

Ishmael

Chapter 8 – A Quiet World

“..... We are legally standing in for your parents while you’re here, in loco parentis is the legal term. Because of the problems we’re all aware of and the lack of reliable phones to contact your parents..... The school will be closing until further notice...”



MacLaren felt perspiration on her forehead and turned up the cooling on her atmosphere suit. It had been too much of a trudge from where she’d landed Billy; they’d both be tired by the time they were inside Albion. She waved at Gene and he waved back. They were trying to avoid using even the low power personal radio links. Their enemy was fast acquiring omnipotent status, mainly because they knew virtually nothing about the aliens and human curiosity abhors a vacuum. Kitty MacLaren decided there was no longer a need to keep comms silence, when a hydrogen tank behind them exploded.

“Get behind cover Gene; it’s to the right of the airlock.”

“I see it, do we engage?”

“That’s the general idea Gene.”

It had fired and ducked behind the small wall that housed the refuelling connectors for Billy.

MacLaren knew the wall and panel were thin and made of light aluminium alloy.

“I’m going to try a shot through the connection panel.” She said.

She felt the vibration through her fingers as the pulse rifle came to life. It didn’t need an atmosphere, the beast of a weapon worked better in a vacuum. A count of five to let the weapon get a range on the target and she fired twice. The metal slugs hit the panel at hypersonic speed, travelling right through and straight through the alien creature hiding behind it.

“Wow, we got the bastard.”

“Cheer when we’re certain it’s dead.”

It had been a strange target to aim at, the sights on the rifle had dropped back to a best attempt setting. MacLaren had seen bits fly off what was probably its head, as she’d fired three quick shots. Gene had fired four times, she’d seen his slugs hit the creature’s main torso. Their enemy had fallen behind the panel and could no longer be seen.

“Don’t assume it’s dead Gene.”

“I won’t.”

She led, taking it slowly across the rubble strewn lunar surface. The alien hadn’t moved, or looked to have attempted to move. She still fired twice more into its head at close range.

“Didn’t expect us to have decent weapon, did you fucker.” She muttered.

“Its skin seems to reflect light in odd ways, like camouflage.” Said Gene.

“Run your suit camera over it.” She told him. “If there’s time when we leave, I’ll get Billy to run his scanners over our friend here.”

“Crap, I don’t think you will.”

The body changed and it was a rapid change. It became a viscous fluid, which flowed over the ground, before vanishing into the dry dusty lunar ground. Apart from leaving a grubby outline, the dead alien had vanished.

“Wow, you can tell them about that, they’ll never believe me.” Said Gene.

“Did you get it on your camera ?”

“Yes, I think so..... Yes, definitely.”

MacLaren walked up to the main airlock, the one big enough for Billy to be brought inside for his regular maintenance. There had been no finesse about the aliens breaking into Albion, no care in maintaining the base’s atmosphere. The entire outer door had been cut around the outside and left to fall to the ground.

“All that care over Mordor One and then they do this.” Said Gene. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“They probably knew there was nothing worth taking in Albion. Come on, there might be survivors.”

The outer door had been cut through and the inner door looked to have been opened by using the manual override lever. There was still power in the base, most of the corridor lights were still on.

Clear signs of destruction from sudden explosive decompression though. Thin partition walls had been destroyed, the inside of Albion was now one large open plan area.

“Crap MacLaren, no one could have survived this.”

“Someone might have got into the Nest.”

Probably a fool’s errand, but she had to be able to tell the base commander that she’d done her best to look for survivors. Every piece of equipment and furniture had been picked up and destroyed, as every scrap of air had escaped through the open airlock. She’d seen training simulations. For the people in Albion it must have been like trying to survive in the centre of a tornado.

“Oh shit..... There are a few body parts here.” Said Gene.

“Recognisable ?”

“No, just bits of bone and sinew.”

“Leave them, we’re here for the living, if there are any.”

