the slot. I’m sure Sergeant Evans can rig up a little present for our new friend.”

The Australian looked torn, she thought he’d probably call in a science team and get rid of the problem by passing it on to them.

“Do it, rig something up.” He said.

“Evans !” Yelled Matt. “Get over here and create a little surprise for our alien, something on the door.”

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Ishmael McGrath knew he'd lose a few day's pay for leaving his crap, low paid job without notice. He didn't care though; Fifth West wanted him to attend a three day induction course, so he was going to attend. Besides, Fifth West were going to pay him well, for doing a job they still hadn't properly defined. His mother hadn't quite believed the salary on his offer letter.

"Wow, that's a lot Ishmael.....When I retire you can keep me in pizza and prosecco. I suppose this job is legal?"

"Oh, mum."

London felt different as he walked from the station, like an entire city waiting for the second shoe to drop. There were no crowds watching the sky in fear, no boarded up shops, no tumbleweed blowing down Chancery Lane. The train had been full, the shops were still open. There was just a feeling, which he was willing to admit, might have all been in his imagination.

"Go in there and show them they were right to hire you." Biff had told him.

Ish felt confident, though he was seeing far more DaHus than he usually saw. At one street crossing it felt as though he was surrounded by them. He held onto a lamppost, his heart beating against his chest, his mouth suddenly dry.

"Are you alright?"

She looked about forty, a look of genuine concern on her face. For a second Ish couldn't get enough air to speak.

"New job, I start today." He managed to say.

"We've all been there. Just remember that they'll be just as nervous as you."

"Thank you."

His Good Samaritan walked off towards Holborn, but talking to her had helped. The panic had gone, though he still wondered why so many of the people he saw looked hideously damaged. It might have been his imagination fuelled by anxiety, or something far darker. Even Biff had noticed that his delusions seemed to be getting stronger as the alien space rocks came closer to Earth.

"My name is Ishmael McGrath." He told the man on the security desk. "I start my new job with Fifth West today."

He handed over the letter Lianne had given him, requesting his presence at the induction course. He was still pulling an ID card out of his wallet, when the guard spoke.

"I don't need that Ish, the building knows you now. Welcome aboard and I wish you well in your new career."

Damn, the welcome was nice, but it looked as though everyone at Fifth West was going to call him Ish. All induction course were held on Lower Level Two, or so his letter said. Ish found an elevator with a down button and descended.

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Deborah Newman was known to everyone as Deb. While her husband Matt was serving his country abroad, which seemed far too often, she buried herself in her job. Deb worked as an Accident and Emergency nurse in the newly opened York Heworth Hospital. She loved her job, but not the bureaucracy that went with it, the forms and endless boxes to tick. She especially loathed all the meetings, though this one was different.

"You're all healthcare professionals, you know the dangers of civil unrest. Everything you hear today, every part of the plan to make York Heworth ready for what might happen, is confidential. You won't be asked to sign the official secrets act, but please behave as though you have. Tell no one, even your loved ones."

"Little chance of that happening." Muttered Daisy

Daisy Farmery was her best friend and a fellow nurse. There was quite a bit of muttering and Deb agreed with Daisy. The man from London had already mentioned a tight schedule as he was visiting every major hospital in Yorkshire and Lancashire. It seemed a pretty good bet that other men and women from the ministry were holding similar meetings in every hospital in the country. There was no way it was all going to remain confidential.

“No recording, or we will take away your phones.”

Shouted one of the two people he’d brought with him, the anonymous man from the ministry. He looked awkward and kept referring to a script.

“Please.....A little quiet.... There will be questions at the end. Although there is no confirmed threat from these visitors from space, the ministry feels it would be foolhardy not to make preparations. York Heworth has been selected to be the main trauma centre for York and the North East. Some extra prefabricated buildings will need to be erected and you will notice quite a few new medical staff, some wearing military uniforms. Please make them welcome, they are here to help you.”

“Are we being taken over by the military ?” Someone shouted.

“Questions at the end..... Please ! There will be two mobile MRI machines arriving within the next two days. In the short term they will help bring down your waiting lists. Of course we all hope there is nothing to worry about, but we need to be prepared.”

“Fuck Deb, this sounds serious.” Daisy whispered.