First she had a job to do in Richard’s office. The code books and encryption keys were in his safe, priceless information for Britain’s many and varied adversaries. The office was now part of the open plan, any furniture unrecognisable. The safe was built into the floor, a small green light indicating its internal battery was still functioning.

“As if anyone could come here and steal the code book.” Said Gene.

“I tend to agree, but I have my orders and Richard is quite capable of locking me up somewhere if I don’t obey them.”

The code book really was a book on paper, with the day codes printed on about twenty separate pages. The really important data, the encryption keys, were on a plain vanilla memory wafer. Both items went into the leg pocket on her suit.

“Now we’ll check the Nest.” She said.

The Nest had been intended as a trial for storing high level radiation waste on the moon.

International agreements had come into force before it had ever seen an ounce of any dangerous isotopes. The moon was to be kept clean, definitely not used as a dump for mankind’s unwanted toxic waste of any kind. Pamela Rath had come up with the idea of using the Nest as a panic room, a place to hide from any imminent apocalypse. Judging by the mess in front of the stairs down to the Nest, the apocalypse had arrived.

“Damn, just when you need a few eager students, there are none.” Said MacLaren. “Come on, we’ll need to clear this mess the hard way.”

It was hard work moving the junk that had swirled around the stairs, before a lot of it had filled the top ten feet or so of the spiral staircase. Hot work in an atmosphere suit, MacLaren noticed she was sweating again. Every piece of junk had to be put somewhere it wasn’t going to get in their way again.

“The good news is that the aliens didn’t shove it all out of the way.” Said Gene. “There might be a few students still hiding down there.”

The Nest had been dug deep into the lunar surface and had its own independent air scrubbers and heating system. It was the unofficial party area on Friday night, everyone knew the code for the airlock door at the bottom of the stairs. As her suit indicated there was a breathable atmosphere, she removed her helmet, as did Gene. It was so nice to breathe outside of the suit again, even if it smelt of stale beer and cold pizza. The wonderful smells of party night in Base Albion.

“Anyone here ? It’s MacLaren.”

“I’ll get the lights.”

In the emergency lights the Nest looked sinister, with the rows of metal shelving full of tins, where the hazardous waste store had become their pantry for dry goods and beer. Once the main lighting was on, it looked wonderfully normal compared with the chaos upstairs. There seemed to be movement in an alcove that had been turned into an emergency bedroom.

“This is MacLaren, we’re here to get you out of here.”

“Come on guys, stop messing about.” Added Gene.

As far as MacLaren was concerned she was just a shuttle pilot passing through. She had no intention of being that friendly with the endless stream of people living in Albion for a year at a time. The two students who came out of hiding were familiar to her, but she didn’t know their names.

“Are we in trouble ?” Asked the girl.

“Why would you be in trouble Sylvie ?” Asked Gene.

With one name, MacLaren remembered the boy was called Theo. Two French students on an exchange year, the two of them seemed inseparable. The truth suddenly became blindingly obvious.

“You came down here to screw.” She said.

“We heard terrible sounds and.....” Said Theo.

“It seemed a good idea to stay down here.” Added Sylvie.

Wonderful, they were even finishing each other’s sentences. Under other circumstances it would have been wonderfully romantic.

“Is it just you two ?” She asked. “Anyone else hiding back there ?”

“No, just us.”

“Do you know where the suit cupboard is ?”

“Of course we do.....” Said Sylvie.

“We both have top points for health and safety tests.” Finished Theo.

Well done Pam, all the hard work and repetitions had paid off. The two kids found the right sized suits and flawless went through all the checks once they were wearing them. They were even smiling as they stood in front of the airlock door.

“It’s a mess up there, be prepared.” Said Gene.

“Fucking gnarly, follow us and be careful.” Added MacLaren.

Once their helmets were on, it was impossible to see the reaction of the kids to the destruction in Albion. The base was never that comfortable, but it had been a safe home for the students who came there. Now that home was destroyed, the furniture ripped apart and strewn over the lunar surface. The young lovers were quiet during the long walk back to Billy. They weren’t smiling anymore once their helmets came off.

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Brenda Grundy woke up in the back of a medical helicopter. Not military, it looked as though someone had called in one of the emergency copters that served the population of the Northern

Territories. Matt probably, she could see him having the back of his head examined by one of the medics.

“Ow..... I don’t need stitches doc, I just fell over.” Said Matt.

The helicopter was still on the ground, she could just about see the bottom of the waterfall where they’d fought the alien. Daylight outside, she must have been unconscious for a while. They must have killed the Ripley, or she would probably have never woken up again. Brenda moved to get a better view through the door and the pain ripped through her back. She screamed, quite loudly.

“No, you mustn’t move, your back might be broken.”

The second medic arrived from somewhere behind her, gently moving her head back onto the pillow. Pain brought her fully awake. She’d been strapped into some kind of brace and there were two drips in her left arm. Pain brought further pain, as the wound near her left hip demanded its turn at making her yell.

“Bren is awake..... Chris, she’s alright.” Yelled Matt.

Alright seemed a bit of an overstatement. Every bit of her was hurting, making her want to scream and kill the creature all over again.

“I’ll give you something to make you sleep.” Said the medic.

Forming words was hard, her mouth was so dry.

“Not yet, I have to know.” She muttered. “Did we get it ? Is the Ripley dead ?”

“Ripley ?”

“Yeah, it’s dead Bren. They’re sending a special forces copter for it. I was expecting to be arrested and it turns out we’re all bloody heroes.”

Chris, with a bandage around a part of his neck, but smiling and on his feet.

“We’re waiting to go with it Bren.” Said Matt. “You’re going to the hospital in Darwin. Good place these guys reckon, they’ll fix you up.”

No use objecting, the medic had injected something into her arm. The pain was becoming more of an annoyance than anything to yell about.

“How are things out there.....The Ripleys.....?” She muttered.

“Not good, we’ve lost touch with much of South East Asia.” Said Matt. “They’re going after the satellites and undersea cables. The world is gradually going quiet Bren.....”

The drug made her feel briefly euphoric, before it sent her into a deep and pain free sleep.

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Luis Lopez liked working on the rooms on the top floor of the Girona Guest House. His wife Jada had often accused him of inventing jobs to do, just to stare out of the windows for a while. A little unjust, he never invented jobs, but he did look very hard to find them. Today it was a skirting board with a scuff mark. A little paint and it would be good as new. The small job gave him a chance to open the room’s window and enjoy the glorious view of Torbay. Rather unusually his son Mateo was with him. After unsuccessfully trying to talk his mother into some pile of nonsense, he’d been following him around all morning.

“Do you always get those sounds from the bay ?” Asked Mateo.

Luis looked up from his small paint job. The constant bangs had become so common that he no longer took any notice of them.

“That’s the navy hunting for something, it goes on all day and night.” He said. “There are rumours that they’ve lost another two patrol boats, but they are only rumours.”

“The noise must keep you awake.”

“It did at first, but not now.”

The view was incredible on a good day, all of Torbay and the ocean beyond. It wasn't a good day though, mist hid whatever was happening out at sea. There was just the steady sound of explosions every few minutes. Probably depth charges, though once again that was only a rumour.

"Do they ever hit anything?" Asked Mateo.

"There were bits from a machine washed up once." Said Luis. "The navy sent a truck to collect it all before anyone got a good look at it. One of the cleaning girls got a few pictures on her phone, but it just looked like lumps of burnt metal."

"Aren't you scared by it all dad?"

He was only dad when his kids wanted something and Luis could guess what it was.

"This is about us going into that damn bunker isn't it? No use trying to win me over. I've been married to your mother for years and I can never remember talking her into doing something she didn't want to do."