“The main beneficiary of extra staff and equipment will be the Accident and Emergency department.” Said the man from the ministry. “A few portacabins will be erected in the rear car park, but they’re just for the extra admin staff. Sterile prefabricated structures will be used to create a dedicated trauma centre with its own resus area and wards. Effectively York Heworth will soon have an A&E department capable of dealing with any eventuality.”

“Christ man, you’re preparing for war !” Someone yelled.

“At the end.....Questions later..... Please... Silence.....”

He was thorough, though Deb didn’t bother listening to the details of how many extra staff and where they’d be housed. There was going to be a new temporary mortuary with a capacity of two hundred bodies. All planning for what would probably never happen.... Only governments didn’t spend that kind of money unless there was a real and credible threat.

“You’re right Daisy, it is fucking serious.” She whispered to her friend.

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It was the middle of the night at Glyde Point in Northern Australia. As Matt’s wife listened to the man from the ministry, her husband listened to waves hitting the shore. It was a nice spot for the soldiers to wait, though Matt hadn’t realised how close to the shore the space rock had landed.

“This is a nice place, our alien picked a decent spot to land.” Said Matt.

“I just wish there were a few more of us, with heavier weapons.” Said Chris Crawford, the local cop they’d seconded onto their team.

“A bazooka, that’s what we need, two of them.” Said Evans.

“Shush....You’re making enough racket to frighten it off.” Said Ward.

Surrounding the crater at a safe distance would have required a thousand soldiers, maybe more to do it properly. He was working well with Ward, there had only been a short argument about where to wait for ET to return to his or her space rock. Matt had wanted to make a makeshift camp near the ocean and he’d won the argument.

“We don’t know how well this thing hears, but the sound of the ocean will muffle any sounds we might make.” He’d told them.

They were currently waiting on the ocean side of a large dune, leaving the watchers with night vision glasses to watch and wait for the alien to come back to its craft. If it did come back, for all they knew the crystalline lump of rock might be a one way escape craft.

“Do your weapons use 5.56 ammo ?” He asked Ward. “We’ve got some spare armour piercing rounds if you can use them ? Something secret, so we’ll need them back if you don’t use them.”

“I like the sound of that.” Said Ward. “We’ll take any you can spare.”

“Made to kick alien ass are they ?” Asked Charlie.

“Something like that.” Said Matt. “Evans, take Mitchell with you and make sure all our friends have a few AP45 rounds..... And do it quietly.”

“Yes sir.”

“Will they fit my handgun ?” Asked Chris.

“No.”

Matt wasn’t sure how good the ammunition would be anyway, there was no real way to test anything designed to kill an alien creature. Someone at the MOD had asked a think tank and they’d sent a list of requirements to a munitions manufacturer. The result was the AP45 round.

“Basically designed to hit harder and penetrate deep.” A trainer had told him. “The general assumption was that any extra-terrestrial invader will be tougher than us.”

Of course the assumption might well be wrong and the ammunition had never been used against an enemy, even a human one. The AP45 rounds were top secret and very expensive. Matt was amazed they’d been given a supply of them to bring with them to the Northern Territories. He’d been napping when he heard one of the watchers in his comms earpiece.

“Movement in the bushes to the south.”

“I’ve got it too, nothing in infra-red or UV, just movement.”

“I see it, crap it’s huge.”

“Someone tell me what it looks like ?” Asked Matt.

“Fuck ! It’s seen me.”

The firing began and no one was answering his question. Matt went over the top of the dune and realised fifty yards from the space rock had been too far to sit and wait. It was close to a hundred yards to where the firing was coming from, too far.

“On the double.” He shouted. “One of the watchers is in trouble.”

“We could do with a few flares Charlie.” Shouted Ward.

Not just Charlie, several flares rose into the air and came slowly down over where someone was firing an assault rifle. Even under the light of many flares, it was hard to see any details. The creature was huge, at least three times the size of a man. Its skin didn’t reflect light at all, it seemed to absorb it, giving nothing back. The alien was like a huge dark shadow, it didn’t even snarl or growl. It could do them damage though, Matt could see two men on the ground.

“Kill the damn thing.” Shouted Ward.

“Walker is down, it got the new guy.” Someone was shouting over the comms.

“Evans..... Fuck..... Shoot it.”