"But you'll be far safer in there. The army are going to give us guards and there will be plenty of food. I've seen the worst case scenario dad..... Up here you'll run out of clean water in just a few weeks."

The conversation seemed to be never ending. Mateo would agitate his mother next, with all the unpleasant maybes and nasty scenarios. He'd even been trying to get his abuelita to go into the bunker. His son wasn't stupid, he'd just grown up at a time of relative peace and plenty. Luis knew the army guards would quickly become jailers. Soon that wonderful bunker would become a hell hole. He was angry and fed up with the entire business.

"I'd rather be up here than hiding in a hole in the ground." He shouted. "Do you think these invaders will let you stay down there? They'll dig you out like.....Sorry Mateo but you just won't listen. We don't want to go into the bunker and neither does your abuelita. Stop pestering us, you're upsetting everyone."

"I'm sorry dad, it's an impossible choice and no one is making it easier. No matter what I decide, my own children are likely to hate me forever."

His son was crying, something he hadn't seen for nearly thirty years. Luis dropped the paint brush in a jar of cleaner and sat opposite his son. No hugging, Luis knew the unwritten rules of parenting. Only daughters were hugged after they'd become adults.

"Would you like my advice?" Asked Luis. "I won't get upset if you ignore it, but I have been around for fifty seven years next month. I've run a guest house, which often seem to be a huge gossip factory. Add on bringing up two kids and putting up with your abuelita....."

"I get it dad, I'd appreciate your advice."

His son was thirty five and seemed to run half the local council, but in many ways he was so naïve about life.

"Firstly you can't stop your children hating you for choosing the wrong two people to enter the bunker with you. The good news is that children are adaptable and their emotions can run from hate to love in the course of one afternoon. There is only one person who might hold a grudge for the rest of her life, your wife. Helen might be making the right noises now, but when the real trouble starts and you're down there, while her parents are up here..... Ask her son, you really need Helen to be on your side."

"You're right..... But what if they say no?"

"Then you'll have done your best son. I'm sure someone at Torbay Council will be grateful for those two extra places."

"Yes, I'll call her now."

His son looked at his F-Phone and frowned, a lot of people had been doing that lately.

“Don’t tell me, no service.....I think our alien friends have realised the best way to demoralise the population of planet Earth, is to take their F-Phones away from them.”

“Might just be a network problem.” Said Mateo.

“No son, we don’t do that. No matter what the council might say to the public, we both know the reason parts of the world are going quiet is because of them, the aliens.”

“Ok dad, no more bullshit, I promise. Is the landline working ?”

“It was an hour ago. We’re still getting lots of bookings. It seems everyone wants to watch the navy blow up the aliens. Whether they’ll still want to come when the aliens are blowing up the navy..... That is a different matter.”

“Sometimes you have a weird sense of humour dad.”

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For fifteen year old Zane Bates, the reality of what was happening only registered when the local school closed. All the schools were closing in what some of the media were calling an act of national betrayal. Mrs Porter had told them all the day before in a specially extended morning assembly.

“..... We are legally standing in for your parents while you’re here, in loco parentis is the legal term. Because of the problems we’re all aware of and the lack of reliable phones to contact your parents..... The school will be closing until further notice..... There will be a letter for you to take home for your parents.....”

No one could say Mrs Porter didn’t enjoy an opportunity to waffle on for hours. There had been a lot about carrying on study at home, for when the school reopened. Deep down though everyone knew that was it..... The schools never were going to reopen.

“Damned local councils.” Said his dad. “They’re just scared about being sued if someone’s kid is hurt. Bloody health and safety shit again.”

“Leave him alone dad, it’s not his fault.” Said Tirsia.

Friction, lots of it, most being caused by his dad’s insistence on trying to carry on as normal. They’d all heard the ‘there are still bills to pay’ speech so many times. Paid to who though ? Every major company seemed to be admitting defeat and closing, or keeping just a skeleton staff to keep things running. Even the power companies were advising people that the electricity supply could no longer be guaranteed. There was his dad though, good old Tyler Bates, going on about bills and a roof that needed fixing in Bruce Grove.

“You could come with me Zane.” Said his dad. “Better than sitting at home all day.”

“Fine, it’ll get me away from all the rows.”

A rare thing all being around the breakfast table together. Not that the newfound closeness was a good thing, it was causing the current arguments and tension. His mum was looking at his dad, giving him the stink eye.

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea.... He’s got no experience and with the trouble....” She said.

Trouble was putting it mildly. They were living out of the freezer in the garage so as not to waste the food if the power went off. The spare bedroom contained two plastic baths, both full of water, just in case the water went off. To top it all off the major building supply companies were no longer delivering. Once his dad had used the stock in his yard that was it, finito, no matter how many bills there were to pay.

“I don’t mind mum, I’ll do it.” Said Zane.

“Kids today don’t know what real work is.” Said thirteen year old Tonya.

It was one of his dad's favourite gripes, almost his motto. His dad was actually looking a bit less moody than he'd been earlier.

"Now I think about it, there's a lot of ladder work." Said his dad. "It's near the reservoirs too and.... Things have been seen near the reservoirs."

"If it's not safe for Zane, you shouldn't go either dad." Said Tirsa.

"She's right and you probably won't get paid for the job anyway." Added his mum.

He felt sorry for his dad, there was the look of a defeated man about him. Men went out and worked hard, men were breadwinners. Without that his dad was going to find it hard to adjust to whatever the aliens had in store for them.

"So what do we do today?" Asked his dad.

"There's room for more plastic baths in the garage." Said Zane. "We could get them from the yard and fill them up with water."

"I want to help." Said Tonya.

"The yard isn't far, we could make it a family outing." Said his mum. "If we can find anywhere open, I'll buy some fried chicken on the way back."

"Great idea, we'll walk there and drive back in the truck." Said Tyler Bates.

It was a last family outing, they all knew it but no one was saying it.

"Park the truck outside and you'll get a ticket dad." Said Tirsa.

"You know what they can do with their ticket."

There was laughter as they left. It wasn't going to be a day at a leisure park, but it beat staying at home and arguing. Even seeing smoke rising up from the direction of Coppermill Lane Water Works didn't dampen their enthusiasm.

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The reason they hadn't seen the old lady for a while became obvious once they went upstairs. Inka Malovic couldn't even remember the name of the dead woman. It didn't need Sherlock Holmes to work out what had happened. Unable to cope with what was happening in the outside world; their next door neighbour had gone to bed and taken poison. There were the remnants of an unpleasant green foam around her lips.

"Oh, mum." Said Kata.

A dead body that was well on the way to becoming a fly blown pile of corruption. Definitely not the sort of sight she wanted to inflict on her children. Antun was making the strange sound with his throat, a precursor to fits of crying.

"We'll close the bedroom door and never come upstairs again." Said Inka.

There was room for them downstairs. An old Victorian terrace house that had never been converted into umpteen separate flats. There was a small parlour downstairs, a lounge and a room with just a TV and a sofa in it. Even a small toilet and shower room near the kitchen. There was no real reason for any of them to go upstairs, unless the stench became too bad to ignore.

"Don't be so timid Kata." She said. "This is our house now, go through every drawer and cupboard."

"Can I take a shower." Asked Kata.

"Maybe later, I'll go up into the loft later and check the water tank. If it's fairly full we can all take a quick cold shower."

The kitchen was a treasure trove of dried goods. Some were outside of their use by date, but her kids had long ceased worrying about such things.

"Three boxes of chocolate chip cookies mum." Said Kata. "Still wrapped up in a supermarket bag."

"Yes, I think our neighbour was a bit of a hoarder.... Do you remember her name?"

"Mrs Long." Shouted Antun.