He was still too far away for accurate automatic fire, but the creature was a massive target. Matt knelt down and brought his weapon up to his shoulder, before taking a deep breath. He exhaled as he fired, emptying a full clip of the AP45 rounds into the alien. It was hurt, the monster staggered to one side and made a strange soft sound, like a bird.

“Evans needs a medic, where is Bren ?”

“Christ..... Walker looks bad.”

“More flares, we need to see it.”

It was chaos coming through his ear piece and the alien was aiming something at him. Again there was no detail, just the impression of something short and tubular being aimed his way. Matt ducked and dropped to the left, feeling something tugging at the shoulder of his uniform as it went past.

“We can hurt it..... Keep firing.” He yelled.

“It’s running..... Going for its craft.” Said Ward.

No time to tell his team to duck, the present they’d left for the alien exploded too quickly. The first explosion made his ears ring, but the second seemed to change the landscape. It felt like a hurricane pushing him across the ground, a hurricane wind that didn’t stop. The ground came up to meet him and something hit the side of his head. He woke to hear Brenda’s voice in his earpiece.

“..... Anyone ?.....This is Brenda Grundy, nothing looks the same.”

All looked tranquil, the explosion had left him back on the dunes, facing the ocean. Their makeshift camp was untouched, protected by the dune. Matt found a flare and aimed it towards where the space rock had been.

“Bren, this is Matt.... I’m back at the camp. Look for my flare.”

“I see it.”

The space rock was gone, as was most of the ground which had been there. The flare showed a vast crater, the bottom too far down to see.

“Anyone else there ?..... Check in please.....The camp is intact.”

“Anyone ?”

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Ishmael McGrath hadn’t known what to expect, most of his previous employers hadn’t been big on induction courses. There had been a handwashing course at a burger place once; he still had the certificate somewhere. Just six new employees in room L-202 and one of those wasn’t going to be in London for very long.

“They’re taking me to the Forward Development facility in Penrith in two day’s time.” Said the girl, who looked about his age. “It was all so unexpected..... My boyfriend is going crazy.”

Ish hadn’t even considered that Fifth West might send him to the other end of the country, or even abroad. His letter said he’s been employed as a Planner in Forward Development, whatever that really meant. Would they send him to the Penrith Campus ?

“I heard it’s nice up there.” Someone said. “And let’s face it, Fifth West pay well.”

There was a lot of muttering about how well they paid, and Ish began to wonder if he’d agree to be moved out of London or go back to subsistence pay jobs. A lady came in and introduced herself as the UK corporate head of human resources.

“I’m going to run through how and when you’ll be paid.” She said. “Everything I say will be repeated on the screen in front of you and there is hard copy available on request. Firstly expenses, Fifth West require a receipt for all expenses.....”

After her there was a man from accounts who went over expenses again. It seemed that a lack of receipts had been a big issue once, there had been a few employees ‘let go’ because of it. After the accounts guy there was a steady stream of people from other departments, even a lady from welfare muttering about the perils of workplace relationships.

“Jeeez, they’ll wheel in a chaplain next.” Muttered the man to his right.

It was lunchtime before the steady procession of speakers ended and Ish felt he hadn’t really learned that much, apart from making sure he was really carefully with his expenses. He stood up to follow the others out of the room.

"I heard they're providing a free lunch." Someone said.

Not for Ish though, Lianne appeared and asked him to stay where he was. It didn't take long for her father to enter the room, Jaroslav Verga, the CEO of Fifth West Corporation. Four others entered with Verga, all of them looking at Ish in an unsettling manner. For a moment Ish felt like an exhibit, a feeling he didn't like.

"Get the door sealed Lianne, 6G clearance only." Said Verga. "Kill the building AI in here too, no recordings."

He stood waiting for her to confirm that the room was secure and not under surveillance by the omnipresent AI system. Still they were examining him.

"Oh, you're not sending me to Penrith are you?" Asked Ish.

"That's it, we're now isolated from the rest of the building." Said Lianne.

Verga came and sat near him, using a chair recently vacated by one of the new intake.

"Penrith, yes I can see why you might think that Ish." Said Verga. "They do good work at our northern campus, some very good work. There's a lot of interchange of information with other organisations, the place is a genuine think tank. Sadly that is why it will be targeted quite early.... They've been watching us for a while now Ish, prioritising targets."

It was his turn to look at Jaroslav Verga as though he was a specimen in a petri dish.