Her son found the real find, a door hidden behind layers of coats hung up on hooks. He'd explored most of the basement before taking them to show off his discovery. He did it with a flourish, probably the way Columbus told everyone about the Americas.

"Wow, wait until you see what's downstairs."

There was enough tinned food to keep them fed for years, enough candles to light a small village until the end of time. Stacks of bottled water, boxes of carefully wrapped apples. There were a few things that had gone bad, but most of the food was edible. Mrs Long had even equipped the basement with a double burner camping stove to cook it all on. It begged the question though. Why had their neighbour killed herself after setting up her own food hall to ensure her survival? Inka stopped worrying about that when she found a crate of vintage champagne. Warm of course, but she wasn't going to complain.

"We're having a feast tonight." She announced. "And we'll light a few candles for Mrs Long."

"Why do you think she did all this and then killed herself mum?" Asked Kata.

"I have no idea and to be honest, I don't care."

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There had been sex as the sun came up. Good sex, despite them both being tired. After the usual morning rituals of washing and dressing, Ish took Biff a little north of their camp. Three uniformed and heavily armed soldiers followed them without being asked. Their presence was necessary for his survival, but he still wasn't used to it.

"It's easier to show you Biff, than explain it on maps." He said.

Most of Stourbridge was visible from the small hill; it was why the location had been chosen. There were quite a few burning houses and wrecked cars, but otherwise morning in Stourbridge looked to be relatively tranquil. Reports mentioned the army losing several tanks and over five thousand troops in fighting around the town. None of that had left any visible marks, on what was a beautiful landscape. In the distance a structure claimed attention because it obviously didn't belong. An asteroid had landed at speed, causing a crater in the once green farmland. Something had risen out of the crater, a dark metallic structure about the size of the Albert Hall, as the media kept saying.

"That is what we're calling a disruption centre." He said. "Like everything that name is new and might change. We're fairly certain that they're disrupting power supplies and communications from there. Not just local either, the effect stretches for over two hundred miles in every direction. It's a dead zone Biff, only Fifth West comms and tech works here."

"It's nice to know JV's tech works." Said Biff. "Aren't we a little close to them though? I've seen what they can do."

"It sounds crazy, but they do seem wary of us..... Come on, I'll show you why."

Ish wasn't worried about walking down the hill in the direction of central Stourbridge. He'd seen what he was about to show Biff and he'd seen recordings of the drone being brought down. It was in amongst some trees, quite a way down the hillside. He knew Biff's reaction was going to be the same as his when he saw it, disbelief.

"Oh Ish, this has to be a joke?"

"I thought that too..... After years of people being told they were crazy for seeing them, we've finally found out they were real. Drones of course, probably watching us for decades, though there is evidence they visited us more after the nuclear detonations during World War II."

The object had suffered some damage from hitting the ground, but the shape of the bronze coloured flying drone was well known.

“Finally something arrives to claim the name.” Said Biff. “I’m not going crazy am I, it is a flying saucer.”

“It is, though JV has banned the use of that name. He seems to think it will give our reports a lack of credibility and he’s probably right. For now we’re calling them Flying Laser Platforms. Not very exciting I know.....The troops are still calling them saucers.”

He let her look at the twenty metre wide saucer shaped craft for a while. He’d had his own period of disbelief, followed by nerdy excitement.

“It’s amazing.” Said Biff.

“And our weapons brought it down fairly easily. We’ve screening to keep our tech working and weapons that are surprisingly effective. This is only an advance unit of the main alien force and they seem quite keen on avoiding us now.”

His guards weren’t keen, but they were under orders to follow him everywhere. Ish had to show Biff the line of destroyed robots at the very bottom of the hill. They’d turned up to destroy the Fifth West science team and had failed in their mission.

“This is too close, we can’t stay long.” He said. “Again metallic robots, though they have organic constructs too. The aliens are using a wide variety of robotic machines for different types of terrain, which makes sense.”

Robots that ran on large spherical wheels and used high energy discharge weapons. There had been reconnaissance pictures of hundreds of them causing a large number of fatalities in Stourbridge. They too seemed to have been withdrawn after their failed attack on the Fifth West camp. At least eighty of the deadly robots had been destroyed and their burned out shells littered the bottom of the hill.

“How did JV’s weapons destroy them ?” Asked Biff.

The anxiety of the guards was contagious, he began to lead her back up the hill as he answered.

“We have a few weapons that work well and some that don’t.” He said. “The long heavy weapon you can see my guards carrying has worked best, so far. It disrupts the energy weapon the robots use, turning them in on themselves. The aliens didn’t seem to think we’d have those kinds of weapons. A bit like attacking a force you think only have bows and arrows, and finding out they have assault rifles.”

“So why hide Ish ? Surely we can fight them now ?”

“Oh, if only.....We’re just fighting the autonomic machines, the real aliens are still out there, watching us from the dark cold depths of the outer solar system. I know, sometimes I can feel them in my dreams. There are tens of millions of them Biff and they’re probably already designing weapons to beat ours.”

“So JV was right about hiding ?”

“Maybe, I still want to find out what they’re here for before deciding one way or another.”

“When do you think you’ll know ?”

“I’m not reading their minds, it just feels like that. Really my precog skills are being triggered by their intent, their desires. Sadly I think they’ll need to be very close for me to see their true motive for invading Earth. I have a few ideas, all probably wrong.”

There was that look on her face, she was going to pester him. Probably for the first time in their lives, he was determined not to tell her what she wanted to know.

“Tell me Ish, what is your best theory ?”

“I’m not telling you Biff, they’re all nasty and unpleasant. Worse, they’re all probably wrong.”

“Tell me, we can discuss it.”

“No Biff..... Come on, we’re going to take the vehicles into Stourbridge. The robots are likely to defend the structure in the crater with everything they’ve got. We’re going as far as the Town Hall, that shouldn’t agitate them too much.”

“I might still be small, but I can still Biff you on the nose Ish. You can trust me.”

He held her hand and her fingers squeezed his, they were still alright.

“If I’m right we’ll have no alternative, we’ll have to fight back. Trust me Biff, you will know when I’m certain.”

“Fine..... Why are we going into Stourbridge ?”

“Research mainly, watching and observing how the drones and robots react to us. There might be survivors hiding in their homes, though probably not many. We can pick up a few and direct any others back to our camp.”

She gave him a very gentle thump on the nose, followed by a long passionate kiss. Too passionate for in front of three curious guards. He’d have to keep his promise to her, but for now she seemed to have forgiven him.

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Inka Malovic had forbidden her children to use the upper floors of the house, but she’d found a hoarders delight of brand new clothes in a front bedroom. She’d also covered Mrs Long’s body in many layers of blankets, in the hope of stopping the smell reaching downstairs.

“I’ve found new clothes..... A bit musty and probably the wrong size, but at least they’re clean.”

Her kids hadn’t cared about size or the smell, they were just happy to get a quick shower and clean clothes. As they sat around the breakfast table they looked strange in their oversize clothes.

“Hmmmmm proper hot porridge.” Said Kata.

“I’m never eating cold soup again.” Added Antun.

Her kids eating porridge made with water and loving it. It wasn’t so much a miracle as unthinkable. They had food though, enough to keep them fed for years if they were careful.

“I’m sure there are less metal men out there.” Said Kata.

“Stay away from the windows.” Said Inka. “Tonight I’ll go upstairs and watch for the metal men.”

Could the worst be over ? Inka hoped so, they could hardly stay indoors forever, her kids were already developing a pallor from never being out in the sun. A thought occurred to her.

“Vitamin D, we must search the kitchen, Mrs Long must have bought some.”

“She bought just about everything else.” Said Kata. “No wonder there were so many delivery men coming to her door.”