"How do you.... How could you know that?" He asked.

"First a confession Ish, something I'm not proud of. I have seen your medical records from when you were a child. They were supposed to be locked away forever, but I have my means. I needed to be certain Ish, completely certain that you're a very gifted precog. You might be the best there is and I've looked at quite a few."

"You mean the monsters I saw? I was just a kid, I grew out of it."

"That's not the truth Ish." Said Lianne. "I've seen you look at people..... You see them as they might be, after what's coming."

"Do you see them too?" Asked Ish. "I think of them as damaged humans, DaHus."

"No, my father sees them but I don't ish." Said Lianne. "These other people are precogs too, but they don't see as far ahead as you do."

"Precognition, foreknowledge of an event, especially as a form of extrasensory perception. I can see events very clearly, but only a year or so in the future." Said Verga. "You though Ish, even as a child you saw far into the future. Nothing cast in stone, that is important, precogs often see several potential futures. You see decades into the future, perhaps even further. That is why we need you Ish."

"I'm not sure Mr Verga, I still remember the feelings I had as a child. I felt my mind going out of control, going.... Insane. I'm not sure I'd want to be like that again, even if I could."

"Call me JV Ish. Jaroslav is a mouthful, everyone calls me JV. They've been watching us for a very long time. There have been a lot of sightings and events kept out of the media. Some knew of course, the late great Stephen Hawking even went rogue and wrote an article for the press. He just about admitted that there was a real threat on the way. The public greeted his words with the usual apathy though and sadly, so did those in authority."

"But if they knew....." Said Ish.

"Having a damn good idea and being certain are different." Said JV. "In a democracy no one wants to rock the boat, the voters don't like it. There were a few research programmes put in place, mainly military. The UK government commissioned a few weapons that might or might not kill a creature

many times tougher than a human. On the whole though, no one did much at all. Apart from me of course and my company, the Fifth West Corporation.”

It almost seemed rude, but Ish had to ask.

“What are you doing ?”

“Sorry to sound like a history teacher Ish, but every invader in history has wanted something, they’ve had clear aims. The Romans, Vikings, Genghis Khan and his horde. They all killed vast numbers in battle, but ultimately they wanted something. These new invaders will want something too.”

“They might just want to kill us all, wipe us out.” Said Ish.

“It’s impossible to rule that out, we don’t know how they think. It seems unlikely though, considering the time they’ve spent observing planet Earth. They might want us as a colony in some sort of galactic empire, or they might treasure a natural resource we don’t even think of as valuable. We just don’t know, but we need to know. We can’t ask them of course.....Which is where you come in.”

“I get it, you want me to use my.... Whatever it is, to look into the future and see their intentions, what they want.” Said Ish.

“Precognition Ish, that’s what you have.” Said JV. “I have quite a few precogs, all seeing the near future far clearer than you can. None can see decades ahead though, none can see the bigger picture.”

“We really need you Ish.” Said Lianne.

Ish had almost unconsciously changed his life to stop the visions he’d always thought were hallucinations of some kind. He avoided emotional triggers and getting too close to DaHus on the street. He’d even stopped eating certain types of food. The conversation with Verga was triggering something though, he could see the blood on Lianne’s clothing. Her face was destroyed, her pretty eyes gone, empty sockets looking back at him. It was only one of several futures though... Or at least that was what JV had said.

“Is that it, all you’re doing.... Looking into the future ?” Asked Ish. “I’m not sure if I’d be any use to you anyway JV, I’d probably end up drooling in a corner of the room.”

“Oh I’ve been doing a lot more than that Ish.” Said JV. “I’ve better weapons than any government and I’ve poached a lot of special forces troops from countries across the globe. Fifth West has also built several hidden facilities in hard to reach places, most deep underground. The trick is knowing what they want, so we can keep out of their way. I’ve no intention of fighting these visitors if it can be avoided. We go underground and wait for them to leave.”

“They might not leave.”

“Again history teaches us that all empire eventually fail. America was a colony of Britain once and they seem to be doing rather well these days. We wait Ish and come out onto the surface when they’ve gone. You need to fully trigger your gift though. Please come up to the roof with me and look at the clouds.”

“I’m worried.... If I go too deep into the visions.....”

“Please Ish.” Said Lianne.

That ruined face, so much blood.

“Alright, I’ll do it.” Said Ish.

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