A good breakfast just brought home to her how empty the rest of the day was likely to be. Her kids needed something to do, apart from reading their school books over and over again. It had to be something quiet though that didn’t mean moving in front of the windows. Her daughter seemed to have been thinking about the same thing.

“She bought some old fashioned games in boxes.” Said Kata. “I’ve heard of Monopoly, one of our teachers brought it in once. How about trying to play it ?”

A noise outside stopped any decision on whether to play the game. Not an unusual sound, just one they hadn’t heard for a while.

“Mum..... That sounds like a van in the street.” Said Antun.

Vans meant people, vans might mean the army and rescue. After telling her kids to stay in the kitchen, Inka went into the front parlour and looked through a gap in the curtains.

“Who are they ?” Asked Kata.

Of course her daughter had followed her, she'd inherited her stubborn streak. Soon there were three heads peering through the curtains.

"There's lots of them..... Soldiers with guns." Said Antun.

"Might not be nice people, keep your heads down." Said Inka.

It was an entire convoy of trucks and motor homes. A truck with bars on the front was pushing a wrecked car out of the way. Soldiers who looked likely to be on their way to somewhere else in a few minutes. It was an opportunity, even if it was risky.

"Stay here..... I mean it this time." She said. "If anything happens to me..... There's plenty of food here."

"Don't go out there mum !" Yelled Kata.

"I have to, we can't stay here forever..... Soldiers mean there's still someone out there fighting back."

No following her, they were too scared. Inka opened the front door and stepped into the street. No one noticed her until she was at the edge of the pavement.

"We've got a civilian." Shouted one of the soldiers.

There were several people in ordinary clothes with the soldiers, two looked quite young. A girl came towards her.

"We can take you with us, there's room in the motorhome at the rear of the convoy." She said.

"I can't just go, there are the children's things."

"Children, you have children ?" Asked a young man.

"Yes, two a boy and a girl."

"They can come too." Said the girl. "We're going as far as the town hall and coming back again. Get your things packed and we'll pick you up when we come back."

"But..... Our food....." Said Inka.

"We have food, you won't be hungry." Said Ishmael McGrath.

"You don't understand, it's our food.....All our food."

He understood, the boy who couldn't be older than twenty. She could see there was something about him, he'd understand.

"We've got a saucer coming in from two miles out.....Look due west." Someone shouted.

"You'd need to get inside our vehicle." Said Pandora Gray.

"No, my children....."

All those days hiding from them, yet Inka had never managed to get a good look at the alien craft that had killed so many people. It was big, travelling low and fast from the direction of the ALDI near King Street. They weren't scared or firing at it, the soldiers were calm, actually discussing the way the alien saucer moved.

"We have civilians far too close to us." Said Ish. "Take it out now."

Her children were at the door and waving them back didn't work. Inka pushed her kids back, trying to use Mrs Long's garden wall to shelter them from whatever might be about to happen.

"We have a second target..... Same direction and height." Someone yelled.

Why weren't they doing anything ? It was so frustrating. She'd expected the large gun on the truck to begin firing , but it didn't. Two soldiers were carrying weapons that looked large and heavy.

Nothing fancy, there was the look about them of a double barrellled shotgun, but heavier and with a gunsight on the side. They aimed and did something, but there was no rocket, no sign of anything actually happening.

"Full disruption confirmed, second target is turning away."

The idiots were cheering, yet the saucer was still heading for them. It twitched slightly and did a roll away from them to the right. There were bright blue electric flashes across the surface of the craft, as it twisted and hit the ground about a mile north of them. No explosion, just the sound of destruction as it hit the town somewhere near the Stourbridge FC football ground.

“Confirm no further targets.” Yelled Ish.

“Can confirm target two is running for home and is not a threat.”

“We’ll pick you up in about an hour.” Said Pandora. “Be ready to leave by then.”

“No, we’ll come with you now.” Said Inka Malovic.

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